Chapter 9
When Kroko-the-Crocodile Got Sick

In this chapter, we illustrate what the tensions concerning what we refer to in terms of alterity and coordinating as if and as is, imply for playing and teaching. Below follows two examples of how the tension between dealing with alterity and coordinating as if and as is can be successfully handled in ways that integrate play and teaching.

Reading Icons and Graphical Symbols as a Prerequisite to Play

Four children (aged 4–5 years) are playing postal worker, and they have asked the teacher to write a letter. When we enter the play, she has left a note for the children in the letterbox. The note is about a toy crocodile by the name of Kroko, a very familiar toy to the children. Excerpt 9.1 starts as the teacher knocks on the door to the room where the children are playing.

Excerpt 9.1

1. Maja: Yes, there was a knock. There was a knock, yes. (takes the letter from the mailbox). It has knocked, we’ve got a letter! (shouts)
2. Simon: I knew it
3. Disa: What does it say? Band-Aid Emergency
4. Maja: Rrr… (holds the letter in her hand and starts to sound) A M L A T [(in English, (F) A L L E N)
5. Disa: Band-Aid! (shouting)
In this activity, the teacher takes the opportunity to implement a planned (curricular) activity in children’s play. She does this in response to the children’s expressed wish to get a letter in/for their play. The response from the children when they receive the note is immediate and excited (turns 1–3). They immediately hold their on-going play and direct their focus on the note. The note contains written text and two icons, one of a Band-Aid and one conventional symbol for hospital (Fig. 9.1). The discovery of the note (turns 1–2) evokes great engagement among the children and they laugh out loud (turn 2). There is a playful ambience in the moment when the children gather around the note and they want to know what it says (turn 3). Thus, the teacher is successful in implementing a real problem, how to decode (read) the note (its icons and text), and the children have agency in how to interpret the message of the note with the teacher initially staying in the background. Reading the note poses a challenge to the children, both individually and as a group (turns 3–25). To interpret the note becomes a shared focus, engaging and challenging the children.
in how to grasp and interpret the message (*as is*). There is a transition from *as if* to *as is* when talking about the content of the note; what does the text (actually) say? The question posed (What does it say?, turn 3) shows an awareness of text as something particular (a message being sent and received), that the note has a function to it. Trying to read the note constitutes a challenge to understand text *as is*, while the activity is framed *as if*, since the note is implemented as part of their ongoing play. Also when trying to read the note, *as if* and *as is* are merged. In turn 3, a child says, “the Band-Aid emergency” which probably refers to the image on the note. However, when saying this she sounds *as if* she is reading.

In the activity, a variation of understanding of the concept of reading becomes visible through the different strategies used by the children. These different strategies are later seen to be significant for how the activity develops. One strategy is to read the icons on the note. Another strategy is to read the written text. One girl turns out to be knowledgeable in letters and she tries to sound out the first written word of the note. Even if she can match grapheme (letter) with its phoneme (speech sound), the challenge appears in the synthesis, to sound out the different letters into a unified word (turn 4). The teacher is invited to participate (turn 6), and becomes involved. Then the activity evolves as a reading activity, where this child overcomes the challenge to sound out and combine different sounds of letters with each other. The teacher supports the child through the reading process. The teacher is balancing between encouraging (turn 9) and giving adequate scaffolding in the process (e.g., turns 14 and 16). The questions from the child guides the teacher’s actions (turns 6, 8 and 10). This balancing activity illustrates how the child and the teacher manage to coordinate their perspectives to do the reading according to an alphabetical principle. Important features of reading, such as where to start and reading direction (turns 7, 14 and 16) and meta-terms, such as “word” (turn 12), are pointed out by the teacher.

The two reading strategies (attending to icons and written text, respectively) could both have been accepted or rejected. As the design of the note opens up for
children to read in different ways, there is a choice for the teacher in what to empha-
sise. She has at least two options, either to engage with several children, who read
the icons, or to engage in the reading process with one child who tries to sound out
the first written word of the note. The teacher has to make a quick decision, in the
spur of a moment, and the reading of the icons is implicitly put into the background
as the teacher focuses on scaffolding the child who is continuing sounding the word.
The child who involved the teacher into the common “reading project” is a child
with knowledge of a key to reading, the connection between letters and sounds,
which comes to have significance for the direction the activity takes.

