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‘Just 5 more minutes!’ Power dynamics in outdoor play

Natalie Canning

*Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes,
United Kingdom*

Natalie Canning

Senior Lecturer Education – Early Childhood

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies

The Open University

Stuart Hall building, second floor,

Walton Hall,

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Email: Natalie.canning@open.ac.uk

Skype: natalie.canning6

Twitter: @nataliecanning6

ORCID account number: orcid.org/0000-0001-7683-400X

Biography

Natalie Canning is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood at The Open University. Her background is in playwork and social work, supporting children to explore personal, social and emotional development through play.

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Abstract

This paper considers power dynamics between children, parents and early childhood educators in an outdoor environment. Drawing on sociocultural theory the paper considers how power is constructed and viewed in relation to children’s play. The research focuses on three case study examples of outdoor social group play where power dynamics influence children’s choices and decisions, how they respond and how they negotiate to follow their play interests. The paper considers some of the dilemmas and intricacies of power dynamics between children, adults and the environment exploring the way in which children navigate those situations so that they can achieve ‘just 5 more minutes’ playing.

Key words

power dynamics, empowerment, outdoor play, children’s choice, children’s interests, exploration

Introduction

The title for this paper was inspired by the children, parents and early childhood educators participating in the research. ‘Just 5 more minutes!’ was a common phrase used by all, but with very different meanings. Children used it to gain more play, pleading with adults for extra time; educators used it as a warning that the daily routine of events was moving on, and parents used it almost as a reward, giving their child and their playmates extra time. In this paper the power dynamics between children and adults are explored within the context of

outdoor play. The way in which children negotiate those dynamics reveal how power can influence and impact on play experiences.

This paper is part of a wider study concerning children's empowerment in play and is framed within a sociocultural approach (Vygotsky, 1978). Assumptions about social and cultural contexts shape children's knowledge and understanding and influence their contribution to the adult world. Consequently, common or taken for granted practices are often reaffirmed through actual experiences: what has been seen or heard or emphasised through pictures or stories. These experiences are played out and explored when children engage in play. Therefore how children relate to the world is largely a function based on what they know of their own cultural context and the influence of wider societal norms (Corsaro, 2005).

Within any given situation, anyone can have the opportunity to be powerful through their actions and reactions (MacNaughton, 2005). Power can be productive, influencing dynamics between adults and children; and between children at different times and in different situations. Deleuze (1993) argues that power is determined between two separate forces and emerges when one force acts over the other. Therefore power is influenced by interactions and alters in intensity depending on the situation in which it is used. Both Foucault (1980) and Deleuze discuss how power is not static. Deleuze focuses on the *affect* of power and how a person may be able to think or act differently when they feel powerful. He suggests that an individual can be influential as well as influenced. Within the context of play, situations may offer opportunities for children to experience the affect of being powerful as well as being powerless. The ability to be creative and play out different scenarios supports what Olsson (2009) argues as capacities that can be created and imagined.

Children gain a sense of power by being given the opportunity to make choices in play and to act on their decisions (Nugin, Veisson, Tuul, Õun, and Suur, 2016). The process of supporting children to feel in control of their play requires a gradual development of trust on the part of adults in what children will choose to do, and an understanding of how play can be facilitated to ensure a safe and stimulating environment. Social group play interactions that children encounter help them to practice and develop their understanding of the patterns and processes that underpin social relationships and friendship. Therefore power dynamics is a process dependent upon the interaction between children and adults and is negotiated through relationships and dialogue (Hoyle, 1999).

In social group play and in outdoor contexts where children have choice it is particularly revealing to observe the decisions they make in terms of their engagement depending on how self-assured they feel to actively participate (Canning, 2011). This is because as Smith (2010) suggests, when children make play choices they can use the opportunity to make decisions about their engagement and behaviour. They can then be innovative in their thinking and apply this to their play situation to develop strategies to be accepted into social group play. Children involved, for example, in risky play have to find the courage within themselves to take risks such as climbing a tree or acting independently of their peers, but in demonstrating their confidence to other children they often become leaders of the play, being able to influence other children into copying their actions and behaviour (Kleppe, Melhuish, and Sandseter, 2017). This corresponds with Foucault's positioning of power as an action rather than a possession which can be supported through different relationships at different times (Foucault, 1980).

