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Children's views of objects as imaginary friends at the start of formal schooling

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to use an embodiment approach (Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1968) to contribute a new theoretical understanding of what imaginary friends mean in a school context. The paper addresses the specific area of 'object-friends' and draws on examples from an empirical phenomenological study of a small sample of five and six-year-old children's everyday experiences of friendship in school. The paper argues that if practitioners consider embodiment approaches and listen attentively to the knowledge and information that children share about their imaginary friends, this could be used to nurture children's early learning.

Keywords: Imaginary friends, object-friends, embodiment, phenomenology, school.

Introduction

In this paper we draw upon data examples from an original study of children's everyday friendship experiences using a phenomenological framework. In the main, imaginary friendships have been explored through the lens of developmental psychology so this study seeks to fill a gap in the field of education through the application of an embodiment approach (Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1968). Importantly, this paper includes consultation with children themselves about the meaning of these friends. This highlights the political and ethical dimension of the study which seeks to explain diverse approaches to children's relationships to objects, rather than to measure this aspect of children's behaviour against external and socially constructed norms.

In early psychological studies, children's imaginary friends were defined as invisible companions (Svendsen 1934). This definition was later broadened out to include animated objects or personified objects (Singer and Singer 1990; Taylor 1999).

Personified objects are defined as ‘objects such as stuffed animals or dolls that are animated by the child’ (Gleason 2004, 204). This paper focuses specifically on the concept of personified objects as imaginary friends and introduces the term ‘object-friend’ to signify where children use toys or artefacts in this way. We pose two questions:

- What do imaginary friends in the form of objects mean to children at the start of formal schooling?
- How do object friends support children to play alone?

The data examples were selected from the study that took place in a school in northern England. The school was a larger than average infant setting with a four entry form and was an affluent, multi-cultural school. There were an average number of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds who spoke English as an additional language. The sample included seven children all aged five and six years. The children included boys and girls with different academic abilities, personalities and a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Firstly, this article explores how an embodiment approach (Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1968) can be used to understand children’s perceptions of objects-friends. Secondly, we discuss the importance to this study of both a phenomenological rationale and the use of consultation with children. This approach is contextualised by data examples that seek to illuminate the reality for children of their object-friends; the meaning of object-friends for children; and finally how these objects support children who choose to play on their own. These examples are viewed through the lenses of psychological literature and contrasting insights gathered from an embodiment perspective. Thus, the substantive new theoretical insights throughout the paper highlight the importance to teachers and practitioners of both an embodiment and participatory approach to understanding children’s object-friends. We suggest that this knowledge can help teachers to make informed decisions about the management of children’s object-friends in the classroom.

Bodies and objects

As suggested above, this paper and the study it refers to invoke a variety of perspectives on childhood which include: children’s participation; children’s social and emotional development; and children’s exploration of the world around them using their bodies

and, as an extension of their bodies, their chosen object-friends. By taking children's own views seriously and positioning ourselves as researchers to accept and understand their perceptions, we adopt a phenomenological stance. At the same time, this position is both ethical and methodological, as discussed in the next section. The philosophical approach we use to try and understand children's perceptions also derives from a phenomenological root and is primarily one of embodiment studies rather than developmental psychology or, indeed, political philosophy. An embodiment approach refers to the 'body-subject', meaning that bodies cannot be separated from the spaces, objects and other bodies with which they interact (Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1968). Bodies are, in effect, always inter-subjective. Thus, children's imaginary friends infuse them. This became clear for the researchers from a conversation in the research journal field notes. An extract from these notes, (Table 1), is recorded below.

