We're doing a wedding': producing peer cultures in pretend play

Helen Breathnach, Susan Danby, and Lyndal O’Gorman

School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

Play is valued pedagogically and conceptually as supporting children’s imaginative capabilities and social development. In this article, we focus in particular on pretend play as a type of play activity in which children engage in the creative production and performance of peer cultures. In pretend play, new peer cultures are produced as children actively and creatively appropriate information from the adult world. Drawing on sociology of childhood understandings of children as agentic social actors, this ethnographic study with children aged five years in their first year of school in Queensland, Australia, explored children’s production of peer cultures in their classroom play. We present here an extended pretend play episode in which children plan and perform a wedding framed in pretence and reality. Observations reveal the complexities of children’s peer cultures, and ways in which they negotiate peer and adult agendas within the social structure of the classroom.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2017  Accepted 20 June 2018

KEYWORDS

Children; pretend play; peer culture; interpretive reproduction; early childhood education; performance

Introduction

In early childhood education, play is valued pedagogically and conceptually as supporting children’s imaginative capabilities and social development (Breathnach, O’Gorman, & Danby, 2016; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Wood, 2014). One way in which children represent aspects of their lives is through pretend play. Pretend play, also referred to as sociodramatic (e.g. Simmons, 2014) or role play (e.g. Rogers & Evans, 2007), refers to play that is related to children’s real life experiences, and involves a high degree of reciprocity, social interaction and collaborative pretence (Corsaro, 1993; Lillemyr, 2009).

Play is a dynamic concept shaped by biological, social and cultural contexts within which children create their practices and peer cultures (Fleer, 2013; Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007). Peer culture is defined as ‘activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers’ (Corsaro, 2005, p. 110). Children’s agency to exercise initiative, decision-making and control in their practices is dynamic and unfolding as they negotiate peer and adult agendas (Breathnach, Danby, & O’Gorman, 2017, 2018).
In pretend play, children creatively appropriate adult cultures to create new peer cultures that are situated within collaboratively co-constructed local contexts (Corsaro, 2005). In these episodes, children often assume and perform other child and adult roles. With its collaborative nature, lack of script and loose structure, Sawyer (1997) describes it as a form of ‘improvisational performance’ (p. xvii), which he contrasts with highly formal, structured, and ritualistic adult social interactions such as weddings.

Framed within sociology of childhood understandings of children as agentic co-constructors of knowledge and identity (Prout & James, 1997), this article reports on an ethnographic study with children aged five years in their first year of school in Queensland, Australia. The aim of the study was to explore how children negotiate and produce peer cultures in their classroom play. In this article, we draw on an extended pretend play episode in which children plan and perform a wedding that is framed in pretence and reality. Building on the concept of play as improvisational performance (Sawyer, 1997), children’s creative production and performance of the wedding is both unscripted and improvised but also framed within cultural understandings and social practices of wedding rituals, as well as the social structure of the classroom, and adult and peer agendas.

This episode presents rich and unique opportunities to explore the complexities of children’s creative production and performance of peer cultures within the real world of the classroom, and cultural contexts of children’s real-life experiences. The context of this pretend play episode, situated both in pretence and reality, provides exciting opportunities to explore how children negotiate relationships and cultural understandings in the production of their peer cultures.

We begin by describing the ethnographic context for the study.

**The study**

**The setting**

The study took place in 2014 in a Preparatory Year (Prep) classroom in Queensland, Australia. Prep is the first year of school in Queensland, and children typically commence aged between 4.5 and 5.5 years. The setting was located in one of four Prep classrooms in the school. In the classroom, there was one teacher, two part-time teacher assistants and 25 children (13 girls and 12 boys).

According to recent census data, 90% of residents in the school’s locality identified as having Australian, English or Irish ancestry. The majority of those born overseas identified as being from the United Kingdom and New Zealand, with 6% being from a non-English speaking background. Approximately 65% of residents were of Christian faith, with the majority identifying as Catholic or Anglican (.idcommunity, n.d.).

**Research participants and ethical considerations**

A member of the research team who had previous associations with a local school had suggested this setting as a potential research site. Once the school principal and a classroom teacher indicated their interest in participating in the study, ethical approvals were sought and provided by Queensland University of Technology (1400000238) and the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (550/27/1454).
An ethical approach is more than the initial formal consent process but rather an orientation throughout the study. The ethical approach recognised the potential impact of adult–child power relations on children’s decisions to participate or to opt out of activities. This awareness demanded sensitivity to children’s verbal and non-verbal cues during data collection (Alderson, 2005).

The researcher visited the classroom on two occasions before fieldwork commenced to meet with parents and children, and answer questions about the study. Information posters with her name and photograph, and information about the study, were placed around the classroom. Parents and children were invited to provide their written consent for children to participate. Parents were asked to read with their child a child-friendly consent form that used text and images to describe the study, the activities of the researcher, and how data would be used. Children were asked to write their name or make their mark on the form if they wished to participate. All children and their parents provided their written consent. To ensure their ongoing assent, children were asked to reaffirm their verbal consent throughout, and were reminded that they could choose not to participate and stop the recording at any time. A number of children exercised this right during the study.

**An ethnographic approach: data collection**

The study was framed as a contemporary ethnography. This iterative-inductive approach drew

… on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, and asking questions (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 3).