However, adults consciously and unconsciously hold power over children's play, making decisions which impact on children's choices. The physical environment provides boundaries for children as does how adults and other children behave within that space. Most situations that children encounter have a set of rules which help to organise and guide behaviour (Foucault, 1984). From a young age children understand how social rules work based on their own experiences and by observing other children and adults in a range of situations (Ailwood, 2010). Children can recognise when they are able to push the boundaries and Loizou (2005) suggests that there are times when children are empowered by the idea of 'seeing what might happen if...' causing a reaction from an educator or parent/carer. The different ways in which children negotiate their play, utilise the outdoor environment and peers to pursue their interests, contributes to the debate surrounding the significance of power dynamics for children's social learning and cultural understanding. The notions of power and empowerment in the early childhood community are ambiguous in how they are understood and communicated. They are sometimes behaviours that are not easily recognisable in informal learning contexts such as outdoor play. The research focuses on what children choose to do in their play and how that is interpreted by educators and parents in relation to identifying power relationships and dynamics.

Research design

This research is part of an ethnographic study exploring children's empowerment in child-initiated social play from a sociocultural perspective. The focus here is on the power dynamics between children and children and adults, namely the early childhood educators and parents, with the research question: '*in what ways do children play out power dynamics between their peers and adults in an outdoor play context?*' A qualitative research method (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) explores social worlds of children, to examine their social

interactions, creative responses and individual motivations. In seeking to understand 'meaning and action...in a lived situation' an interpretative tradition of social enquiry is employed (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p 83).

The setting

The setting is a community based enterprise for families located in the West Midlands area of the UK. The outdoor provision consists of green open spaces and a woodland area with established trees. The main building is set away from the woodland and the whole space is enclosed by a perimeter fence. In the woodland there is a central clearing with a fire-pit and logs which act as seating. When it is raining plastic sheets are tied between trees to create a canopy for shelter. Rough paths lead off the central space, meandering between trees and the woodland floor is covered with natural debris.

Method

The research consisted of non-participant video observations and field note reflections immediately after each visit to the setting. Particular attention was given to the interactions between children in social group play and children and adults where they became involved in children's play. The observations were collected during outdoor play in the woodland area at 'stay and play' sessions where parents were encouraged to stay and socialise with other parents whilst their children played together. Educators oversaw the sessions, but parents had overall responsibility for their children. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and observations were collected over a four-week period. There were opportunities to talk with educators and parents before and after each session and these informal conversations were recorded as field notes immediately after the discussion. They focused on educators and parents views about play, children's social interaction and engagement with the outdoors.

There were opportunities with educators and parents approximately 7 days after the initial video collection to review the footage and gain their views on the children's play. This video stimulated review (Foreman, 1999) provided insight into how parents and educators viewed the power dynamics of different play situations involving themselves and other children. The table illustrates the nested case studies:

Table 1 here

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was gained from parents and staff in the setting for the non-participant video observations and purpose of the research. Observations were conducted on a day where 'stay and play' sessions were already planned. Children were familiar with each other and played together on a regular basis within and outside of the setting. The names of the children have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011, 2018) guidelines were adhered to in relation to researching children's play and interactions. At the first meeting with children, all aged between 3 ½ and 4 years old, educators facilitated a session where the research was explained in child-friendly terms and the children could look at the video camera and ask questions. From this children's assent was gained rather than their full informed consent. Seeking informed consent from children is always questionable as it is difficult to know if children understand the context in which the research will be presented or the implications for them at a later date (Palaiologou, 2016). In the explanation to children, the idea of having their play filmed seemed to be accepted and they were happy talk about what they liked to do when they played.

Throughout educators acted as gatekeepers for the children's participation in the research. It was important that children had a choice about their participation and Mukherji and Albon (2014) consider gatekeepers as a way in which safeguards can be put in place to ensure that children are able to express if and when they want to take part. Children may find it difficult to tell an adult that they no longer want to participate because of the power dynamics between the researcher and child (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault, 2015). Therefore children were made aware at each visit that they could go to another adult if they felt unsure of being observed or filmed.

Participants

On each visit there were three children (Ethan, Harry, Mikka) who were consistently present at all observations, usually accompanied by their mothers. There was always the same lead educator present who facilitated the 'stay and play' sessions. On any one visit there were between seven and ten children present with their families. The parents mainly stayed in the central clearing whilst the children had the choice to stay nearby or explore the woodland. All of the children were 4 years old and had opportunities outside of the setting to socialise with some attending formal day care settings together.

