Power & Voice in Research with Children

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CHAPTER FIVE

COMING HOME TO RESEARCH

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Playing creates imagined spaces in fictional worlds that can be entered by people of all ages. Yet in early childhood research, play is almost exclusively regarded as the special province of childhood. Play is an activity to be observed by adults (Katch, 2001; Paley, 1988; Reynolds & Jones, 1997; Thorne, 1993) to understand children's perspectives (Graue & Walsh, 1998) rather than to be participated in with children (Cohen, 2001; Corsaro, 1985; Kelly-Byrne, 1989).

The potential benefit for adults, as well as for children, in playing together has been overlooked. The socially constructed categories of adult versus child reify hierarchies of authority and undermine "adult" participation in "children's" activities (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Though we acknowledge that meaning is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978), as adults we are often wary of our participation in play events. We resist the introduction of our authority to structure and interpret play in "the child's world," as if that world were constructed exclusively by children in the first place (Dyson, 1993).

Looking outside-in at play as an early childhood activity, it is easy to forget not only that different adults can interpret the same events quite differently (Hauser & Jipson, 1998), but also that as adults we can misinterpret the reality of play for children. We can easily regard children's actions as abuses of power and ironically impose our authority as adults to control, ban, or limit play activities and interpre-
tations that are actually significant for young people's meaning making (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; Katch, 2001; Paley, 1988).

Play creates imagined spaces in possible worlds (Bruner, 1986) that as adults we can enter with children to give us inside experiences and perspectives that are not possible if we remain on the outside looking in. If we play with a child we can productively use our power to share authority so that we may coexplore the meanings of events in imagined spaces.

Relying on the theories of Bakhtin (1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1986, 1990), I argue that when we share authority with children as we play our interactions will be "dialogic" so that children and adults can raise and explore questions of import that would otherwise not be possible (Edmiston, 1998; Edmiston & Enciso, 2002). Play is dialogic when different meanings of events are set in motion so that "all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another, and co-exist in the consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292). As children desire repetitions of play events, as was the case when I played with my son (aged two-seven), questions can be explored over time, the events can become more elaborated, and the dialogic meaning of the underlying ideas can become more complex.

I have often encountered the critique that playing with my son could have been interruptive for him, but rarely is the point made that, as a father, I necessarily cared about the development of my relationship with my son, Michael, or that our play could have been enriching for our lives, giving us both insights into humanity. Unlike other researchers who participate in child's play and then leave the research site (Corsaro, 1985; Kelly-Byrne, 1989), I knew that I would continue to live with the meaning of our play for myself and for my son. Instead of creating a voyeuristic or exploitative site for research, my inquiry into our play turned the research lens toward my actions, decisions, and understandings as much as it illuminated my son's explorations of human dilemmas.

My understanding of why and how we can share authority in adult-child research changed significantly through inquiry and play with Michael, who is now aged fourteen. In this chapter I show how adults could learn about some of the deepest aspects of themselves by researching their play with children. Over several years I examined some of my assumptions and beliefs about research, and life, and these understandings developed as Michael and I interacted as coauthors of action and meaning in the imagined spaces of play.

**COMING HOME TO RESEARCH**

I came home to research when I began playing with our young son. Playing was the primary mode of communication and relationship building with Michael in his ear
childhood. In the research, I focused on what I was learning about both play and myself as a researcher. I recorded play episodes over several years (1992–1997) and wrote narrative interpretations of the meaning of our play.

Our play and my inquiry created a “space of authoring” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) in which I could not only author actions but also author meaning about myself and the world that included my understanding of play and inquiry. Over time, a question that guided my analysis (and the one I used in writing this chapter) became: How did my understanding of myself as an adult-father-researcher change through playing with my son?

The lines of communication and analysis in inquiry are never straight but are rather bent, or “refracted,” by people’s perspectives and values as they select, use, and interpret words. Bakhtin uses the term refraction to highlight how in our use of spoken and written language we create meaning indirectly about ourselves and about our relationships with others. When we use words to write and when we interact with others, including when we play with someone else, language does not transfer meaning directly.

Bakhtin (1981) stresses that “Language is not a neutral medium” since it comes to us already “populated with the intentions [and values] of others” (p. 294). To understand anything using words we populate language with our own intentions and values. However, we never bend words to make individual meaning that is separated from other people’s meanings and our own previous understandings. All ideas are located in intentions, assumptions, and beliefs that are to differing degrees shared with other people. Making meaning always requires effort that may become a struggle as we experience varying degrees of tension or conflict between and among prior and new understandings.

