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Young children enacting governance: Child's play?

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Abstract

Schools, homes and communities are increasingly perceived as risky spaces for children. This concern is a driving force behind many forms of governance imposed upon Australian children by well-meaning adults. Children are more and more the subjects of both overt and covert regulation by teachers and other adults in school contexts. Are children, though, passive in this process of governance? It is this issue that is the focus of this paper. In order to respond to the question of how young children enact governance in their everyday lives, video-recorded episodes of naturally occurring interactions among children in a preparatory classroom were captured. These data were then transcribed and analysed using the methods of conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis. This paper shows a number of strategies that the children used when enacting governance within their peer cultures in the classroom. It focuses specifically on how adult and child-formulated rules and social orders of the classroom were drawn upon and developed in order to control and govern during the interaction. This paper illustrates that children are not passive in enacting governance, but actively and competently enact governance through their peer cultures. These findings are significant for educators to consider, as they help to develop an understanding of the complex social orders that children are continually constructing in the early childhood classroom.

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Introduction

The lives of Australian children are seen to be governed increasingly by adult imposed regulation and policies (Danby & Farrell, 2004). In the face of risk, adults develop legislation, policies and practices aimed at protecting children's lives (Beck, 1992, 2000; Farrell, 2004; Farrell & Danby, 2003; Farrell, Danby, James, & James, 2001; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Terms such as 'traffic danger' and 'stranger danger' are emblematic of adult concern for children. Such concern is a driving force behind many forms of governance increasingly imposed upon children by well meaning adults (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Are children, though, passive recipients in the process of governance? This paper presents data to demonstrate that young children are not passive in this process; indeed, they are competent in enacting governance in their everyday interactions with peers (Cobb, Danby & Farrell, 2005).

Young children are involved in a constant process of negotiating and constructing their own social orders and rules (Danby, 2002). This process occurs alongside and within the social orders of adults (Danby, 1999). Spaces such as schools have sets of rules that 'embody expectations regarding children's behaviour' (Corsaro & Schwarz, 1999, p. 246). Such rules do not always correspond with the social orders that children themselves construct within their peer interactions; indeed, at times they may be in opposition to children's rules. This may result in resistance to these rules, representing children's desire to gain control over their own lives (Corsaro & Schwarz, 1999). Children also utilize adult-formulated rules in order to increase their own power within peer interactions (Maynard, 1985). Thus, as young children interact, they engage in a complex process of constructing their own social orders, while also drawing upon existing adult-formulated rules. This paper will examine how children draw upon rules and also demonstrate how the social orders of children and adults may at times be in competition as children enact governance within their peer interactions. Firstly, however, we will consider what governance is and how it may be seen in children's everyday lives.

Governance

Governance here is defined as, 'the complex and intersecting systems of regulation that operate to show up frames of relevance for children's everyday participation and active engagement in the places of school, home and the community' (Danby & Farrell, 2004, p. 38). Systems of regulation can be both formal and mandated, such as legislation and policy, or informal and in an everyday context, such as family routines. Governance in this paper refers to the systems of regulation that occur in children's spaces. Moss and Petrie (2002) define children's spaces as the 'place for the conduct of local politics around issues of childhood' (p. 41). This paper examines the issue of governance in children's everyday spaces and how children themselves understand and enact governance in their everyday lives, drawing later in the paper on a study of peer interactions in a preparatory year classroom.

Governance in children's lives

More and more children are subjects of both overt and covert regulation and governance (James & James, 2001). Due to concerns about the safety of children in public and private spaces and the risks that they may face from dangerous adults and dangerous children, adults organize children in a way which gives adults more direct

control and or in ways that bring children within their purview (Jenks, 1996; Walkerdine, 2001; Wyness, 2000). In relation to this, Mayall (1996) comments that opportunities for play out of school are mediated through adult agendas and the character of adult social worlds – worlds that are considered too dangerous for unsupervised children.

Adults often make decisions regarding what they think is best for children, justified as operating within a ‘principle of “care”’ (Jenks, 1996, p. 14). Thus, many decisions that are made regarding children do not actually involve the child in the decision-making process. Instead, adults are viewed as knowing best and children are expected to accept their guidelines. This can often deny children the opportunity to display their competence within this area. The practice of making decisions for children without their involvement may be indicative of a lack of understanding of children’s decision making abilities and of their competence in enacting governance. Such issues influenced this study and highlight the importance of actually examining children’s interactions with a focus on how they enact governance.