The purpose of the 'stay and play' sessions is to support families and children in an informal context where children can play and parents can socialise and seek advice from an educator if they want to. The sessions are funded through the local council as an initiative to bring communities together.

Findings

From the video observations and informal discussions with educators and parents content analysis was carried out (Krippendorff, 2004). Opportunities to record reactions from the video stimulated review, also fed into the analysis. The data revealed nuanced examples of power dynamics between children and children and adults. These examples were often interwoven through play; a moment in an otherwise typical play episode. The extracts below, illustrate diverse power dynamics and how the outdoor environment contributed to initiating and sustaining those dynamics.

Extract case study 1: Power dynamics between children

This extract is an example of a 2 minute video following Ethan, a 4 year old boy building a den in the woodland area. It describes Ethan's actions and interactions with his friends and how he persuades and negotiates his lead position with the group.

Video time code: 00.06.23-00.10.90

Ethan verbally encourages the building of a 'Ben 10' (popular children's television programme) treehouse to the other children. He describes the sticks as 'big and fat' and tries to organise his friends into bringing sticks to build the structure of the den. He uses direct instruction towards the other boys he is building the den with, saying with authority:

'Put that big one over there'

'This one is fat, it can go here'

'Move the end and grab that!'

00.05.12-00.12.01

Ethan knows what to do with the sticks in order to build a den against a large tree. He uses the tree as the main support for the sticks so that the den structure can start to take shape. The other boys watch

him do this the first time, then begin to copy him, joining in the play, engaging in the idea of a 'Ben 10' treehouse.

00.15.01-01.04.55

Ethan negotiates with another boy over a large stick and persuades him to let go of the stick so he can place it where he wants it.

'No it is better over here' (he struggles to move the stick while the other boy stands with his hands on his hips and protests) 'There, it's better here'.

Ethan steps away and looks at what he has done. He moves on to his next task without looking for acknowledgement or approval from the other boy. The boy stands and watches Ethan carry on collecting sticks then starts to join in again.

01.08.08-01.15.22

Ethan along with another boy moves a long twisted stick into position. They have several attempts, lifting the stick above their heads to lean it against the tree trunk. Ethan realises he needs the help of the other boys to move the stick – he is less directional and more persuasive as he reacts within the situation. This is evident in his language when he says:

'I think that is better there, don't you?'

He looks directly at his friend when saying this, although he does not wait for a response before moving on with the task. He also uses 'please' to encourage the other boys to cooperate with him.

01.19.41-01.20.95

Ethan shows interest in keeping a narrative going alongside building the den by suggesting that they go to bed, using his imagination to maintain a story. He mimics the actions of going to bed and

encourages the others to do the same. When the other boys move away, he is undeterred and continues to pretend he is in bed.

01.30.11-01.34.16

Ethan shouts to someone out of shot:

‘Hey come over here, this is our ‘Ben 10’ treehouse.’

He doesn’t wait for a response, but continues to move nearby sticks to lean against the tree trunk.

02.00.21-02.06.52

Ethan is on his own, as the other children have moved away from the play. He picks up a large stick and declares:

‘I’m taking this’.

Extract case study 2: Power dynamics between children and adults

The following is a description of video material that lasted approximately 2 minutes 30 seconds and describes the actions of Harry, his friends playing with rain water and the reaction of his mother.

Context

Harry and his three friends (also aged 4 years) are sitting under a large plastic sheet suspended by rope tied to nearby trees. They are near the fire pit in the middle of the woodland area that is used as a meeting point. It is the beginning of the session and the children are waiting to be told they can go and play. Close by, Harry’s mother is chatting to

other mothers who have brought their children to the session. The educator is busy, chatting to other parents and welcoming children.

Time code: 00.01.05-00.18.30

It is raining. Harry and his friends are under the plastic sheet to stay out of the rain, but the water is dripping off the side of the sheet onto the ground. Harry puts his hand out to catch the drips. He lets out a short burst of squeals of excitement which attracts the attention of the other boys. They come over to him and copy his actions, trying to catch the drips.