Fieldwork occurred over the final five months of the 2014 school year. Opportunities for child-initiated or ‘free choice’ activities (Wood, 2014, p. 5) coincided with the researcher’s visits to the classroom. Two or three days a week, the teacher facilitated free choice activities for approximately one hour. This period provided opportunities for the children to negotiate with adults and peers access to resources (such as craft and recycled materials, wooden and commercial building blocks, dress ups, old electronic devices and commercial toys), space and partners of their choosing. Children engaged in variety of self-chosen activities including pretend play, craft and block play. Children regularly initiated and organised performances (such as concerts and magic shows) for their teacher and classmates. If requested by the children, the teacher and teacher assistant helped with tasks such as hanging items up for display and conflict resolution.

The researcher sought opportunities to engage with children in their spaces inside and outside of the classroom. In her interactions with children, the researcher framed her role as being different to that of the teacher. She did this by not directing children’s activities, and by participating in their activities at their request or invitation. The researcher sought to participate in children’s activities in a minimal way so as not to dramatically affect their nature or flow. However, being conscious that power relations are amplified in adult–child interactions, we acknowledge that her presence may occasionally have affected the activity.

Video-recorded participant observation and informal conversations formed the basis of data collection. Inside the classroom, the researcher captured 65 hours of video-recorded
participant observations and conversations with children as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities and practices. Outside the classroom, the researcher captured 40 hours of audio-recorded participant observations and conversation with children in open spaces such as the playground. The researcher used audio rather than video recordings in outside spaces to avoid capturing images of children from adjoining classes who were not part of the study. Additional data collection included the researcher’s hand-written field notes, and children’s creative artefacts. Prior to analysis, conversations were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and pseudonyms were used for participants.

Data analysis

This study is guided by theoretical understandings of children as agentic co-constructors of their social worlds (Corsaro, 2005; Prout & James, 1997). Drawing on Corsaro’s (1993, 2014) theory of interpretive reproduction, our analysis of data focused on ways in which children creatively appropriated real-life experiences from adult cultures to produce their own unique peer cultures. From this perspective, interpretive refers to children’s creative participation in social worlds as they appropriate knowledge from adult cultures to address local peer concerns. Rather than simply internalising or reproducing adult cultures, reproduction refers to children actively producing their own peer cultures, as well as contributing to adult cultures (Corsaro, 2012).

Our analysis involved an initial review of 105 hours of video- and audio-recorded data and hand-written field notes to identify all episodes of children’s pretend play. Within this corpus of data, we identified common themes in children’s pretend play such as the performance of concerts and magic shows. We also identified an extended play episode in which children drew on real-life experiences as they creatively reproduced a wedding. This episode was selected because it was an extended sequence of play that the children had initiated and because the teacher’s involvement brought structural changes in the children’s pretend play. While not the only example of play where the teacher’s involvement brought structural changes, this episode was selected because its focus on a wedding provided the most clear example of ritual in children’s peer play. We were interested in the ways in which children framed the wedding in pretence and reality in their production of new peer cultures while negotiating peer and adult agendas. In choosing this example, we attended to matters of reliability; the process where others viewing the data may understand how the researcher arrived at those findings and perhaps identify similar ones (Theobald et al., 2015). Reliability involves transparency in the data analysis (e.g. making explicit the analytic approach) and in how data are represented (e.g. field notes) (Peräkylä, 2010).

Stella’s wedding

Children frame the wedding in pretence and reality

Weddings are one of a small number of significant life events that are widely practiced around the world. They are a marker of relationships in adult culture and are a dominant aspect of many people’s lives (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). Like all rituals, the wedding ritual
involves formal and symbolic actions that are repetitive and structured, and recognisable in the way that they are performed (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Pleck, 2000).

In the following pretend play episode, children creatively appropriate their knowledge of wedding rituals and practices in their planning of a wedding, which is led by Stella (the bride) and assisted by Melissa (the bridesmaid). Initially, the teacher is involved in a separate activity in another area of the classroom but becomes involved in the wedding later in the episode. Stella involves the researcher (Helen) by describing to her the artefacts that children are making for the wedding.

Stella: I'm making a ring box.
Helen: You’re making a what?
Stella: A ring box …
Helen: Ooh.
Stella: … for two rings.
Helen: A ring box.
Stella: Because she’s made a church (points to Melissa).
Helen: Ooh.
Melissa: And she’s the bridesmaid and … wait … she’s the bride and I’m bridesmaid.

Stella draws on her cultural knowledge of wedding practices as she describes specific artefacts (ring box and rings) and the church that she and Melissa have made for the wedding. Melissa links their activities to shared understandings in the peer culture. She does this by referring to the identities that she and Stella will assume in this wedding.

As they co-construct this peer culture, it is likely that the girls are drawing on socio-cultural practices and their experiences of weddings, and dominant Western views of the ‘traditional’ (Barnes, 2014, p. 60) or ‘white’ (Ingraham, 2008, p. 2) wedding are evident. The wedding ring is perhaps the oldest and most universal symbol of marriage (Chesser, 1980) and, in her planning of the wedding, Stella privileges this important ritual symbol with a physical prop.

The identities that Stella and Melissa take up are arguably the two most important female roles in a ‘traditional’ wedding. By not taking up the significant male role of the groom, the girls signal the significance of gender identity in their play episode. The theme of gender identity is evident throughout the play episode.

In the following segment, the emotional struggle and investment devoted to planning a wedding is evident. Stella identifies a real-world problem when she realises that she does not have a ring girl for her wedding. Jack and David attempt to resolve the problem by suggesting that David take up this female role.