Part of coming to understand is becoming more aware of, and discriminating among, the competing ideological roots of our own and other people’s ideas. In dialogic interactions not only a person’s words, but also their values, are in degrees of competition with another person’s words and values. Beliefs and values become more apparent in exchanges when our ideas are critiqued or challenged as my understandings of play and research were challenged when I played with Michael.

My research was interpretive (Erickson, 1986), reflective (Schön, 1983), and refractive (Bakhtin, 1981) inquiry. As an teacher–researcher I had engaged in reflective practitioner research into using drama and play with children for curricular purposes in my own third- and fourth-grade classroom and in other teachers’ classrooms (Edmiston, 1993; Edmiston & Wilhelm, 1996; Taylor, 1998). I was comfortable both playing with school-aged children and using reflective analysis to guide my practice. Inquiry as a father–researcher was more seamlessly woven into the fabric of everyday life than it had been in the classroom.
Researching at home was more of a struggle and was less straightforward than I had expected. The meaning of our play was contested. I soon recognized that other parents and teachers had interpretations of the nature and value of play at home and in school that often differed from, and sometimes conflicted with, one another and with my own changing understandings.

The tensions among these views connected with and extended some of the questions in the field. When is play mostly imitation of external reality and important for the individual construction of understanding (Piaget, 1975) and when is it more significant as social interaction that plays with reality to lead development (Vygotsky, 1967)? How much are children manipulated by media and how much do they resist or transform intended meanings to actively construct their own understandings (Dines & Humez, 2003; Levin, 1998)? When is play more like a window into the existing reality of children's psyches and hidden desires (Freud 1933), and when can play, like art, create a time-space in which social, cultural, and ideological reality can be examined (Bakhtin, 1990)? Are children being violent and/or might they become violent if they pretend to hurt and kill (Paley, 1988 Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987)? Why might boys learn to be aggressive and oppressive in gendered play (Thorne, 1993), especially in play with toys that are marketed for young males (Goldstein, 1994)? Does play only promote a stage in a child moral development (Kohlberg, 1984) or through playing together might adults as well as children develop ethical understandings (Edmiston, 2000)?

Anyone who talks or writes about play, whether in an academic or family setting, is unavoidably using a term with ideological force that is populated with different people's assumptions and beliefs about the value of play in different situation and relationships. Everyone has a different understanding of play because of how the term is linked to various images, experiences, and other people's meanings, which often include ideas about what is wise parenting or good teaching.

As I inquired into my play with our son, I explored questions like those just listed. I also had opportunities to examine and change my understanding of myself an adult-father-researcher. Ideas about play, parenting, and research that had previously seemed obvious and stable to me, looked less obvious and more open to question when they collided with and were refracted by other ideas.

PLAY

I had almost continual opportunities to play with my son because, like most young children, he had a playful attitude to almost any activity, transforming mundane events into imaginary possibilities. He focused much more on the possible fictional meanings of objects, actions, situations, and relationships than on their l...
meaning (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976; Garvey, 1977; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Pelligrini, 1991; Vygotsky, 1967). For example, though we had read and played with several of Beatrix Potter’s stories, it was not until we had a walk in the woods one day that Michael, aged three, wanted to pretend to be inside the world of *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (Potter, 1908/1984). Seeing a flapping crow, he transformed it into Jemima Puddle-Duck flying to the woods; one of the book’s watercolor illustrations shows her gliding toward the trees. He scampered ahead of me on the path, took the map I was carrying, and sat on a log pretending to read the newspaper. He imagined that I was Jemima meeting him as the fox when he said, “Daddy, you’re Jemima and you ask me where you can lay your eggs.” A minute after we talked as goose and fox he had turned rocks into eggs. As in the original story, he pretended to be the fox, chased me away, and ate the eggs.

Playing with my son was extremely pleasurable (Huizinga, 1955), and was central to communication (Bateson, 1955; Schwartzman, 1978), conceptual development (Vygotsky, 1967), and building an intimate relationship (Kelly-Byrne, 1989). Our play was also carnivalesque when our individual or shared actions disrupted or inverted norms of hierarchical adult–child authority (Bakhtin, 1984b; Grace & Tobin, 1997). For example, I loved pretending to be the silly naïve goose meeting the clever but dangerous fox. Michael was learning about the dangers of trusting strangers at the same time as we were deepening the trust in our own relationship. It did not bother me that in play he was stronger and cleverer than I was, because we had created a carnivalesque space of pleasurable, shared authority. Our play was not a time where Michael overpowered me but was rather a time for dialogue.