Table 1: Harry's Story

The Pirate in my Pump

Harry was a child that always had an object with him: a cuddly toy; a Lego figure, a popular culture figure. They were present in the house; at the shops; in the park; visiting the toilet and he wanted them with him at preschool and later on at school. The reaction to toys or object-friends from practitioners was varied. At the preschool setting these objects were unwelcome. There was adult concern that they would be lost or damaged. The school setting were more receptive and small pocket toys were permitted. However, despite the school policy the children noticed that some adults disapproved of their object friends. Harry perceived the disapproval of his teacher towards his object-friend at the start of formal schooling in year one. However, he needed his object with him and kept him concealed in his pocket until playtimes. He relayed his dilemma in a physical education (PE) session and the lengths he was prepared to go to retain physical proximity to his object. Harry needed his object-friend with him (a Lego pirate figure) and planned to transfer him from his trouser pocket to his PE shorts pocket. Harry then realised that he did not have pockets in his shorts and therefore had no way of keeping his friend close to him, so he decided that he would place the pirate into his PE pump. He explained how his foot hurt whilst he participated in PE.

Harry's story demonstrates his intense need for an object to be not just nearby but actively felt. If we view Harry's story from a position outlined by Dreyfus (1997), we can say that the closeness of his object friend is helping him to gain a 'maximum grip' on the requirements of the classroom. The object as an extension of his body affords him the acquisition of new social skills and emotional well-being. Thus, whilst some children may achieve an equilibrium without such an object-friend, others, like Harry, may need to use an object to extend their bodies. Using additional data examples, this proposition will be returned to in more detail in subsequent sections.

Dreyfus also clarifies (2011) that Heidegger is 'the source' of an embodiment approach to phenomena because of his assertion that an object 'calls you' to get in the best relation to see it. This implies a normativity based on our perception of objects, rather than on externalised measures. Dreyfus (2011) goes on to identify that Merleau-Ponty's approach to embodiment 'goes beneath' Heidegger's approach by highlighting that 'our body with its skills... enables us to relate to things by going around them and to people by this interesting thing called inter-corporeality ... the body is *geared into* the world'. Thus we have a view of the body as phenomenal and not just socio-cultural.

Concentrating on Merleau-Ponty's exposition of the phenomenology of perception (1962), it is important to note that the body and the phenomena of objects have a two-way connection – as he states, 'my body is inescapably linked with phenomena' (353). If meaning cannot be achieved by the body's natural means, then 'it must build itself an instrument' (143). Dreyfus (1997) usefully points out that Merleau-Ponty uses the word 'habit' as synonymous with 'skill' - he does not see perception as part of a body of organized knowledge and laws but insists that it is the corporeal body only which enables the subject to be at 'grips with the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 353). This view grounds us in a reality which is comprised of a mesh of corporeality and extraneous phenomena—what Merleau-Ponty calls, 'a synergic totality' (369). Thus, 'the world is not what I think but what I live through' (xviii) and reality is a framework of relations in which all appearances have a unified meaning. In this world, the relative distance we are from an object creates a tension which references the norm created by our bodily perception of that phenomenon. It is therefore important to understand that, from this perspective, an object is not symbolic of anything else – it is instead potentially an extension of the child's body intrinsically motivated - the body's 'I can' (Dreyfus 1997, 8) - to explore a new and potentially alien environment. Therefore, what could be regarded as an inanimate and separate object which a child keeps close to his

or her body (think back to *Harry's story*), when seen through phenomenological eyes, is not separate from the child and his or her situation but is, instead, integral to it.

We therefore contend as a framework for this study that the objects that children adopt *almost* as an extension of themselves *are*, in fact, an extension of themselves. Furthermore, we also suggest, in our first research question, that children's connection with object-friends constitutes examples of their agency and should be viewed as a helpful strategy for transition to a new environment, rather than as an emotional deficit. We also consider to what extent having object-friends is a step to inter-corporeality, or 'real' friendship, or is a substitute for it – and whether this indeed is of relevance to children themselves. Finally, in our second research question, we consider how object-friends enable children to use their agency differently in order to choose to play on their own.