Stella: Ah! We can’t do the wedding!
Helen: Why?
Stella: Ring boy. Ring girl.
David: I could be the ring girl.
Stella: You have to be a girl (looking towards David).
Jack: You could be a flower girl! (looking towards David)

In order to address Stella’s real-life problem of not having a ring girl, David and Jack attempt to improvise by negotiating and refining the role of ring girl. Through their interpretive reproduction of the role, David and Jack demonstrate co-constructed understanding of gender identities in this peer culture; that is, identities are fluid and not gender specific, at least for the purposes of addressing Stella’s real-life problem. Contesting
taken-for-granted gender identities in the wedding ritual, they suggest that David take up this female role. While pretence in this peer culture has been used thus far (for example, making ‘the church’ out of cardboard boxes), it is not taken up by Stella as a reasonable solution to her ring girl problem because the ring girl ‘[has] to be a girl’. There is no negotiation for her in this regard, and Jack’s suggestion that David could be a flower girl is ignored.

Stella’s assignment of roles based on gender constrains David’s agency to take up a female role. Stella influences the nature of the peer interaction and solidifies understandings of the ‘traditional’ wedding and gendered identities in it. The subsequent peer culture that is produced is one where the social order of the ‘traditional’ wedding is maintained. Her interpretive reproduction is likely influenced by her real-life experiences of weddings. Aside from the gendered role titles, gendered identities are evident both in the language used in ‘traditional’ weddings and in the material culture. The bride and groom are visibly distinct from each other. In the case of the bride, the ritual costume of a white dress and bridal veil worn in ‘traditional’ weddings distinguishes her from all others present (Chesser, 1980). The wedding party and wedding guests are also typically dressed according to a dress code which clearly distinguishes men from women (Farrimond, 2015; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002).

In her role as bride, Stella’s attention next turns to her wedding cake which she describes for the researcher and David (to whom Stella has now assigned the role of groom).

Stella: Em … so Helen.
Helen: Mm?
Stella: I want a six layer cake.
Helen: A six … for your wedding?
Stella: Yeah.
Helen: Wow. How fancy is that!
Stella: We’ll have a six layer cake okay? (to David)
David: Oh yeah!! (laughs)

The wedding cake is a significant symbol of the wedding ritual (Chesser, 1980). Stella’s interpretive reproduction of this important wedding artefact is that a wedding cake is not just any cake. By specifying that it is a special kind of cake with multiple layers, Stella co-constructs knowledge of the distinctive, tiered wedding cake in a ‘traditional’ wedding, and David demonstrates his shared understanding of this cultural artefact.

While Stella describes for the group the type of cake that she wants, she does not propose who is to make it. Just as in real life, the often elaborate nature of wedding cakes means that they are typically made by professional bakers, rather than the bride themselves (Charsley, 1987). Thus, Stella’s attention now turns to organising someone else to make the cake.

**Children negotiate peer agendas**

In the following segments, Stella seeks to engage a boy in the class to make her wedding cake for her. Jack is initially uninterested in making the cake for Stella, choosing instead to make ‘pretend food’. Stella employs a variety of strategies to secure Jack’s participation, demonstrating the collective and negotiated nature of peer interaction, and the ways in which agency is co-constructed.
Jack: Helen, can you help me?
Helen: Sure!
Jack: Can we make some pretend food?
Helen: What can we make it out of?
Stella: Cake! We need the cake!
Helen: Jack! They need a cake for the wedding. Maybe you could make a cake for the wedding!
Jack shows the researcher some paper on which he has written a list of food items.
Helen: Ah pizza and sausage (reading from Jack's list).
Stella: And cake!
Jack: No no no. Sandwiches.

Stella’s concern that she does not have a cake may have been prompted by Jack’s separate and unrelated activity of making ‘pretend food’. Now, Stella's interpretive reproduction of the wedding cake is that it is no longer something that she simply ‘want[s]’; it has become something that she ‘need[s]’. Anthropological interpretations of wedding rituals identify the wedding cake as an essential item, without which symbolic practices (such as wedding photographs, the cutting of the cake, the wedding toast, and sharing of the cake with guests) would be impossible (Barnes, 2014; Charsley, 1987; Chesser, 1980). While wedding ceremonies are often personalised in different ways, for most people the possibility of omitting the cake does not arise (Charsley, 1987). So too, in this episode, Stella identifies the wedding cake an essential item that is to be marked with a physical prop.

Jack and Stella demonstrate their competence in including adults as non-players in their peer culture when they seek the researcher’s assistance with making food. In order to minimise her participation in the play, and drawing on Jack’s current activity as a maker of ‘pretend food’, the researcher identifies Jack as suitably qualified to make the cake and thus solve Stella’s problem. In doing so, the researcher maintains her presence as a helper and non-player in the peer play. This creates opportunity for a new peer culture to be negotiated between Stella and Jack. Stella demonstrates shared understanding of Jack’s suitability to make the cake; just as in real life, Jack is deemed qualified to take on the role of wedding cake maker based on his current role as a maker of pretend food.

Jack may also be demonstrating a shared understanding about the role of a wedding cake maker. Exercising his agency, he refuses both the researcher’s and Stella’s suggestions that he make the wedding cake. In his current role, he is a cook and not a baker. In fact, he is not just any cook. He is Jamie Oliver.