After having read the note, some of the children run into another room where
Kroko (the toy crocodile) lies on a couch:

Excerpt 9.2

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 27. | Disa: | Maja! Kroko has fallen by the couch! |
| 28. | Maja: | I’ll be right there |
| 29. | Simon: | Noo, you’ve just put like that |
| 30. | Disa: | I have to get her (runs off). |
| 31. | Child: | Kroko has fallen now… come quick! |
| 32. | Disa: | He’s bleeding, he’s bleeding in different places. Look! |
| 33. | Child: | Isn’t he bleeding? |
| 34. | Maja: | Bleeding, is he bleeding? |
| 35. | Disa: | I think so |
| 36. | Simon: | No, you’ve send a letter just for us to… no, it’s not the mailman who has |
| 37. | Maja: | Where does he bleed? Where does he bleed? |
| 38. | Simon: | No, it’s just you who’ve put him like this |
| 39. | Disa: | Yes, he’s wounded also |
| 40. | Alva: | Here! |
| 41. | Disa: | Aaaaaaa |
| 42. | Maja: | What shall we do? |
| 43. | MIA: | Has Kroko hurt himself? |
| 44. | Maja: | Where does he bleed? |
| 45. | Disa: | Kroko has hurt himself! Oh no, how sad! |
| 46. | Maja: | Oh no! |
| 47. | Disa: | Oh no! |
| 48. | Simon: | No, we’re gonna play doctor |
| 49. | Per: | Aa doctor’s bag |
| 50. | Alva: | He’s not bleeding |

The content of the note (that Kroko has fallen) contributes to fantasizing about
the crocodile and to further play. Disa evolves the narrative, by calling out to a
friend that Kroko has fallen (turn 27). Another child, Simon, objects that it is merely
the teachers who have placed Kroko in such a manner (turn 29), by indicating that it is the teachers who have written the note (turn 36). Neither Maja nor any of the other children take any notice of this statement. Thus, there is initially some lack of intersubjectivity: while Disa (turn 27) aligns with the play frame, as constituted by (the reading of) the note, another child (Simon, in turn 29) objects to the evolving narrative. Hence, Disa aligns with the as-if nature of the initiated play while Simon takes the ‘predicament’ of the toy crocodile as is (he has not really fallen and hurt himself). The lack of coordination of perspectives continues, as we will see, throughout the episode represented in Excerpt 9.2.

Disa continues to advance the play and involves a peer (turn 30, who is urged to come quickly. There is no predetermined narrative but an open one, free for the participants to develop (cf. Huizinga, 1938/1955). The children fantasize that Kroko is bleeding, that he might be bleeding in several places and at the same time they are questioning whether he bleeds at all (turns 33–35). Kroko’s possible injury seem to be open for negotiation, which implies different narratives (alterity). At the same time, the boy showing suspicion tries to convince the other children about it only being the doing of the teachers (turns 29 and 38), but still gets no response. The boy’s comments show scepticism and could be regarded as a potential play-breaker. Huizinga (1938/1955) argues that every play has its own specific rules and no play endure doubt.

Simon’s objections can be understood as him perceiving that this is not how it really is in the play, and that the teachers are not participants in the play, but stand outside it. What takes place in the activity could be seen as a field of tension between the boy’s attempt to reveal the ‘conspiracy’ of the grown-ups and the agenda of the group to develop the common narrative in play. This field of tension also indicates the delicacy of play. One child, who sticks to the agreed-upon narrative, turns to the group, asking what to do with Kroko (turn 42). The teacher supports the evolving story, by asking if Kroko is hurt (turn 43), which is confirmed by one of the children (turn 45). The suggestion by the boy showing suspicion is thus put to the background. To support his suggestion could possibly have made the narrative of Kroko pointless, ending the play.