00.19.20-00.42.02

Harry sees the rope that is holding up the plastic sheet. He gives it a tug. This makes the rain water that had been pooling on the top of the sheet run down the side. The children's arms get wet. There are more squeals of delight and Harry starts to rub the water up and down his arms.

00.43.11-01.05.16

Harry's mother hears the commotion and shouts across to Harry to behave. Harry ignores her and continues to catch the drips in one hand, whilst tugging on the rope with the other. No more water falls, but the sheet has loosened and is flapping in the wind.

01.06.20-01.32.45

At this point, Harry's mother comes over the boys, she says:

‘What have I told you Harry?’

Harry giggles and the other boys move slightly away

Harry tugs on the rope again.

‘Do it one more time Harry, one more time....’

Harry goes to tug the rope. His mother grabs his arm,

‘No! What have I told you?’

01.33.14-02.05.32

Harry pulls away and moves to the other side of the shelter. Harry’s mum is distracted by another parent. She points a finger at him as if to say ‘no more’. The boys huddle in the corner and tentatively start to put their hands out again, catching the drips of water.

Through video stimulated review (Foreman, 1999) both Harry’s mother and the educator watched the video back a few days later. Harry’s mother commented:

‘At the time it was naughty, he was letting the water in. But looking at it again I can see the fun side of it and he wasn’t doing anything wrong at all for me to get worked up about really, to tell him to stop really. So that was quite funny, to see me and my reaction to something there. But to look at it from his point of view it was just a bit of fun’

The educator focused on Harry when reviewing the video and commented:

‘It was quite funny watching that because it was like Harry was more in control of what was going on, the other were following Harry there and he wasn’t afraid to break the ‘rules’, he seemed more confident and tried to push the boundaries his mum was setting!’

Extract case study 3: The influence of the environment on children’s power relations

This example focuses on how the environment influences the power dynamics between children. Mikka utilises the position of a tree to achieve his aim of climbing higher and further than his friend. The video clip was approximately 2 minutes in length.

Context

Mikka and his friend are walking purposefully through the woodland area to a group of trees near the perimeter fence. Mikka selects a tree and begins to look around for smaller logs that he can move. He instructs his friend to help him position the logs underneath the tree. He then begins to climb the logs to reach the lower branches of the tree.

01.25.89 – 01.42.66

Mikka and the other boy are stacking four logs, making the pile higher, then taking a log away and making the stack smaller. Mikka lifts a log and moves it towards the base of the tree for the boy to try and stand on whilst he reaches up to grab the tree trunk, then Mikka moves the log closer to the trunk for the boy to attempt to stand on the lowest branch.

00.36.40 – 00.50.00

The other boy moves away and Mikka attempts to climb the stack of logs alone. The boy returns and holds the stack steady so Mikka can climb up. He reaches the top of the pile, but can't quite make the step onto the lowest branch. He carefully climbs down again, watching where he is putting his feet.

00.20.60 – 00.29.69

Mikka and the other boy discuss where the stack of logs should be moved to so they can be made steady in preparation to be climbed upon again. They are pointing to different areas around the base of the tree and going over to test the ground with their feet, kicking at the earth.

01.01.60 – 01.46.90

Mikka and his friend move the logs one by one and then he holds the stack of logs steady, allowing the other boy to attempt to climb up. Mikka changes his position so that he can hold the top log steady whilst the other boy attempts to jump from that to the lower branches of the tree. He stretches and just about manages to hold onto the trunk before sliding down to the floor. He is about to have another attempt when in the distance the educator calls, 'just 5 more minutes everyone!'

Mikka has control of the immediate environment, something that Treseder (1997) considers important in establishing ownership over a particular space or area. He demonstrates his knowledge of the situation and what it would take to achieve his aim of climbing the tree. He uses that knowledge to support the other boy. Both his mother and the educator who reviewed the video commented on this:

‘They were empowered from each other and the environment. I think it is trust in each other and it was really interesting to see how they worked out where to move the logs to and the realisation that they would have a better chance of achieving their aim if they moved them.’

(Mikka’s mother)

‘It was their play wasn’t it? Mikka was totally engrossed in what he was doing and solving the problem. He had a goal and was going to achieve it. The environment helped him in the fact that he could use the logs around him to help him and his friend climb the tree, but also that there were lots of things they could do in that space, but they chose to focus on getting up the tree.’ (Educator)

Discussion

Power dynamics can never be value free or objective and as such the intricacies of actions and interactions should always be questioned (Albon, 2010). Perceived power over others can produce a set of ‘truths’ which may become seen as an authoritative consensus about how things should be done (Gore, 1993). In the same way Foucault considered that ‘truths’ can become woven together to govern what is accepted as a way of doing something or a goal to strive for or a way to act, think or feel.