Phenomenology and meaning

The study (Carter 2013) from which this paper draws examples approached friendship as a 'phenomenon' from the perspective of children (n=7) in Year One in an English school. A phenomenologist's role is to capture this childhood experience and to 'invite more adults into taking longer and deeper looks at what being a child means' (Danaher and Briod 2005, 233). Phenomenology also asks for multiple realities to be considered. This means that there is not one specific way of seeing or viewing something, or indeed one reality. In phenomenological studies, alternative views, experiences and explanations should be presented and reflected upon as equally valuable (Denscombe 2010).

We have all been children but from an adult perspective 'childhood' can become misinterpreted or distorted because we are reliant on memories (Danaher and Briod 2005). The world of the child is distinct from that of the adult. In Paley's (1998, 4) account of a kindergarten class, Wally, the protagonist, explains to his kindergarten teacher that children 'don't feel the same as grown-ups'. This highlights that the concerns of children are often on a totally different track from that of an adult and it is very easy to forget or dismiss the complexity of this stage of life.

A phenomenological approach is also compatible with the emerging contemporary views of childhood which acknowledge that children are experts within their own lives. This, in turn, has led to a methodological shift in research which views children as active participants (James and Prout 1990; 1997). O'Kane (2008, 125) refers

to this more agentic model as ‘a new paradigm for the study of childhood’. This paradigm sees children as social actors as opposed to ‘passive recipients of adult socialization’. This approach has been demonstrated through research related to children’s services (Alderson 2008; Clark et al 2005; and Garrick et al 2010). However, Brooker (2011) also warns about the danger of this practice becoming tokenistic and asks whether we are taking children seriously since the adult agenda of listening often leans towards cognitive learning experiences, whereas children’s play is often dominated by social aspects of learning, including friendship groups and peer status or ranking (Brooker 2006; Corsaro 1985; Hedges 2010; and Lofdahl 2006).

In the light of the above points, the priority of the research detailed in this paper was to remain faithful to the views and perceptions of the children involved. The literature in the field suggests that adults have previously viewed the presence of imaginary friends as concerning and an indication of poor social skills (Hurlock and Burstein 1932; Svendsen 1934; Ames and Learned 1946; Nagera 1969; Harter and Chao 1992). Thus, the literature does not often represent the views of children, in the way this study aims to. Even though more recent research has begun to explore the merits and benefits of object-friends as imaginary friends and question this negativity (Singer and Singer 1990; Gleason and Hohmann 2006; Taylor 2013, we suggest that an entirely different paradigm for understanding imaginary friends is called for. To repeat an earlier point: since embodiment studies is founded on a phenomenological research approach, in our view it fits a study that privileges children’s views.

Although verbal communication often features within the world of phenomenology where qualitative interviews are the common form of data collection (Denscombe 2010), it is not necessarily the best medium for children to express their views. Clark and Moss (2001) have inspired a wide range of research methods, known as the ‘mosaic approach’, in order to understand children’s lives’ better. In our study, a similar multi-method approach using drawing, persona dolls and small world play interviews was adopted, to encourage listening and promote talk. Table 2 below gives a brief description of the methods but more details can found in (Carter and Nutbrown 2016).

Table 2. Methods

Method	Details
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Drawings	The children were keen to draw their friends and use this as a medium for conveying their friendship experience. They often asked to do this when this was not the plan. Coates (2002) noted that children are most keen to talk about and share their drawings at around the age of five years. This did turn out to be the case and was effective way for the children to express themselves and convey their views and mean-making (Einarsdottir et al 2009).
Persona Dolls	Each week the Persona Doll, named Zack by the children, was faced with a friendship case study dilemma. The children were encouraged to give Zack advice drawings upon their own experience.
Small World Play Interviews	The children were invited to play with a mobile playground scene. Once they had established play, I joined in and asked them related semi-structured interview questions. For example: ‘This figure has no-one to play with. What should he do?’