Jack: Helen, I’m going to put Jamie Oliver’s name (points to his shirt)
Helen: I think that’s a great idea. Who’s Jamie Oliver though?
Jack: Eh … he’s … he’s a cook.
Helen: Is he? Do you like him?
Jack: Yeah.
Helen: You know what. I do know who Jamie Oliver is. I actually think you look like him.
Jack: I do!
Helen: You do!
Jack: Yes (smiles).
Helen: ‘Cos you’ve got blond hair like him, don’t you?
Jack: Yes.
Helen: Yes. And …
Jack: And …
Helen: … his hair’s a little bit long like yours.
Jack: Yeah. To there (points to the back of his neck).
Helen: Mm.
Helen: Do you like to watch Jamie Oliver?
Jack: Yeah!!
Helen: Do you?
Jack: And … and Daddy.
Helen: Your Daddy watches Jamie Oliver?
Jack nods vigorously.
Helen: Does he? Who likes Jamie Oliver best? Your Mummy or Dad?
Jack: Dad and me.
Helen: Dad and you.
Helen: And do you cook stuff that Jamie Oliver makes?
Jack shakes his head.

Jack nugs vigorously.

Jamie Oliver is a British celebrity chef and restaurateur. He has produced many television cooking shows (e.g. *Jamie’s Comfort Food, Jamie’s Kitchen Australia*), food documentaries (e.g. *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution*) and written bestselling cook books (e.g. Oliver, 2010, 2012). Aside from his television shows which feature regularly on free to air channels in Australia, Jamie Oliver has been in partnership since 2013 with the Australian supermarket giant Woolworths, featuring in a series of advertising campaigns. His high profile identity has ensured the widespread familiarity of the ‘Jamie Oliver’ brand, and his identity as a household name.

At first glance, Jack appears to be seeking to wear a name badge bearing Jamie Oliver’s name. The children in this setting were familiar with wearing name badges, for example with relief teachers or visitors to the classroom. Jack, however, does not describe wanting to put on a name badge. Rather, he determines that he wants ‘Jamie Oliver’s name’ on this shirt. In his television shows and books, however, Jamie Oliver typically uses his first name only. Thus, it may be that Jack’s desire to ‘put Jamie Oliver’s name’ is reflective of his taking on of the Jamie Oliver identity for his play agenda.

Jack creatively appropriates ‘Jamie Oliver’ as he constructs his identity in this new peer culture. While watching television is typically described as a passive activity for children (AAP Council on Communications and Media, 2016; Australian Government Department of Health, 2012; Paavonen, Pennonen, Roine, Valkonen, & Lahikainen, 2006), Jack’s interpretive reproduction of Jamie Oliver in this peer culture demonstrates how his passive viewing of Jamie Oliver on television is actively produced in his play.

Stella demonstrates shared understanding of Jack’s new identity. She does this by seeking to negotiate Jack’s participation as her wedding cake maker.

Stella: Do you want to cook for us? (to Jack)
Jack: I want to put Jamie Oliver’s name.
Stella sits down at a table. Jack stands behind her.
Stella: How do you write Jamie Oliver? (to researcher – who does not respond as she is talking to another child)
Stella: Helen! How do you write Jamie Oliver? (to researcher – who does not respond as she is talking to another child)

Stella writes Jamie Oliver’s name on a piece of paper and gives it to Jack.
Jack: Thanks.
Jack walks over to researcher.
Stella uses the opportunity, created by the continuing discussion of cooking and food, to again attempt to negotiate with Jack his participation as cake maker at the wedding. Agency is co-constructed as Stella makes the decision to explicitly ask Jack to participate. Jack does not explicitly refuse but tempers his response by stating his play agenda; that is, to ‘put Jamie Oliver’s name’. Jack’s response creates an opportunity for Stella to negotiate with him his participation in the wedding.

Exercising her agency, Stella neither waits for Jack to ask for her assistance with Jamie Oliver’s name, nor does she ask Jack if he wants her assistance. While she initially seeks the researcher’s assistance with spelling, Stella ultimately assumes an authority position, resulting in a cooperative outcome and a new negotiated peer culture. In this new peer culture, Stella and Jack seek to negotiate with the researcher a role for her in helping them to make the wedding cake.

Stella initially sets up the wedding cake activity as a joint one involving herself, Jack and the researcher (‘we make the cake with you’). While the researcher attempts to re-direct the wedding cake activity back to Jack in order to minimise her own participation, Stella identifies the researcher’s participation as necessary in order to address a local concern: Jack is cooking at the wedding, and this is a separate and distinct activity to making the cake. Jack’s identity as cook at the wedding is now more closely aligned with his original agenda of making ‘pretend food’, and with Jamie Oliver’s real-life identity as a chef. Thus, the cooperative outcome for Stella and Jack has addressed the immediate concerns of the local peer culture. The researcher’s identity as a helper in the peer play is reaffirmed by Stella’s request for her ‘help’ with making the cake.

**Children negotiate the teacher’s agendas**

With Jack’s participation as cook at the wedding now secured, Stella negotiates the Teacher’s agenda as she sets about organising a kitchen space for Jamie Oliver.
Stella: I left a microwave in there for him *(to researcher)*.
Helen: Okay. He’s just trying to get his apron sorted.
Stella: Jack! We’ve got your fridge in there.
Jack: Thanks.
Stella: Okay. We’ll get your stove and your dishwasher.
Teacher: Girls! Where are you taking that? Jamie’s kitchen?
Stella: Yes! He’s cooking for us.
Teacher: Okay but leave that table there.