Within Early childhood there are many perspectives of what children’s play should look like, its content and purpose which are held as ‘truths’. If a particular truth of children’s play is part of an early childhood educator’s daily practice, it becomes part of what that individual does, thinks or feels and is embedded in actions and reactions to children’s needs.

Practice then disseminates through the setting and influences others which results in a particular 'truth' being accepted and results in the governability of groups of people where they are compliant in being told what to do and how to do it. In this way power can operate without people realising it, resulting in an undercurrent of practices and relationships which may influence children's play experiences.

Power between children

In the extract from case study 1, Ethan continually reaffirms his 'truths' of being in charge of the play situation. In his verbal and non-verbal communication he demonstrates his ability to lead his friends in the construction of the den and is able to defend his position when challenged. MacNaughton (2003) argues that interactions between children are not only about participation, which seems to suggest a sense of equality, but is 'deeply linked to power relations between children' (p. 58). Ethan directing the actions of the other children through telling them what to do, what to think and how to act in play situations is exerting his power.

Children making decisions about what they are going to do or how they are going to behave, act consciously through what Foucault (1980) describes as disciplinary power where children are able to self-regulate their own behaviour or make a decision about being in charge. The everyday rules that children encounter and learn through their interactions with others generates a sense of normality through regulating expectations and accepting hierarchical structures (Rogoff, Coppens, Alcalá, Aceves-Azuara, Ruvalcaba, Lopez, and Dayton, 2017). In this way it is possible to see how Ethan was able to easily and quickly take charge of the other children. They accepted his lead willingly and followed the majority of his instructions.

Children learn that different structures and procedures exist in different situations; as Loizou (2005) observes, children often direct each other as Ethan does or may even reverse conventional power relationships. For example, they may remind an adult about what they should be doing next or about rules associated with certain play such as not going outside of a boundary. Knowing the rules can offer children a sense of power and familiarity, supporting a confidence in their actions and interactions with other children. Ethan and his friends seem comfortable with the rules of the environment. They play within those rules and the other children recognise Ethan as assertive in his instruction. He uses direct language: 'No it is better over here' and 'I'm taking this' to reaffirm his power over the others.

Power between children and adults

In the extract from case study 2 Harry wants to play with the water but is aware of his mother's desire for him to stop. He is testing the boundaries in his play but also self-regulating what he is doing so that he doesn't get into any more trouble. His mother makes a decision about how she is going to handle the situation and reverts to being motivated by perceived 'good' behaviour through the structures she considers to be appropriate i.e. not playing with the plastic sheet and making the water fall on the other children and surrounding area. Waller (2005) argues that play experiences offered to children often reflect a socially constructed view of childhood of what is considered appropriate at the time. In this context, the outdoor play environment is considered suitable, yet the actions and reactions from Harry are not. The power lies with the adult, as expectations of how Harry and his friends play are enforced rather than supporting their exploration.

It is a skill to judge the flexibility needed to meet the curiosity of children and give them opportunities to experience different resources, make choices and express preference

over what they are doing through their play (Brunson and Vogt, 1996). Adults have a greater awareness of social and cultural traditions and therefore are not only able to impose these on children through behavioural expectations but are also able to occupy a disproportionate aspect of power over children because they can control the environment and what happens in it (Ernst, 2014). In the example, Harry's mother warned him of unspoken consequences, which presumably she knew Harry would understand. She adopted an authoritative position without fully engaging in what Harry and his friends were doing. A snapshot of his actions prompted a sanctioning response, power that Harry's mother felt she had because of her relationship with her son. She accepted the context of what Harry was doing at face value, 'he was doing something naughty' and her response was to stop it.