The usual procedures were utilised, to gain ethical approval via the University system. This ensured access and informed consent from gatekeepers and guardians and ensured confidentiality and anonymity (Carter 2013). The main priority was to ensure that the children had the opportunity to voice their experiences but at the same time were not coerced in any way. (Danby and Farrell 2004; Nutbrown 2011). This was achieved through multiple opportunities to agree or refuse consent/assent throughout the project (Nutbrown 2011). It was made clear that they could participate or withdraw without any consequences and they often did withdraw especially if they were absorbed

in classroom experiences. In these instances, they could participate later or the following week (Carter 2013).

The reality of object-friends

When the children were asked to talk about their friends, it was noticed that they included their imaginary object-friends alongside their human friends. An example of this (see figure 1) can be found in Elsa's drawing and commentary (below).

Figure 1: Elsa's drawing



Commentary: I've got four friends but one of them is a rabbit that I've had since I was a baby and my grandma gave it to me when I was a baby. When I got bored and I can't get to sleep without her and if I want her with me but because she's so precious I just stay at home and she stays with me always at home but never goes somewhere else. So if I went for a sleepover somewhere like my grandma's house I would take her with me but I always have to just remember her because I just don't like leaving her.

The fact that children were positioning their object-friends alongside their actual friends was unexpected and suggested that these imaginary yet tangible friends were as important as their 'real' friends. This insight gathered from children themselves provided the focus for a potential challenge to the dominant view of children's imaginary friends in psychological literature. This was supported by the

phenomenological framing of the study and led to alternative views of the phenomenon of imaginary friends.

Literature on imaginary friends which, as previously noted, is dominated by the paradigm of developmental psychology, suggests that the incidence of imaginary friends is common in early childhood (Singer and Singer 1990). Pearson et al (2001) report that during childhood and adolescence there is a sixty-five per cent occurrence of invisible companions and personified objects. Initial research suggests that imaginary friends are more widespread within the pre-school period (Fraiberg 1959; Piaget 1962; Manosevitz et al 1973). Subsequent research, however, indicates that imaginary friends are still present for children between the ages of five and twelve years (Pearson et al 2001; Taylor et al 2004). Even some adolescents and older children are felt to have imaginary companions (Hurlock and Burnstein 1932; Cohen and MacKeith 1991; Seiffge-Krenke 1993, 1997). Therefore, from both children's and psychologists' views, imaginary friends exist and often are made visible by personified objects or, as we would call them, object-friends.

Returning to the insights derived by applying an embodiment approach to Harry's story (*The pirate in my pump*), we suggest that children might be using object-friends in order to achieve a sense of equilibrium, particularly in a new environment. A key idea, related to this is J. J. Gibson's concept of 'affordance' (1986) which tells to us that object-friends will intrinsically suggest certain uses/ actions/ functions, as related to embodied action. From these perspectives, we can interpret children's use of object-friends as an extension of themselves - a bit like a talisman - which afford them the acquisition of new social skills. Thus the object-friend is an instrument with which the child's body can project around it a cultural world. This is a cultural dimension of embodiment; in which objects extend the body's capacity and acquired skill. As mentioned, it is conceivable that this way to achieve equilibrium 'suits' some children and not others who might use their bodies to gain entry to a new environment without the need for an object. Part of the problem with the psychological paradigm is that it doesn't allow children to be different without reference to a norm, whereas with embodiment, difference is less troubling.