The cooking space becomes known in the classroom, even amongst those not directly participating (such as the Teacher), as ‘Jamie’s kitchen’, with ‘Jamie’ and ‘Jack’ used synonymously. The Teacher’s self-constructed identity as a non-player is evident when she asks the children for information about the furniture – information that is known to the players in this peer culture. Stella shifts between adult and peer cultures as she projects manages the set-up of Jamie’s kitchen, while at the same time negotiating with the Teacher the movement of furniture around the classroom.

The wedding ritual comprises the performance of multiple components such as intentional physical movement and choreography (Farrimond, 2015; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). As the wedding ceremony draws closer, children’s agency in their practices is constrained as the Teacher draws on her adult appropriation of a ‘traditional’ wedding ritual and choreographs children’s physical movement and positioning. The Teacher’s involvement requires children to negotiate peer and adult agendas in their interpretive reproduction of the wedding ritual.

Jack: Helen! The wedding’s starting now!
Teacher: The groom needs to be at the front. The bride needs to be hidden somewhere outside.
Teacher: Alright. And groom you’re going up the front waiting for your bride.
*Jack leaves the kitchen area and stands beside David (the groom).*
Teacher: No Jamie. You’re in the kitchen.
Teacher: Now your guests can go in. Walk in.

The Teacher’s involvement brings a taken-for-granted reality frame to an activity that is situated by children within a pretend frame. The Teacher’s role shifts from that of a non-player to a director in the play.

The children shift between adult and peer cultures as they appropriate information from the adult world. Negotiating peer and teacher agendas, Jack attempts to exercise his agency. With his kitchen located in the same space as ‘the church’ and with his best friend David (the groom) standing up the front, Jack improvises and creatively constructs his identity to be one where the cook stands beside the groom. Following the ‘traditional’ wedding script, however, the Teacher directs Jamie/Jack back to his kitchen. While Jack has constructed himself in multiple and fluid roles, the Teacher, as an outsider and non-player in this peer culture, constrains Jack’s agency by restricting his movement and his identity.

Stella: Okay. Go [Teacher] *(instruction to start recording).*
Teacher records the proceedings on an iPad.
Teacher hums ‘The Wedding March’ as the children move into place.
Teacher: Right Scarlett you need to … the Minister needs to stand up darling.
Teacher: Use a really big voice.
*Scarlett (the ‘Minister’) laughs.*
Stella exercises her agency by directing the Teacher to begin recording the ceremony before she moves up the aisle, and demonstrates her understanding of the ‘performance’ aspect of the wedding ritual (Boden, 2001; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). In her instructions to the Teacher, Stella constructs the Teacher’s identity as that of a documentarian whose role it is to record the event.

While the wedding has assumed many of the characteristics of a ‘traditional’ Christian wedding thus far, the Teacher’s reference to ‘Minister’ is the first specific reference to a particular faith. The wedding is now constructed as a Protestant ceremony. In reality, the role of a Minister would be an authoritative one. However, Scarlett’s agency is constrained as the Teacher instructs her on behaviour appropriate for the performance of this role. In her role as educator, the Teacher draws on the teachable moment that this opportunity presents in order to scaffold Scarlett in the practice of public speaking.

**Jack:** [Teacher]. I’ve got the cake *(holds up a piece of plastic fruit).*
**Jack:** [Teacher]. I’ve got the cake.

Thus far, Jack has exercised his agency by refusing to be involved with the wedding cake both in peer interactions with Stella, and in interactions with the researcher. Now, however, it may be that Jack identifies the wedding cake as the solution to his immediate and real-life problem; that is, gaining access to the wedding ceremony. Jack demonstrates his understanding of identity as fluid and, exercising his agency, improvises and redefines his Jamie Oliver identity. While his initial appropriation of Jamie Oliver closely resembled Jamie Oliver’s real-life identity as a chef, this new production of Jamie Oliver is an identity in which Jack is also the cake maker, or at least the bearer of the cake.

The cake, which Jack has interpretively reproduced in the form of a piece of plastic fruit, is offered to the Teacher. In addressing the Teacher directly, Jack demonstrates his understanding of the social order of this classroom setting in which children and adults have asymmetrical rights. Despite this peer play taking place within the context of a free choice period in which the adults are non-players, Jack demonstrates his awareness that, in co-constructed talk and interactions in the classroom, it is the Teacher who is in charge. In order for Jack to be part of the wedding ceremony, now he must gain access to this peer culture by negotiating with the Teacher.

**Jack hands Melissa (bridesmaid) the wedding cake (a piece of plastic fruit).**
**Teacher:** Jack, they don’t need the cake yet darling.

Next, Jack offers the ‘cake’ to Melissa, the bridesmaid. Jack’s attempt to exercise his agency through pretence in order to gain access to the ceremony is again constrained by the Teacher’s adult appropriation of the wedding ritual, and her self-constructed identity as director of the ceremony. While the Teacher’s directions may reflect the taken-for-granted reality of a ‘traditional’ wedding, they serve to constrain Jack’s fluid identity in this peer culture.

Next, children negotiate the Teacher’s agendas as they co-construct the customary wedding kiss.

**Scarlett reads from a sheet of paper that has been written by Stella.**
**Scarlett:** Man do you want to kiss the girl? *(laughs)*
**Teacher:** What was that?
**Scarlett:** Man do you want to kiss the girl.
Teacher: Oh okay.
Scarlett: On the cheek.
Scarlett: I was about to say on the lips.
*Children laugh.*
Stella: On the lips!
Children: On the lips! (laugh)
Teacher: No. Definitely not.