Governance in school spaces

Governance that is imposed upon children in one setting may differ in another. For example, Danby and Farrell (2002) discovered that children reported that school personnel often made decisions involving only adults, whereas at home decisions involved both the parents and the child. In regards to the governance imposed upon children in schools, Saunders (1989 in Mayall, 1996) notes that ‘the child is gradually introduced into a culture which appears to reduce choices and opportunities for decision-making, problem-solving and active involvement in the classroom’ (p. 119). Mayall (1996) comments that children have no say in the running of schools. Indeed, quite the opposite – the adults in school are reluctant to share control, and such attention to children’s rights would require rethinking the social order that exists in schools (Mayall, 1996). Thus, when children enter the schooling system, they enter a system that imposes greater forms of governance upon them, over which they have little or no control.

Schools, similar to local communities, can no longer be considered safe havens for children. Instead they are seen as risky spaces in need of regulation. Zinnecker comments,

Children’s area of action is increasingly and qualitatively narrowed. The life world of children is more and more taken into protected rooms, sealed from the natural world, and limited from other age groups’ action arenas. (Qvortrup, 1994, p. 195)

Examples of this can be seen in the increased supervision of children during school lunch breaks and during arrival and departure times. Now children are to be supervised at all times; it considered too risky for them to be left without adult protection. There are concerns that the cost of such protection is the loss of children’s control over their own lives and freedom to have new experiences (Corsaro, 1997; Jenks, 1996). Increased monitoring and regulation of children’s lives mean a reduction in opportunities for children to be relatively free from adult control (James & James, 2001). Hence, the issue of governance and how it impacts on the everyday lives of children is an important one.

Children deal with governance in their everyday spaces through peer cultures

Arguably, children are not passive in the process of governance. Children do not see themselves as outside society, but as entwined with others (Mayall, 1996). Alanen and Mayall (2001) emphasise that children are participants in, as well as outcomes of, social relations. Indeed, children's agency can be seen in the ways they seek to control and organise their use of time and space. Agency is theorised as children being active participants, rather than as passive occupants, within social and institutional structures with which children engage (Farrell & Danby, 2003; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Mayall (2002) comments further on this, noting that children are not only social actors (taking part in relationships), but they are active agents, negotiating and interacting in ways that influence people and relationships around them. Whilst children may have less experience than adults, they seriously engage with moral issues and contribute to constructing social order (Danby, 2002; Mayall, 2002).

One way that children deal with governance in their everyday lives is through their peer cultures. By engaging in peer interaction, children actively construct a world around themselves filled with their own rules, rituals and principles of conflict resolution (Corsaro & Streeck, 1986; Danby & Baker, 1998; Mayall, 1996). Play, often a shared feature of peer culture, is not simply a reproduction of the adult world within peer culture. Rather, children grasp and extend features of the adult world within their own world (Corsaro, 1985). Through peer cultures, children make persistent attempts to gain control of their lives. Corsaro (1997) comments that 'children take adults disapproving reactions into their peer routine and embed them into their shared peer culture in role play...many peer play routines directly challenge adult authority' (p. 131). Thus, it seems that children may reproduce, manipulate and challenge governance through peer interactions.

Children also impose systems of regulation or governance upon themselves in their peer cultures. Corsaro (1997) found that resistance to adult imposed rules led to the development of a group identity that in turn, led to the emergence of new sub-groups and status hierarchies within the sub-groups. Thus, children organise themselves in ways in which they can govern themselves and each other. Indeed, the social order of the classroom is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated as children interact and regulate each other (Danby & Baker, 1998). Through peer culture and interaction, children develop social skills and knowledge to create and maintain social order, in a sense, govern their life-worlds (Corsaro, 1985). Thus, the increase of adult imposed governance of young children's spaces could well be reflected in children's peer cultures and interactions.