**Dialogic Play**

Our play was dialogic when we each had the authority to shape and interpret play events and thus could encounter struggles for meaning. Though I usually followed my son’s lead in terms of the focus of our play, I was not the object of his play but rather our play was most often “the meeting of two subjects and two authors” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 107). We each improvised words and movement appropriate for imagined social situations. As Michael chose play events he was insistent about what should happen. However he did not dominate or silence me when I said or did something that was unexpected. Though he would use the medium of play to redirect my attention he most often listened and responded to what I said and did. His actions and responses might be loud and very animated but they were always possible ways of interacting I was the one who on occasions made interactions less dialogic when I curtailed or insisted on certain behaviors. Finally, if one of us wanted to stop playing the other did so, though often not without protest as far as Michael was concerned.
In improvisation we “piece together existing cultural resources opportunistically to address present conditions and problems” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 277). We talk and move in response to imagined conditions and problems. To do so we selectively draw on cultural resources from our life experiences that include the fictional narratives we know.

Most of my improvised actions as I played with my son drew on fictional narratives that we had introduced to him since birth via literally hundreds of books and videos. When an encounter in a story captivated his imagination, for weeks months he would ask one of us to pretend with him—to be the people or creatures in the story. When he was aged three we were imagining the events in Beatrix Potter’s tales. Aged four we were battling as heroes and monsters from myths like St. George and the Dragon (Hodges, 1984). By the age of five we were pretending to be creatures like Frankenstein and the Wolfman from the Universal Studios movie of the 1940s and 1950s.

As we played I improvised actions that felt appropriate in response to Michael’s actions within both the particular imagined social situation and the broader cultural milieu. Imagining that I was Mr. McGregor in Beatrix Potter’s (1903/1984) Tale of Peter Rabbit, I pretended not to find the hiding Peter Rabbit/Michael: Wanting Michael to learn more about sharing (and unlike the character in the tale) I mused aloud that if he was hungry and had asked I would have given him vegetables to eat.

Sharing authority in dialogic play was essential for each of us to be able to control our actions and signify meaning. I used my authority as a parent to constrain his behavior when I was concerned that he might physically hurt himself; for example, by insisting that he not climb beyond my reach at the park. Most often I shared authority with him; for example, when we negotiated what and where we would play. As we played, it was not my words, but rather imagined spaces and narratives that provided the social controls for his (and my) actions (Vygotsky, 1967). For example, when he pretended to be Peter Rabbit sneaking into Mr. McGregor’s garden, he quietly sneaked along the floor.

Authority was dispersed among the people and creatures we imagined with each of the fictional worlds that we explored in play. Michael took on the authority of whatever person (or creature) he pretended to be and he wanted me to do the same. We played with relating to one another in multiple ways beyond our everyday hierarchical father-son relationship. We authored meaning from related points that had very different degrees and forms of power. He loved pretending to be very strong and noisy, but he also wanted to imagine being weak and of Pretending to be Mr. McGregor, Michael could yell, “Stop, thief!” as he chased (pretending to be Peter Rabbit) and then pretend to lock Peter Rabbit in a box. Seconds later, he would switch to pretend to be Peter whimpering to McGregor...
as he apologized for taking carrots and then asking for some food to share with his family.

REFRACTIVE PLAY

As we interact with another person our views can range from being in close agreement to being in intense opposition depending on the “refractive angle” between them (Bakhtin 1981, p. 300). We cannot avoid dissonance when we play because play interactions, like all exchanges, are always to a degree refractive. Though much of the play with my son felt exuberant and unproblematic, our play was most refractive for me when I found myself improvising words and actions that felt at odds with how I believed I would have behaved in everyday situations. When I interacted with Michael, despite my discomfort, I became more aware of the values, assumptions, and beliefs embedded in my language and thought and more open to changes in my ideas.

Interactions are easy when there is already much agreement. The more divergent people’s ideas, the more refraction there is between them, the more discomfort we are likely to feel. Usually when Michael wanted us to pretend to be elsewhere as if we were other people or creatures, I was aware of little refraction between Michael’s ideas and mine. Most often there was fairly close agreement between what Michael asked me to do, and what I was comfortable doing. Occasionally I felt intense opposition.

One particularly refractive experience for me was the first time Michael wanted me to pretend to be a police officer shooting someone. As a pacifist and a Quaker I was fundamentally opposed to hurting and killing people. Having grown up in Northern Ireland living in a violent divided society, I believed that I would never use a gun in an aggressive act. I did not anticipate on that day, when I felt such antipathy, that our play and my subsequent inquiry would allow me to examine, clarify, and develop those and other beliefs.