By including the customary wedding kiss in the script it is likely that children are drawing on their experiences and media portrayals of ‘traditional’ weddings. While there is no specification as to the type of kiss, the Teacher immediately seeks clarification. Garvey (1990) observes that, depending on the context in which they occur, children’s interpretive reproductions of real events in their peer play can be constrained by adults. Thus it may be that the unfolding events create a tension for the Teacher as she seeks to manage potentially risky behaviour in children’s close physical contact, while at the same time support children’s agency in their play.

The Teacher appears mollified by Scarlett’s repeating of her wording. Scarlett, however, offers a clarification – the kiss is on the cheek. She demonstrates her nuanced understanding of the social order of the classroom to be one where a kiss on the cheek might be more acceptable. Her reference to a kiss ‘on the lips’ immediately thereafter demonstrates her cultural knowledge of the customary kiss on the lips at the end of the ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony (Chesser, 1980). The children’s laughter suggests a shared understanding of the risqué nature of such a kiss. Despite the Teacher’s response, which effectively shuts down the possibility of a kiss on the lips, momentum and anticipation for a kiss builds as children become increasingly animated.

Melissa (the bridesmaid) offers Stella (the bride) a ring.

Teacher: David needs to give her a ring.

Melissa’s offering of the ring to the bride may reflect her cultural knowledge of the significance of this part of the ritual. Melissa has assumed important roles in the wedding thus far, both as co-organiser and as bridesmaid. Her interpretive reproduction of the ring exchange where she, rather than the groom, offers the ring to the bride may reflect her self-identity as an important figure in the wedding. Melissa’s agency, however, is diminished by the Teacher’s adult appropriation of this part of the ritual where the groom offers the ring to the bride. While the Teacher’s directions may reflect the taken-for-granted reality of a ‘traditional’ wedding, they serve to constrain Melissa’s fluid identity in this peer culture.
The script associated with the exchange of wedding vows in a ‘traditional’ Christian wedding is particularly symbolic and recognisable (Farrimond, 2015; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). Drawing on this ‘traditional’ script to direct the children in their practices, the Teacher demonstrates a form of ‘reality analysis’ (Hester & Francis, 1997, p. 103) as she instructs the children in what is really said in a ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony.

Teacher: Scarlett. Big voice. You say, David do you take this girl Stella to be your wife.
Scarlett: Will you …
Stella: Take (to Scarlett).
Scarlett: … keep … will you keep your wife … bride? Forever?
Teacher: Oh that’s lovely.
Teacher: And then you ask the bride (to Scarlett).
Teacher: Big voice (to Scarlett).
Scarlett: Will you …
Stella: Take (to Scarlett).
Scarlett: … take … this ring. You (to Stella).
Teacher: And then you have to say yes I will (to Stella).
Stella: Yes I will.
Stella: And then we kiss (points at the script in Scarlett’s hand).
Scarlett smiles/giggles.
Stella: Say it (to Scarlett).
Children giggle.
Jack: I want to see the kiss! I want to see the kiss!
Scarlett: Just kiss! (to David and Stella)
David and Stella kiss on the lips.
Children laugh/gasp/clap.
Jenna: (guest at the wedding) They really did kiss on the lips!

The Teacher’s instructions to Scarlett emphasise this event as a performance; that is, Scarlett needs to speak loudly so that her performance can be heard by the audience. This opportunity provides a teachable moment for the Teacher to scaffold and support Scarlett’s public speaking in the performance.

Scarlett exercises her agency by not repeating the Teacher’s words, and instead reads from her script. It is unclear as to whether her hesitation is due to her difficulty in reading the script that has been written for her by Stella, or whether it is because the wording differs from that of the Teacher’s. Negotiating peer and adult agendas, Stella’s seeks to repair Scarlett’s pause by offering ‘take’ – the same wording the Teacher has instructed. Scarlett does not take up Stella’s (or the Teacher’s) suggested wording but instead refers back to her written script.

Stella draws on shared understandings of the ‘traditional’ wedding ritual by directing that she and David should now kiss. She affirms this instruction and infers authority in the written word by pointing to the script. Scarlett does not immediately follow Stella’s instruction; her giggles may suggest that she anticipates what might happen next. With
further encouragement from Jack (‘I want to see the kiss!’) and Scarlett (‘Just kiss!’), Stella and David exercise their agency by kissing each other on the lips, thus subverting or resisting the Teacher’s earlier direction. The reaction of the guests suggests that while they may have anticipated a kiss of some sort in the context of their shared understandings of a ‘traditional’ wedding, the context for this type of kiss challenges the social order and expectations of children’s behaviour in the classroom.

In negotiating the Teacher’s agenda, Melissa draws on authority afforded to her in her role as bridesmaid. She exercises her agency by asserting this authority when she announces ‘the dance’.

Melissa: Now we are going to do the dance and everyone can join in.
Children dance while David and Stella sign the register.
Jamie/Jack moves to his kitchen space.
Teacher: Look at them signing the register!
Jack: I’m in the kitchen!
Children dance and jump around.
Teacher: Do you know normally … ah Prep … guests at their wedding … please sit down.
Teacher: When the people are signing the register …
Jack: What’s the register?
Teacher: The register is when you sign the piece of paper saying that you have just married each other. The guests just talk quietly to themselves.
Stella: At my auntie’s wedding I didn’t even see them because my mum and some of my cousins and my grandma and granddad they stayed with me because they went to the pub. Yeah I didn’t know. I didn’t see them do this.
Teacher: No and that’s called signing the register.
Teacher: Alright now. When they have finished signing the register they stand up and they walk down the aisle together with their arms linked and everybody can give them a little clap. Give them a little clap.