The significance of object friends for children

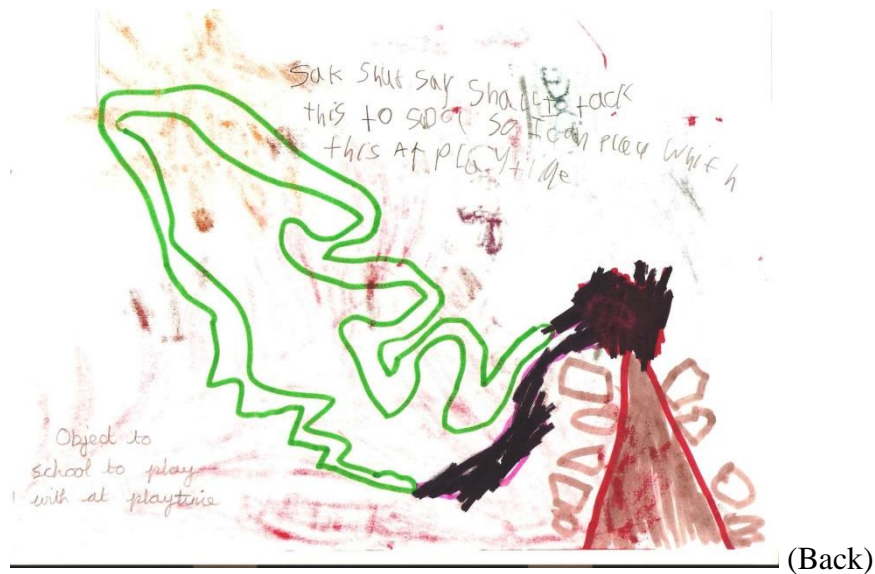
Rather than researching the benefits of imaginary friends, early literature in the field of psychology often views imaginary friends as a sign of a child's deficiency (Benson and Pryor 1973; Nagera 1969). This view tends to associate imaginary friendships with loneliness or peer rejection (Harvey 1918; Bender and Vogel 1941; Manosevitz et al 1973). Some studies also advocate that poor social skills and/or not being able to make friends causes children to create imaginary friends (Hurlock and Burstein 1932; Svendsen 1934; Ames and Learned 1946; Nagera 1969).

However, the following example (see figure 2) from Henry reveals his approach to object-friends which, far from deficient, could be seen as highly strategic. Seen through a psychological lens, we could read this as a lack of confidence in making friends but, if we consider it from an embodiment perspective, we can see the benefit of an object-friend for coping with the unpredictability of classroom social life.

Figure 2: Henry's drawing



(Front)



Commentary: Zack should say, 'shall I take this to school so I can play with this at playtime'. I have drawn a snake and a volcano. This is a four-er game. Zack should still try to make friends but if they say no he still has something to play with.

Henry drew these two pictures together; one on the front, and one on the back of the sheet of paper. They represent his advice to the persona doll, Zack, who had tried to join in with a game but had been refused access. Henry suggests that Zack should take a toy to school and then, if he can't join in with the game, he will still have a friend to play with. Interestingly, although Henry had a range of 'real' friends to draw upon, he also felt the need to have an object-friend with him (his snake) at times when play and friendship needed to be negotiated. It seemed that his snake afforded him confidence and security when amongst his classroom peers. Even if the object-friend was not being drawn upon directly, its presence in his pocket appeared to provide Henry with hidden affordances.

Dreyfus (1997) asserts that when we try to acquire new skills and gain a sense of competence this can be frightening because the 'learner finds themselves on an emotional rollercoaster'. This hints at the emotional labour required to acquire new skills. When we perceive that we are coping, a sense of equilibrium and satisfaction accompanies this. 'This satisfaction is not defined most generally by the pain/pleasure feedback of the behaviourists but by the sense of equilibrium experienced when an organism is able to cope successfully with its environment' (Dreyfus 1997). We suggest that this can be true for children making friends, as Henry's drawing reveals. For some

children to gain this sense of satisfaction and equilibrium, an object-friend is essential to help them achieve this goal. This object forms part of their body, for example, 'One's body is simply solicited by the situation to get into equilibrium with it' (Dreyfus ref). Thus, children use objects/their bodies to know they are coping successfully within their discrete peer culture.