PLAYING IN THE WORLD OF JEKYLL AND HYDE

From a set of stories of classic movie monsters that a librarian directed him to when he was four years five months old, Michael discovered Robert Louis Stevenson’s story of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886/1992). He was particularly captivated by the tale of the kind, respectable, and socially responsible physician Dr. Henry Jekyll, who turned into the monstrously egotistical Mr. Edward Hyde when Jekyll took a potion that he had made in his laboratory. As soon as he realized that we could rent the movies illustrated in the book, he begged to borrow them. Within days we had
reread many of the stories several times and watched extracts from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as well as *The Wolfman, Frankenstein*, and *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*. We had also pretended to be characters from the stories.

A central condition and problem of the story of Jekyll and Hyde that appealed to Michael, was how to react to the violent, and eventually deadly, deeds of Hyde. Play was integral to our dialogue as Michael responded to my questions and improvised his own responses from his images of the story and other narratives.

The following extracts are from a transcript of an audiotape of us playing in our living room.

| Michael: You're Mr. Hyde and I'm Dr. Jekyll. We're the same person. |
| [In quick succession he imagines he is a werewolf who tries to attack Mr. Hyde/me, a little boy asking me/Hyde for money, and an adult sitting in front of Hyde/me. Michael tells me/Hyde to push him out of the way. As the werewolf he tries to wrestle me. As the boy and the adult he falls over.] |
| Brian: Get out of my way. |
| Michael: Now I'm Mr. Hyde and you're a person. |
| Michael: Get out of my way [pretending to push me and repeating the words I've just said as Hyde]. |
| Brian: Please help me. |
| Michael: Get out of my way. I'm a monster. |
| Michael: You're another person who helps him [i.e., the victim]. |
| Brian: Can you help me? |
| [He changes to imagine he is my wife and we talk about what to do. He tells me to phone the police. He imagines we are police officers and wants to write in a book what has happened. He wants us to look for Hyde and imagines that we go into a house. He looks up and points.] |
| Brian: Wait a minute. You have to be very careful it's the right person. |
| Brian: Wait a minute. You have to be very careful it's the right person. |
| Michael: Oh dear. It's him his claws (inaudible). |
| Brian: Shall we have it that he's up on the roof tops and you . . . |
| Michael: and I (inaudible) yes. |
| [He changes to pretend to be Dr. Jekyll.] |

As we began to play I felt little dissonance as we imagined that I was Hyde confronting my son who pretended in quick succession to be a werewolf, a child, an adult. I was happy wrestling with my son, as I had enjoyed rough-and-tumble play since he was a toddler. In initiating our play he improvised from the narrative of *The Wolfman* as he imagined who might encounter Hyde. He had discovered t
story at the same time as the tale of Jekyll and Hyde. Though I was not thinking about this as we played, as I enacted what Michael wanted to experience. By pretending to push the Wolfman/Michael, I confirmed by my actions that no child or adult, and not even a powerful werewolf, could stop Hyde from being violent.

REFRACTION IN INNER AND SOCIAL SPEECH

As we continued, our play became highly refractive as I experienced conflict between what Bakhtin (1984a) refers to as the “voices” of inner speech. My words “Wait a minute. You have to be careful it’s the right person” suggest the hesitation I felt as part of an inner struggle between different voices. When Michael wanted us to pretend to be police officers, I found myself resisting using the imaginary police officer’s gun. I heard different voices that I felt pulled me between pretending to shoot, and not shoot. In one ear I heard a voice insist that because I was pretending to be the police officer I should pull the trigger. This was a powerful voice that had developed since I had first played with Michael and that now urged me to enact whatever he earnestly wanted to experience if it was consistent with the fictional world of the narrative; it felt quite appropriate for an armed police officer to shoot Hyde in order to stop him from killing. In my other ear I heard the equally powerful Quaker pacifist voice developed over a lifetime that was adamantly opposed to killing people.

The words that I spoke, “Wait a minute. You have to be very careful it’s the right person,” along with my lack of movement, were, using Bakhtin’s term, my “utterance.” My utterance was an improvised response or “answer” to my son’s utterance, as if he were a police officer, that he had “addressed” to me as he pointed and used commanding words: “It’s Mr. Hyde. Come on. Shoot. Shoot.” But my utterance at that moment was also in answer to the other voices by which I felt addressed.