As illustrated in this example, the teacher is responsive and latches onto the invitation from the children to write a letter. The note provides a shared platform for the teacher and the children to act upon. By introducing the note, the teacher opens up for children to engage with a content (the connection between phoneme and grapheme). The teacher supports one of the girls to read (facilitating the development of reading skills) in response to the children’s interest in finding out the meaning of the message. The reading contributes with a new possible direction for the play; not only reading but also what the message opens up for in terms of further play activity. Fantasy and reality are intermixed and opens up for new forms of play, such as playing doctor and nurses.
Teaching Everyday Routines in Play

According to the Swedish preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018), the content to be taught concern matters of understanding the surrounding world and how to orient oneself in it. Excerpt 9.3 is from an extended play sequence lasting 24 minutes. Three children and one teacher is playing in the preschool’s family corner. The narrative play-frame consists of everyday routines, common at home and in preschool and culturally prevalent (van Oers, 2013). They start the play by laying the table, eating lots of imaginary food and having an imaginary birthday party. The teacher is responsive to the children’s initiative, but she also gives her own suggestions during the play. In Excerpt 9.3, the birthday party is over and one child starts pretending to brush his teeth:

Excerpt 9.3

119. Tam: (brushes his teeth)
120. MIA: Where do you do that? (till Edvin)
121. Edvin: You do it outside (inaudible)
122. MIA: You brush your teeth after ice cream (to Tam) well done!
123. Edvin: (says something inaudible to Tam)
124. MIA: Maybe I too should brush my teeth... has eaten so much ice cream
125. Tam: Yes... (laughing)
126. Edvin: (inaudible)... here’s even more ice cream, is here. This is ice cream
127. MIA: (pretends to brush her teeth) now I’ve brushed my teeth
128. Edvin: Ice cream (offers MIA more)
129. MIA: No, but I’ve just brushed my teeth
130. Tam: Like that! Do like that! (makes a movement which cannot be discerned on the recording)
131. MIA: Can I eat ice cream when I’ve brushed my teeth? (to Edvin)
132. Edvin: Yes (nods)
133. MIA: Can I? Then I’ll have to brush one more time later
134. Tam & MIA: (pretend to eat)
135. Tam & MIA: (pretend to brush)
136. Edvin: And put it in the mouth, both... and the tongue
137. MIA: Noo, I don’t think I need to brush my tongue... but I can open up a bit (opens her mouth), like that!
138. Edvin: Now you’re finished
139. Tam & MIA (stop brushing)
Tam shows and tells the teacher that he is brushing his teeth \((as\ if)\) and she latches on to this, by asking Edvin where he does so (turns 119–120). Edvin says that you do it “outside (inaudible)” (turn 121). Here the teacher’s question and Edvin’s answers can be interpreted both \(as\ if\) and \(as\ is\). Tam is praised for brushing his teeth after they have had imaginary ice cream. When the teacher says that she also might brush her teeth, Tam shows his approval by a smiling and saying “yes” (turns 124–125); this acknowledges her as a participant in the play. Edvin then tempts them with more ice cream, in an \(as\-if\) way, saying “here is more”, and he also meta-communicates \((as\ is)\) about the (imaginary) ice cream: “this is ice cream” (turn 126). The teacher responds to his suggestion, saying that she too has brushed her teeth (turns 127 and 129). Tam tries to show something but the teacher asks Edvin two times if she is allowed to eat after brushing her teeth and, when Edvin answers that she is, she states that she then has to brush them once again (turn 133). Both Tam and the teacher eat more ice cream and then brush their teeth \((as\ if)\) again (turns 134–135). Edvin suggests that also the tongue should be brushed (turn 136, theoretically speaking a case of alterity), but the teacher rejects this (turn 137). The teacher emphasizes that brushing should be done after one has eaten, connecting to culturally acceptable knowledge concerning how to care for one’s teeth in a healthy way. Since the teaching latches on to the children’s suggestions, she does not interrupt the play, but her contributions are relevant to the narrative play-frame and presumably also relates to the children’s previous experience.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have given two examples of how the tension between dealing with alterity and coordinating \(as\ if\) and \(as\ is\) can be successfully handled in ways that integrate play and teaching. In the two examples (Excerpts 9.2 and 9.3), the teachers try to make it possible for children to discern two quite different phenomena (contents). In the first example, the phenomenon can be characterized as academic knowledge, while the phenomenon in the second example can be characterized as an everyday routine, a cultural practice. However, both examples concern making it possible for children to discern features of cultural life. Also shared by both examples is that the teachers deal with alterity and coordinating \(as\ if\) and \(as\ is\). The examples illustrate that teaching is not restricted to the mode of \(as\ is\) but may also be carried out in the mode of \(as\ if\) (as also shown by Magnusson & Pramling, 2017; and Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2010).
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