Object-friends to support children to play on their own

Some psychologists suggest the benefits and purposes that imaginary friends have for children, in terms of a *practice* for friendship. For example, the study by Gleason and Hohmann (2006) utilised the theoretical framework of Weiss (1974) and the *Network of Relationships Inventory* by Furman and Buhrmester (1985) to pinpoint five benefits of relationships or social provisions. These were: companionship, intimacy, reliable alliance, affection and enhancement of worth. These were used to compare a range of friendship types, including reciprocal and imaginary friends and the results found that imaginary friends were able to provide similar benefits to those gained from real reciprocal relationships. This suggests that imaginary friends may present children with an opportunity to play out experiences which they have within real or reciprocal friendships, like a social rehearsal forum. They may also allow them to internalise and come to a greater understanding of the nature of their early friendships (Gleason and Hohmann 2006). Gleason (2002, 980) also maintains that 'the imaginary social forum provided by an imaginary companion may afford practice in negotiating and conceptualising relationships'. However, it is notable that though these views characterise object-friends as part of a transition to gaining 'real' friends, an embodiment perspective allows imaginary friends to be seen as important to children *in their own right*, regardless of any potential value that may feed into successful real life friendships.

Some data examples indicated that there were some children who preferred, on occasion, to play with object-friends, rather than establishing 'real' friendships. This is echoed in the voices and opinions of the children below.

Elsa: *Sometimes people think when you're not playing with them that you're not their friend but that's not true, you can play with yourself or someone else but they're still your friend.*

Theo: *Sometimes you want be on your own and sometimes you want somebody to play with you and sometimes you can be alone because our teacher said that. And sometimes you don't always have to sit next to each other or do the same thing or play together every time.*

Henry: *When you, sometimes you like to be on your own but sometimes you don't.*

The comments of the children suggest that children choose times when they wish to play with their objects-friends alone. Furthermore, the same process of selection is performed whether they select to play with their real friends or alone. Theo also shared that sometimes he not only uses his object friend to play alone but also to entice a 'real' friend:

Researcher: *Who could be his other friend?*

Theo: *This boy because he can let him play with his man. I got a new man. Do you want a go?*

In this case, Theo is not practising for or internalising real friendship, as suggested by the psychological literature above. It appears, instead, that the object affords him additional status. It may not guarantee him a successful response from the other child but it adds confidence to the unstable journey of friendship. Dreyfus (1997) shows us that acquiring friendship can be seen as the process of skill acquisition. He defines the stages of skill acquisition as moving from a novice to an expert. At a competent stage three, the learner has to decide on a course of action without being clear if this is appropriate in a given scenario. The learner does not yet have the experience to know what will be the best course of action which can be a frightening and uncertain experience. Young children seem to recognise that interest in the same objects will provide play opportunities and ultimately friendship (Dunn 2004). Thus object-friends offer several affordances simultaneously – to play alone as well as to suggest mutual interests to others.

Conclusion

This article posed two questions: the first concerning what imaginary friends, in the form of objects, mean to children at the start of formal schooling; and the second concerning how these object-friends support children to play alone. In order to answer these questions, we provided an embodiment perspective and illustrated this approach through data examples. Our aim has been to query dominant psychological interpretations and to present an alternative reconceptualisation of what object-friends

mean to children and how these objects are used. The data examples revealed that children went to great lengths to ensure that their object-friends were physically present. Children also often regarded real friends and object-friends in a similar vein. Finally, it also appears that object-friends provide hidden affordances that can be used to make and maintain real friendships, as well as to play alone.

We therefore argue that an embodiment and participatory approach to understanding the meaning of children's object-friends can enable teachers and practitioners to make better informed decisions about the day-to-day management of object-friends within the school environment. In turn, this will ensure that children's social and emotional well-being is cultivated. The focus at the start of formal schooling in England currently leans towards a concentration on academic achievement which can easily neglect the need for children to feel a sense of belonging (Bath 2009). Whilst academic achievement is important, we argue here that children firstly need to achieve the 'maximum grip' on their new classroom environment that object-friends can provide (Dreyfus 1997), in order to experience both a sense of belonging and a feeling of success.

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