As Bakhtin’s collaborator Voloshinov (1986) noted, “the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine—and determine from within, so to speak—the structure of an utterance” (p. 86). My hesitation was my conflicted answer to, on the one hand, my son’s utterance in our social speech that resonated with an inner voice in the “immediate social situation,” which addressed me with a demand that I shoot; and, on the other hand, an inner voice in my “broader social milieu” that demanded I not shoot.

At the same time our interactions were for me both inner speech and social speech. My utterance was “double-voiced” because in our improvised dialogue I was answering more than one voice. My discourse was directed both toward my son and toward inner voices that he did not hear. I experienced the voices “encounter one another and coexist in [my] consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291). As I struggled to pretend to be the police officer holding a gun that I pointed at an imagined Hyde,
there was an intense interaction and struggle between the voices, which I felt as dissonance. As Bakhtin (1984a) notes, “What matters is the dialogic [or refractive] angle at which [the voices] are juxtaposed or counterposed” (p. 182). At this moment they felt oppositional.

EASING REFRACTION

The refractive angle of our play eased significantly as Michael shifted to pretend to be Jekyll. My utterances were still double-voiced, but I focused more on my inner speech than I did on the social speech with my son. It was only later as I returned to this moment and compared it with other similar moments that I was struck by the meaning that Michael was making.

Having announced that Mr. Hyde had changed back into Dr. Jekyll, Michael stood still looking puzzled.

Brian: Henry. What are you doing?
Michael: I can’t remember.

[I pretend to read in a newspaper about the people who had been killed.]

Brian: Who could have done this, Henry? Do you know?
Michael: I changed into Mr. Hyde.
Brian: Henry, you mean that was you?
Michael: I don’t want to do all this mean stuff.

[I pretend to read in the newspaper that the police say Mr. Hyde should be killed.]

Brian: Henry, what do you think should happen? Should Mr. Hyde be killed?
Michael: No, because if Mr. Hyde is killed that means me myself is going to be killed.
Brian: But you’re not Mr. Hyde, Henry.
Michael: Well I change into him.
Brian: Only when you drank this potion.
Michael: Yea. I’m going to lock it up. Right now. Here.

[He pretends to lock it in a safe and I help him.] …

I was still thinking about the previous episode when the police officer/I was holding the gun. I was answering this voice when I improvised that there was an account in the newspaper that said the police thought that Hyde should be killed and I asked Michael if he agreed. When he said, “No, because if Mr. Hyde is killed that means me myself is going to be killed,” he was restating the idea that he had articulated as we began to play “You’re Mr. Hyde and I’m Dr. Jekyll. We’re the same person.”

It was only later as I reflected on our play that I realized Michael had captured a central understanding of the story that I did not carry with me as we imagined
I was treating Jekyll and Hyde as separate people whereas he understood that they were two sides of the same person, a concept that he enacted by pretending, with no apparent preference, to be both of them.

**Relative Power and Authority in Play**

As we played, Michael effortlessly moved among multiple points of view on the narrative events as he took up the perspectives of different people along with their relative power and authority. Michael's utterances from these different positions examined the major theme of the story: How do you interpret and respond to Hyde's actions? In addition to pretending to be altruistic Dr. Jekyll and egotistic Mr. Hyde and other characters in the story, he also improvised by drawing on other narratives. He imagined that he had great physical strength (a werewolf); was someone with expertise and mechanical power (Dr. Frankenstein); was a person with social authority (a police officer); was someone like me (an adult), like his mother (a wife), and like himself (a little boy).

He explored different ways to use power to deal with Hyde's deeds. Immediately after pretending to be Jekyll locking up the potion and hiding the key in a hole, he pretended to be Dr. Frankenstein operating his machine. When I asked him, "Is there anything we could do so that maybe you [Dr. Jekyll] won't turn into the beast [the word he had used for Hyde]?" he improvised a response using images from the movie *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* (which we had just watched) in which Dr. Frankenstein uses his machine both to give and to remove the life force. He wanted Dr. Frankenstein/me to connect Jekyll/him to the machine to "break the power," which I did. After being disconnected, Jekyll/he tried taking the potion and it did not turn him into Hyde. When I asked, "What are we going to do about the people who got killed?" he replied, "Put them on Dr. Frankenstein's machine and I'll bring them back to life."