It is likely that Melissa is drawing on her cultural knowledge of weddings and the customary first dance between the bride and the groom, which typically happens after the wedding ceremony at the wedding reception. Melissa’s interpretive reproduction challenges the taken-for-granted reality of the order of events, as the two normally separate practices are conflated. While music is often played at church weddings while the bride and groom sign the marriage register (Farrimond, 2015), in this episode music is for dancing to and everyone should dance. In her self-constructed role as director, the Teacher constrains the children’s agency when she draws on the adult culture of weddings regarding appropriate behaviour for the guests while the bride and groom sign the register.

Despite Stella indicating that she ‘didn’t know’ about signing the register from her recent real-life experience, its inclusion in the ceremony reveals the co-constructed nature of knowledge in this peer culture. Its inclusion suggests that Stella is either familiar with the practice from media or that it is co-constructed knowledge from within the peer group. Stella’s telling about being in the pub with her family after her auntie’s wedding also reveals broader socio-cultural practices in ‘traditional’ Western weddings where post-wedding gatherings and receptions often take place in venues such as pubs, restaurants and hotels.

As the ceremony draws to a close, peer and adult interactions again highlight the element of ‘performance’ in weddings (Boden, 2001; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002), where the bride and groom pose for a photograph before walking down the aisle while being
applauded by their guests. Children’s agency to exercise control in their practices is constrained as the Teacher, drawing on her adult culture, choreographs the final stages of a ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony. In particular, she instructs very specific and intentional physical movement for the wedding party (‘stand up and they walk down the aisle together with their arms linked’) and for guests (‘give them a little clap’).

**Conclusion**

In their pretend play, children creatively appropriate child and adult cultures, and interpretively reproduce new peer cultures situated within collaboratively co-constructed local contexts. The pretend play episode presented here highlights the complexities of children’s creative production and performance of peer cultures within the real world context of the classroom, and the social and cultural contexts of children’s real-life experiences.

This episode illuminates how children interpret and perform a significant ritual in their culture. Children’s interpretive reproduction of the wedding, framed both in pretence and reality, highlighted the complex ways in which peer cultures were produced as children co-constructed knowledge and identity framed in cultural understandings and social practices. The performance of the wedding ceremony also revealed the complex ways in which children negotiated adult agendas. Children demonstrated their competence in including adults as non-players in their peer play when they required their support or assistance. Within the social order of the classroom, children sought to assert their agency by making decisions and taking control of their participation in the wedding. When their agency to act in particular ways was constrained by peer and adult agendas, children improvised and employed a variety of strategies to re-assert their agency that included improvisation, subversion, negotiation, and creative interpretation. The episode provides a valuable example of the kind of agency that children exercise even when adults attempt to direct control over their practices.

Observations showed how children creatively appropriated aspects of adult cultures in order to deal with practical problems in their local peer cultures. Children addressed practical issues that arose (for example, the lack of a ring girl, and who would make the wedding cake) by negotiating, co-constructing and producing new and unique peer cultures. As such, pretend play facilitated children’s agency to transform roles and situations in order to deal with problems in ways that enabled them to exercise and affirm their agency.

Our observations contribute to understandings of how children’s peer cultures are produced in pretend play within the social order of the classroom. These observations provide rich insights into children’s social worlds and have important implications for early childhood policy and practice. In particular, we show what happens when adults step into children’s peer play. In this episode, adult involvement in children’s play changed it from a
peer culture activity, where peers negotiated with each other, to more of an adult-directed activity.

The episode highlights many of the tensions facing early childhood teachers as they grapple with supporting children’s agency, while at the same time providing learning through play. The contexts of play-based learning and scaffolding learning through play in the early years require teachers to orient to ‘teachable moments’ as part of their role. Thus, there is understanding as to why teachers involve themselves in children’s play. However, this episode serves as a cautionary tale; while there may be positive gains when adults get involved in children’s play (such as imparting knowledge or skill development), there may also be negative consequences. When adults step into children’s peer cultures, their presence can change the quality and structure of play. As such, we urge adults to be mindful that their actions can impact on children’s peer play and diminish children’s agency in their practices.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank the teacher and children for their participation in the study.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on contributors**

*Helen Breathnach* is a Senior Research Assistant in the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education at Queensland University of Technology. Her ethnographic research has investigated children’s perspectives and experiences in the early years. In particular, she is interested in the ways in which children’s agency and participation in their practices can be supported.

*Susan Danby* is a professor in the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education at Queensland University of Technology. Her research applies ethnomethodological and conversation analysis perspectives to investigate social interaction in children’s peer groups as well as between children and adults in institutional settings such as classrooms and helplines.

*Lyndal O’Gorman* is a senior lecturer in the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education at Queensland University of Technology. Her research has applied phenomenography to explore parents’ views of the Preparatory Year. Lyndal’s current research topics include early childhood arts education, education for sustainability, play pedagogies, and early childhood leadership.