The study

As children's spaces are increasingly governed, how are the children themselves affected and how do they, in turn, enact governance? As highlighted, the issue of governance in children's spaces is becoming more prominent and impacting on many aspects of children's everyday interactions that occur within these spaces. In response to this, a study was designed to examine the question of how children enact governance in their everyday spaces in a preparatory year classroom. This study was based on the sociology of childhood framework and focused on in-depth analysis of video-recorded data of children's naturally occurring interactions within a classroom setting.

The participants and setting

The research participants were children within a Preparatory Year (Prep) at an independent school. The class consisted of 26 children. The episode that was captured on tape is an extended sequence of interaction that occurred during a creative activity session. The setting was in home-corner, which had been arranged to correspond with the week's theme of transportation (boxes of toy vehicles, a toy petrol station, car mat etc.). The segment of the episode that was transcribed and analysed is 33 minutes in length. The details of the children present during the data collection are presented below (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 *The participants' names and ages*

Name	Age (in years)
John	5.4
Alice	5.3
Campbell	5.11
Tommy	5.6
Bill	6.1

The data and analysis

In this study, a small hand-held video camera was used to collect data. An extended episode of interaction between the children was selected from the video-recorded data and transcribed following the transcription conventions used in the method devised by Gail Jefferson (Heap, 1997; Psathas, 1995). This was carried out in order to capture and relate as much of the complexities of the talk and actions of the participants as possible. The analysis of the data was undertaken using the ethnomethodological methods of conversation analysis and membership categorisation (Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992) in order to explore how children enacted governance.

The findings

Findings of the study indicated that the children in the preparatory year setting enact governance within their peer cultures using a variety of strategies. These strategies were:

- manipulating materials and places so as to regulate each other's actions in the interactive play space;
- developing or drawing on adult and child-formulated rules and social orders of the classroom in order to control and govern their peers' interactions;
- using verbal and non-verbal language to regulate the actions of those around them; and finally,
- creating membership categories to exclude or include others and thereby govern the behaviour of members in the area.

This paper will examine one of these strategies, namely, that of developing or drawing on adult and child-formulated rules and social orders of the classroom in order to control and govern their peers' interactions.

The rules

At the very beginning of the episode of interaction, the participants established rules to regulate the space, the materials and their peers within the area. The children established that the toy vehicles, which had been placed in the area for general use, were resources that could be claimed and owned by individuals. Once claimed, the

vehicles were effectively out-of-bounds for anyone other than by the one claiming ownership. Thus, rules relating to ownership were established. The children also began to identify certain places within the area that they ‘owned’ and these too become out-of-bound for other players. Therefore, during this first phase, the basic rules of the area were established. The following extract is at the beginning of the extended episode, marked by John taking ownership of some of the toy vehicles and claiming a certain space as his own place.

Extract 1

1	John	These are my – these are my cars ((pulls 2 blue fire-engines onto his lap)) (you can’t steal) their home. ‘cause their home is (.) you can’t steal these fire-engines home. ((puts fire-engines inside the toy petrol station))
	
7	Campbell	John I’ve got a car and it can’t fit in my garage ((referring to a space near the far wall))
8	John	(I’ve got a feeling) it was stolen ((moves towards Campbell on his knees and pushes a toy car along as he does this)) (stolen)

Here, John constructs the first rule of the game – other players cannot take cars that are ‘owned’ by someone else. John presents this rule in the form of an imperative or an order: “(you can’t steal) their home. ‘cause their home is .. you can’t steal these fire-engines home” (turn 1). Green (1975) notes that ‘the giver of an order believes that he has the right to control the intentional behaviour of the recipient and he expects to be obeyed’ (p. 120). John’s choice of words in this imperative has many implications. By choosing to use the word “steal”, John evokes concepts of law-enforcement, wrongdoing, criminal activity – to steal something is a criminal offence. Even in the Prep setting, stealing is taken very seriously by the children, involving the intervention of the teacher and various consequences, such as removal of certain privileges. Therefore, John sends out a warning to his fellow participants – those who take his cars will be dealt with seriously. The use of the word “steal” also reinforces the idea of ownership. An object cannot be stolen unless it is first owned. Thus, John emphasises that he has ownership of the fire engines.