Through play, Michael would soon address me with the same question that he had raised earlier: Should a police officer shoot Hyde? Before that he intensified the dilemma by imagining that Hyde killed his victims. After pretending to restore Hyde's victims to life, I had expected that Michael would likely want to pretend that we were inside a different narrative world, as I felt a sense of resolution and order being restored. However, he turned his attention again to the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde and how to deal with Hyde. Toward the end of the movie that we had watched, Hyde's shadow is shown on a wall. Michael seemed to be thinking about this image when he said, "The Shadow of Mr. Hyde remains," and then, "the shadow gets killed but not Dr. Jekyll." As he began to enact his thoughts he wanted me to pretend to be Jekyll.
Michael: You're Dr. Jekyll finally dead at the end of his life.
Brian: [I lie down and pretend to die.] Good-bye everybody. I had a good life.
Michael: Now you're all the people that he's destroyed. I'm the Shadow.
Brian: [pretending to beg] Please help me.
Michael: But the people aren't beggar men. They're all young men.

[The Shadow/Michael pretends to kill three people/me in quick succession as he shouts "Get out of my way." I want to stop playing as I suddenly feel overwhelmed with all the killing.]

Brian: Can we stop for a moment. I don't want to pretend we're killing.

[I hug him and he hugs me back.]

Michael: Knock, knock.
Brian: Who's there?
Michael: Boo.
Brian: Boo who?
Michael: Don't cry it's only a joke.

[I laugh.]  

My recognition of conflicting meanings and feelings intensified to the extent that I had to stop pretending. I felt Hyde's evil power so viscerally when I looked into my son's gruesome face, saw his violent movements, and imagined that he was killing me/three men. Having read the story many times, I was well aware that Hyde killed people, but seeing Michael for the first time show how Hyde used his physical power to kill, coupled with experiencing from the position of the victims, was overwhelming.

As soon as I asked to stop playing, Michael transformed into the sweet, concerned little boy who would "kiss boo-boos" and sing lullabies to his one-month-old baby sister. The grimaces disappeared as we hugged. In seconds he had me laughing as he told me a knock-knock joke that he had just learned.

As I chuckled, the understanding that we were just pretending became more prominent. Later, as I analyzed our play, I realized that I had heard his joke as a reminder that no one is ever actually hurt by imagined actions, even if they pretend to kill. Michael's utterance brought other voices to our exchange. I recalled, a Garvey (1977) noted, that though play activities may be deeply meaningful, they are "non-literal," so that whenever we pretend, we are "buffeted from consequences" (p. 7). We may resist pretending to hurt or kill, but we are not going to be hurt or die if we imagine death by shooting. My laughter and change in mood were part of my answer to his utterance and the voices he had amplified for me.

THE PAST AND PRESENT VOICES OF INNER SPEECH

Michael was eager to continue playing, and as I no longer felt a resistance to pr
tending, I was ready to reenter the world of Jekyll and Hyde. He took us almost full circle back to the encounter with which we had begun our play. Again I would pretend to be Hyde, with Michael pretending to have the authority of the police officer with the power of life and death in his gun.

Michael: Now I'm the little boy. OK, Daddy?
Brian: OK.
Michael: Police. There's a monster who's killed some people.
Brian: Yes we know. Have you seen him? Do you know where he is? We've been looking for him.
Michael: Yes. He tried to kill me.
Brian: Are you all right?
Michael: Yes.

[He tells the police officer/me that Hyde is on the roof of a building.]

Michael: Daddy, you be Mr. Hyde up on the rooftop.

[I climb halfway up the stairs.]

Michael: Get down from that rooftop.
Brian: No. Who are you?
Michael: I'm a police.
Brian: What do you want?
Michael: Stop doing all those mean things.
Brian: Why should I?
Michael: Because they're all mean.
Brian: Huh. What will you do to me if I do come down?
Michael: Well if you don't come down I'll shoot you.
Brian: And if I do? What will you do to me?
Michael: I'll send you away to jail.
Brian: Jail? Why should I go to jail?
Michael: Because you know. Because you're mean that's why. Huh.

[We talk back and forth about rules until Michael refocuses us.]

Michael: Just no talk about it. Now get down or I'll shoot you.
Brian: How do you want it to end? Do you want to shoot him or do you want him to come down?
Michael: I want to shoot you.
Brian: No [laughing]. I can get away. I'm too clever for you.

[Michael shoots and I pretend to die]

Michael: Now change back into the Shadow.

[I lie down and transform my body into Hyde's. Michael stands over me pretending to hold the gun. Pat enters the room.]