However, Harry also held power in the situation, he used his interaction with other children to continue his game regardless of his mothers' warning. He uses the physical space to move away from her as much as he could so he could continue catching the drips. Hughes (1996) suggests that 'both the content and intent of play should be determined by the child' and that play should be 'child-empowering' (p. 22-23). Harry demonstrated through his play that he was able to do what he wanted to do, i.e. catching the drips and exploring the feeling of the water on his arms regardless of what his mother wanted him to do. He was powerful in his own situation through continuing to make choices and explore his interests. He was able to sustain his participation with his friends through negotiating the space, avoiding bringing further attention to what he was doing. Treseder (1997) suggests that active engagement with other children enables them to take part on their own terms. Harry was perhaps more confident to continue to play with the water because his friends were there than if he had been on his own. The social situation contributed to him having power in that context to defy his mothers' wishes.

Influence of the environment

In the extract from case study 3 Mikka appears confident and comfortable in what he is doing, and is utilising the environment to his advantage to achieve his goal of climbing up the tree. He understands what he needs to do and that he requires help in positioning the logs and holding them steady. He is not afraid to take charge of the situation so he can fulfil what he wants to do. He is actively interested and engaged in the play, influencing what is happening through organising the logs on the ground. Mikka is following his own interests in the pursuit of being able to get into the branches of the tree and has total ownership of the situation, leading and organising his friend. Mikka has the support of the other boy who wants to do the same thing and they are focused on using the resources available to them to help them achieve their goal.

Within the woodland environment the boys are able to express their individual choices and ideas, trying out different resources in different positions to enable them to climb the tree. Environments that are flexible allows children to express their preferences and interests but also shows how focused and determined they can be. The environment enabled the boys to achieve their aim, sustain their motivation and provided them with the opportunity to be curious and problem solve. The power dynamics between Mikka, his friend and the role the environment played determined the quality of play experience. Because of the flexible nature of the woodland and the resources within it, Mikka was captivated and contained within his play by the fascination of the environment, i.e. climbing the tree.

The context of children's experiences and how they make sense of what they are doing contributes to their creativity (Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008). When

children have the capacity to adapt resources and space they are able to explore and experiment with ideas. It is not surprising that the environment where children play is closely linked with their capacity for exploration and expressing their creativity (Robertson, 2018). Children experiment with new thoughts and ideas and are curious to find out new things; they do this predominantly through playing with the resources available to them through their environment. Consequently children's play can be seen as a series of improvisations which are created on the spot and perpetuated by the interplay between children and resources within their environment (Ernst, 2014). The greater the opportunity is for flexible environments, the more powerful and enriching the play experience is for the children involved.

The environment can support connections to be made while children play, stimulating opportunities for self-expression, problem solving, communication and building social relationships. This can be seen between Mikka and his friend as he helps him to get into the tree by stabilizing the logs for his friend to climb and them working together to move the logs into a better position. A positive and powerful environment supports children to try out their ideas and use resources in new ways. This not only supports sharing experiences with others, but widens children's ability to feel able to participate.

Conclusion

The power dynamics that are evident in the extracts presented from this research highlights that power is not about a single action or event, it is a fluid process dependent on multiple factors, actions and reactions. It is understandable that at face value power is held by adults who make decisions about what children do or prescribe the direction of their play. However it is the children in each extract who demonstrate a flexible approach, skills and initiative to

negotiate their play. They are able to create and sustain their interests whilst dealing with the different interjections from other children, educators or parents.

The unique characteristics and qualities that children express during play supports them to consciously and unconsciously deal with power dynamics. Through what they choose to do, who they play with and how their play evolves in the moment and over time means that children begin to experiment with different ways of managing situations and the people within them. Play is the dominant way in which children express their preferences and where they learn to negotiate those power dynamics so that 'just 5 more minutes' is something they achieve on their own terms.

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Table 1. Overview of case study detail

Case study 1 Ethan	Video and field notes: Den building <i>Power dynamics between children</i>	1: Informal interviews with Ethan’s mother and lead educator at the time of the observation
Case study 2 Harry	Video and field notes: Playing with rain water <i>Power dynamics between children and adults</i>	1: Informal interviews with Harry’s mother and lead educator at the time of the observation
		2: Video stimulated review with Harry’s mother 2 days after the observation
		3: Video stimulated review with the educator, the following week (7 days)
Case study 3 Mikka	Video and field notes: Climbing a tree <i>The influence of the environment on children’s power relations</i>	1: Informal interviews with Mikka’s mother and lead educator at the time of the observation
		2: Video stimulated review with Mikka’s mother 3 days after the observation
		3: Video stimulated review with the educator, the following week (7 days)