**ORCID**

Helen Breathnach [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9445-481X](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9445-481X)

Susan Danby [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1944-7043](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1944-7043)

Lyndal O’Gorman [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6860-6784](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6860-6784)

**References**

AAP Council on Communications and Media. (2016). Media use in school-aged children and adolescents. *Pediatrics, 138*(5), doi:10.1542/peds.2016-2592
Alderson, P. (2005). Designing ethnical research with children. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 27–36). Berkshire: Open University Press.

Australian Government Department of Health. (2012). Inactivity and screen time. Retrieved June 21, 2018, from http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/gug-indig-hb—inactivity

Barnes, M. W. (2014). Our family functions: Functions of traditional weddings for modern brides and postmodern families. *Qualitative Sociology Review, 10*(2), 60–78.

Boden, S. (2001). “Superbrides”: wedding consumer culture and the construction of bridal identity. *Sociological Research Online, 6*(1). Retrieved October 9, 2018, from http://www.socresonline.org.uk/6/1/boden.html.

Breathnach, H., Danby, S., & O’Gorman, L. (2017). Are you working or playing?” Investigating young children’s perspectives of classroom activities. *International Journal of Early Years Education, doi:10.1080/09669760.2017.1316241*

Breathnach, H., Danby, S., & O’Gorman, L. (2018). Becoming a member of the classroom: Supporting children’s participation as informants in research. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 26*(4), doi:10.1080/1350293X.2018.1463906

Breathnach, H., O’Gorman, L., & Danby, S. (2016). “Well it depends on what you’d call play”: parent perspectives on play in Queensland’s preparatory year. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 41*(2), 77–84.

Charsley, S. (1987). Interpretation and custom: The case of the wedding cake. *Man, 22*(1), 93. doi:10.2307/2802965

Chesser, B. J. (1980). Analysis of wedding rituals: An attempt to make weddings more meaningful. *Family Relations, 29*(2), 204–209.

Corsaro, W. A. (1993). Interpretive reproduction in children’s role play. *Childhood (copenhagen, Denmark), 1*(2), 64–74. doi:10.1177/090756829300100202

Corsaro, W. A. (2005). *The sociology of childhood* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Corsaro, W. A. (2012). Interpretive reproduction in children’s play. *American Journal of Play, 4*(4), 488–504.

Corsaro, W. A. (2014). Children’s well-being and interpretive reproduction. In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frones, & J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child well-being* (pp. 709–737). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. doi:10.1007/978-90-481-9063-8_136

Farrimond, S. (2015). Church of England weddings and ritual symbolism. In J. Miles, P. Mody, & R. Probert (Eds.), *Marriage rites and rights* (pp. 211–228). London: Hart Publishing. doi:10.5040/9781782259664.ch-010.

Fleer, M. (2013). *Play in the early years*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Garvey, C. (1990). *Play (Enl)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gaskins, S., Haight, W., & Lancy, D. F. (2007). The cultural construction of play. In A. Göncü & S. Gaskins (Eds.), *Play and development: Evolutionary, sociocultural, and functional perspectives* (pp. 179–202). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Göncü, A., & Gaskins, S. (2007). An integrative perspective on play and development. In A. Göncü & S. Gaskins (Eds.), *Play and development: Evolutionary, sociocultural, and functional perspectives* (pp. 3–17). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hester, S., & Francis, D. (1997). Reality analysis in a classroom storytelling. *The British Journal of Sociology, 48*(1), 95–112.

Ingraham, C. (2008). *White weddings: Romancing heterosexuality in popular culture* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2002). *Wedding as text: Communicating cultural identities through ritual*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lillemyr, O. (2009). *Taking play seriously*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Oliver, J. (2010). *Jamie’s kitchen*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Oliver, J. (2012). *Jamie’s 15-minute meals*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

O’Reilly, K. (2009). *Key concepts in ethnography*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
Paavonen, E. J., Pennonen, M., Roine, M., Valkonen, S., & Lahikainen, A. R. (2006). TV exposure associated with sleep disturbances in 5- to 6-year-old children. *Journal of Sleep Research, 15*(2), 154–161. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2869.2006.00525.x

Peräkylä, A. (2010). Validity in research on naturally occurring social interaction. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research* 4th ed. (pp. 337–353). London: SAGE Publications.

Pleck, E. (2000). *Celebrating the family: Ethnicity, consumer culture and family rituals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pramling Samuelsson, I., & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2008). The playing learning child: Towards a pedagogy of early childhood. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 52*(6), 623–641. doi:10.1080/00313830802497265

Prout, A., & James, A. (1997). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood* 2nd ed. (pp. 7–33). London: Falmer Press.

Rogers, S., & Evans, J. (2007). Rethinking role play in the reception class. *Educational Research, 49*(2), 153–167. doi:10.1080/00131880701369677

Sawyer, K. R. (1997). *Pretend play as improvisation: Conversation in the preschool classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Simmons, C. A. (2014). Playing with popular culture – an ethnography of children’s sociodramatic play in the classroom. *Ethnography and Education, 9*(3), 270–283. doi:10.1080/17457823.2014.904753

Theobald, M., Danby, S., Einarsdóttir, J., Bourne, J., Jones, D., Ross, S., … Carter-Jones, C. (2015). Children’s perspectives of play and learning for educational practice. *Education Sciences, 5*, 345–362. doi:10.3390/educsci5040345

Wood, E. (2014). Free choice and free play in early childhood education: Troubling the discourse. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 22*(1), 4–18. doi:10.1080/09669760.2013.830562