Pat: Are you going to use that gun to shoot other people?
Michael: I only use my gun to shoot monsters [said with a tone of this being obvious].
To understand some of the layers of complexity of our dialogic interactions, is important to recognize that my utterances resonated with and answered many past utterances and voices in addition to the voice of Michael that I heard in the present moment. As Bakhtin (1986) noted, in extending his definition of utterance:

Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other [past] utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be primarily regarded as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word “response” here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account. (p. 91)

As I imagined again the encounter between the police officer and Hyde, I experienced much more complex refraction between voices. Unlike when I imagined holding the gun, I no longer felt an oppositional resistance to killing Hyde. I felt more complex inner speech, Jekyll/Hyde was a human being but so were his victims. He was a human who was capable of monstrous actions that I had seen with some intensity in imagination. His violent deeds refracted my view of him as a human being. If he was not stopped, I could see him killing again. As I stood on the stairs imagining that Hyde was on the rooftop, I heard multiple inner voices that had been uttered as we played. I could hear the cries of the victims of his heart violence, including those that he had killed and those that he would kill if he were not stopped. Jekyll was a kind physician, but I also saw Jekyll using the pot to change into Hyde because Jekyll knew where the key to the safe was. Jekyll might reform using Dr. Frankenstein’s machine. But if Jekyll died and the shadow of Hyde remained, then it/he would have to be stopped. Killing Hyde was not an option. I knew this because as I climbed the stairs, I did not resist forming an image of the police officer shooting Hyde.

As the police officer, Michael took a different tack than I had expected. Threatened to shoot Hyde but at first wanted him to “stop doing all those things.” He wanted to arrest Hyde and “send him away for jail.” I began to explain his understandings of “jail” and “rules.” However, as he wanted more action and talk, I gave him the choice of what he wanted to do. He enacted shooting Hyde, then wanted me to show the Shadow remaining after Hyde had died.

**AUTHORING UNDERSTANDING**

Our play on this occasion had been more refractive for me than ever before. But the refractive play meant that after about twenty minutes, I had authored a more complex understanding of the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde than my previous, somewhat dualistic view. I had also authored new understanding about my belief...
nonviolence. My earlier feelings of intense discomfort as I imagined shooting a gun had been the product of extreme refraction between a principle of pacifism and a desire to play. As we played, additional views were given voice in situations that modified the idea of not killing; I recognized that killing someone who kills (in the context of an immediate struggle) had to be an option.

REFRACTIVE INQUIRY

My inquiry into our play has continued since I first started playing with Michael before he was two years old. My inquiry has been refractive when this process has led me to author new understanding of struggles and sometimes collisions among differing values, assumptions, concepts, beliefs, or other core ideas that create conflict among my own and others’ interpretations of play and research.

INQUIRY AND THE LIVE EVENTS OF PLAY

Dialogue with Michael created refractive, or dialogic, angles between different voices that opened up an authorial space for the development of my ideas as well as his. As Bakhtin (1984) emphasized, living ideas are neither fixed nor experienced as moments of consciousness. Ideas develop in a dialogue between voices, or “consciousnesses,” in “live events” that for me included the social and inner speech that occurred in our play and in my later analysis of those live events.

The idea . . . is not a subjective individual-psychological formation with “permanent resident rights” in a person’s head; no, the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective—the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between consciousnesses. The idea is a live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses. (p. 88)

Ideas cannot be separated from their sources in the narratives and other cultural resources from and with which I have improvised as I have made meaning about life. I have no space in this chapter to outline where my beliefs came from except to note that they have dialogically developed over a lifetime of interpreting events and narratives from my own life and those of other people that include fictional and well as factual stories. Ideas have developed through the live events of both inner and social speech.

Our play was always a live event that gave me, as well as my son, access to many fictional carriers of ideas with voices that could enter into the ongoing dialogic construction of understanding. Refractive play made me more aware of the process and more attentive to meaning making. Past utterances of mine, and those of my son, were joined by other voices that entered the dialogic meeting of voices from other sources such as books that I read and conversations I had with colleagues.
DEVELOPING IDEAS

My language and ideas developed as I authored more "internally persuasive" and less "externally authoritative" discourse.

The internally persuasive word—as opposed to one that is externally authoritative—is... half ours, half someone else's... it is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is freely developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interminating relationships with new contexts. More than that it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses... The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 345-346)

My belief that I would never kill someone had been much more externally authoritative than internally persuasive. The idea was much more someone else's than it was my own, coming from such sources as a rigid opposition to the tactics of paramilitary forces and a somewhat idealistic view of the lives of pacifists like Gandhi.

In the inner and social speech of refractive play and inquiry, I authored a more internally persuasive belief that was more open to other views than it had been previously. As I dialogued with voices that contextualized other views and as I visualized different scenarios in which I could see myself using violence, I answered those views and accommodated them into my understanding.