John, when he places the cars inside the toy petrol station, an object that he has just previously moved from the center of the area to one side, calls this petrol station “their home”. By claiming ownership of the toy fire engines and then placing them inside “their home”, he also claims ownership of the toy petrol station and sends out a warning that this is out-of-bounds for other players - “(you can’t steal) their home.” (turn 1), introducing yet another rule into the game, that players can take ownership of certain places and exercise authority over these places. He is not challenged by his peers and, in so doing, they send the message that they will abide by these rules and they orient to his role as the dominant force within the group.

Campbell now engages in conversation with John. Campbell comments, “John, I’ve got a car and it can’t fit in my garage,” (turn 7). John, in reference to Campbell’s car that won’t fit in the garage, notes that he thinks that Campbell’s car is “stolen” (turn 8). It could be that John suspects that Campbell has disobeyed the rules of the game and taken one of the cars originally claimed by him. John could have used other words to suggest this, such as ‘borrowed’ or ‘taken’, but he chose to use the word

upheld, rather than the teacher’s social order and the sharing rules of the Prep classroom.

Tommy continues to explore the rules of the area and approaches a pile of toy cars that have been claimed by Alice. The following extract demonstrates Alice’s reaction to Tommy’s actions.

Extract 3

161	Alice	No (.) that’s mine <u>that’s mine</u> . That’s my cars (..) that was my pile. <u>That’s my pile</u> ((turns around, so that back is against the wall and is facing Tommy, with the pile of cars beneath her))
162	Tommy	((moves away, picks up a toy person)) (.1) This is a <u>boy</u> (1) yes.
163	Alice	<u>John</u> (.) John John (.) can you look at Tommy (.) make sure doesn’t get any of these,
164	John	((makes eye-contact with Alice)) () I will make sure (..) if he does ‘I will tell you.’
165	Alice	((stands up, touches John on the shoulder)) no (.) <u>tell on</u> him
166	John	And (.) remember we’re mates.

Alice begins the utterance with an outright “no” (turn 161). Young children frequently use such language and launch directly into oppositional positions without using delaying tactics or disguising the opposition (Danby & Baker, 2000; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Sacks, 1987). Alice places herself on top of the pile of cars while maintaining eye-contact with Tommy. Tommy appears to accept Alice’s rule, signified by his moving away and choosing another toy, one that had not been claimed by the other players.

Alice, though, seeks to further protect her claimed vehicles, enlisting John’s help in protecting her vehicles from Tommy (turn 163). John’s response of making “sure” that Tommy does not take Alice’s vehicles, and informing her if he does, does not satisfy Alice. She further stipulates how John should protect her vehicles, by telling “on” him (turn 165). The telling “on” someone suggests the bringing in of a more powerful authority, perhaps even the teacher. Alice thus hopes to further reinforce the rules of the game and govern more effectively her materials and who can access these. She seems confident that the teacher will uphold these rules, rather than enforce the Prep rule of sharing. Alice’s confidence in the teacher’s support may not be unfounded. Danby (1998) notes that girls are more likely to have their views upheld by female teachers than are boys.

Classroom rules are often emphasised by children to preserve their own positions of power and to exclude others (Danby & Baker, 2000; Jordan, Cowan & Roberts, 1995). This extract has shown how children used class rules and teacher directions as strategic resources. The outcome was that the children enacted governance on each other in a variety of ways in order to regulate access to the space. The rules were also drawn upon to regulate the behaviour of the new participant, Tommy.

Conclusion

These three extracts of interaction among children in a preparatory year classroom have demonstrated that young children are able to competently enact governance by developing or drawing on adult and child-formulated rules and social orders of the

classroom. The participants of this study were able to quickly develop and implement key rules that they could use to regulate the area and their peers actions within the area. Adult-formulated rules and the social order of the classroom, such as sharing, were also drawn upon in order to accomplish their activities within the area, though not always with success. For example, the child-constructed rule of ownership was frequently a more powerful strategy used to order the play space than that of the teacher-constructed social order of sharing. Therefore, even within the classroom space framed by the teacher, the children were able to create their own social spaces and accompanying social orders (Gracey, 1972).

This study illustrates that children are not passive in the process of governance – through their peer cultures young children actively and competently enact governance. The participants of the study demonstrated awareness of how to use adult-imposed governance, such as teacher authority and classroom rules, to their advantage and to increase their own power and efficiency in regulating peers and play spaces. These findings are significant for educators to consider as they explicate the complex social orders that children can co-construct in an early childhood classroom.

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