As I illustrated in the previous section, in my analysis of my language and action across different encounters and situations, some of my ideas became more flexible and open when they began to develop and "live" through play. "The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relations with others ideas, with the ideas of others" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 88). My ideas began to develop when I recognized that some of my ideas were more rigid, closed, and less responsive to new situations than I had realized. For example, my belief that we can be non-violent was more absolute and less inflected than I had realized.

As we entered other narrative worlds and my son interacted with me in more and more varied situations, which were sometimes increasingly extreme, I became more open to situations in which I could imagine and understand people's use of force to kill someone. At the same time I was more concerned with judging the rightness of actions through dialogue in each particular situation.

As I juxtaposed one play encounter or episode with another, I could recognize more of the layers of meaning beneath my words, feelings, and actions as we had played that were largely invisible at the time. The following are summaries of play encounters in mythic contexts that complicated my understanding of killing or violently stopping another's actions:
The Wolfman asking to die
- An “unstoppable” vampire, like Dracula, being killed with a stake in the heart
- Frankenstein killing without intention
- Quazimodo pouring oil on his attackers in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*
- Luke Skywalker exploding the Death Star in *Star Wars*
- Shooting “undead” zombies
- Freddy Kruger killing people and being killed inside a nightmare in *Nightmare on Elm Street*
- The Oklahoma City bomber about to blow up the federal building

As I dialogically connected our play around Jekyll and Hyde with thematically related interactions, I developed more dialogic and internally persuasive understanding about my belief in nonviolence. As Bakhtin (1981) stressed, meaning “is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view, and value judgments . . . that complicates the path of any word toward its object” (p. 281). I did not abandon my antipathy toward killing people. Rather I have become more aware of circumstances, which I now carry with me as images and inner voices in inner conversation, in which I could kill another. Any question related to contemplating another’s death or understanding how someone else could kill is made more complex as I continue to dialogue with those inner voices.

**Toward Conclusions**

My understanding of myself as an adult-researcher changed considerably through researching play with my son. There were ongoing tensions between and among my own prior understandings, the views and actions of other parents and teachers, and the meaning I was making as I read professional literature. The understandings that generated were not arrived at easily but were rather the product of ongoing struggles for meaning.

Researching and playing with a child can create spaces for authoring meaning. When play is dialogic, we can create meaning with children about the narratives that animate them and at the same time we can create meaning for ourselves about the issues that arise as we play. I’ve shown how in the privacy and intensity of a father-son relationship I developed understanding about a core belief.

To make play dialogic and to embrace its potential to refract meaning, I had to share authority with my son. He was never a disinterested bystander but always a person involved in making sense of the events in the narratives that had captivat-
ed him. I interacted with him when as a young child he pretended to chase, attack, escape, and kill. I also interacted with him as he imagined being a victim of violence and death but also as people who loved and tended others as caregivers.

Being a father—researcher with my son was often exhilarating and joyful. It was also, at times, harrowing and poignant. In my play with Michael, we authored meaning about matters of life and death as we raised and explored difficult questions about the human potential to do good and evil deeds. I followed Michael into narrative worlds, explored inner landscapes, and encountered people and creatures that I never expected to meet. I tried to be authentic in my relationship with him, listening to the questions he asked, talking from the heart in response, and at times asking my own searching questions.

Through inquiry and playing with Michael, as I shared authority with him, many research questions arose that have implications for other researchers but that I do not have space here to examine. However, I want to stress that as we played I struggled through refractive inquiry to explore these additional questions in a similar dialogic way as I considered the questions in this chapter. Pragmatically, I faced some questions daily. For example: When should I set or negotiate limits on the content of play? In imagination, should I follow him no matter where he leads? How should I try to teach him as we play? Other questions were regularly present though not so demanding of answers. For example: Why did our daughter want to play quite differently? How was my openness in play different when I played with other children who were not my son? Further questions were ongoing concerns. For example: Can play be emotionally dangerous? How would Michael learn to control his actions in everyday life? Finally, some questions arose when I connected my professional life outside the home with our play. For example: How could I apply what I was learning to classroom contexts? How might early childhood educators apply my understandings?

I look forward to participating in the discussions and conversations that this chapter and book will provoke about the role of play in the lives of children and adults. Refractive inquiry has left me recognizing more clearly that there can never be a singular conclusion to research or to this chapter. We always move toward conclusions, and if we value vibrant living understandings, then answers, as well as questions, must always remain open to be reinterpreted and extended in dialogic interactions with other people in further situations.

Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in [open-ended] dialogue; to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse... When dialogue ends everything ends. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 252, 293)
REFERENCES


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