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Masekitlana *re-membered*: A performance-based ethnography of South African black children's pretend play

Abstract

The extensive empirical research inspired by Piaget and Vygotsky's theories of make-believe play has been criticised for restricting data to Western, urban, middle-class children. We seek to redress this bias by researching the traditional black South African Pedi children's game Masekitlana. Our data relies on embodied memories enacted by Mapelo (one of the authors), and interviews with two other informants. The analytical framework draws upon 'emergent methods' in ethnography such as performance ethnography, auto-ethnography and memory elicitation through 'bodynotes' within a Vygotskyian orientation to play. The findings show that Masekitlana shares features common to all pretend play, but also exhibits others unique to it including:

> *i) extended monologue,*
>
> *ii) metacommunicative frames for realistic thinking, and*
>
> *iii) a complex relation between social and solitary play.*

These findings support Vygotsky. However, 'the long childhood' of Masekitlana suggests that the stages theory of Piaget, as well as Vygotskyian ideas that have come down to us via Cole and Scribner and Valsiner, require revision in the light of Bruner's two modes of cognition and Veresov's reinterpretation of the theatre movement within which Vygotsky's central ideas are embedded.

Keywords: *Masekitlana, pretend or make-believe play, performance ethnography, adult memories, Vygotsky's theory of play, auto-ethnography*

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Introduction

Though children in all societies play games, 'make-believe play' also known as pretend play, role play, symbolic play, or socio-dramatic play (Ariel, 2002; Berk & Meyers, 2013; Bruner, Jolly & Sylva, 1985; Goldman, 1998; Pelligrini, 1982; Singer, 1973; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) is of special importance as one variety of play through which children recreate familiar situations by role playing characters, representing everyday scenes, miming actions and narrating a story. The pioneering study by Piaget (1962) of his own children's pretend play, followed by Vygotsky's extension and critique of Piaget's views on play (Vygotsky, 1933; Bruner, Jolly & Silva, 1985), established a universal theory that play is the leading developmental stage of preschool children in all societies. The mind develops when children internalise the perspectives of other people through role play. The use of symbolic play, including language, thus transforms children's everyday reality through their imaginative representations which they themselves direct like playwrights. The Piagetian and Vygotskyian syntheses and differences thus shifted the commonplace perception of play as a trivial pursuit. However, the data these scholars drew on focussed upon Western children, usually middle-class urban children. Other scholars began to challenge this Eurocentric bias by studying child play in non-Western societies and from rural and lower socio-economic groups (Berk, 2009; Göncü, 1999).

Methodologically, they criticised the decontextualised research of children divorced from their everyday contexts. This led to the shift from elicited and laboratory contexts that studied children isolated from their families and peers, to the study of children in naturalistic contexts such as at home and on the playground. Similarly in Africa, several scholars (especially since the 1960s, after independence from colonial rule), began to focus on African children's play and found that the presumed 'absence' of pretend play in African societies was a deficit view arising from the imposition of play found in Western contexts (Grieve, 1992; Kekae-Moletsane, 2008; Modikwe, 2010; Odendaal, 2010; Reynolds ,1989; Reynolds, 2005).

These Afrocentric studies unfortunately suffer from some shortcomings in their attempt to redress the Eurocentric bias: they tend to homogenise play into European and non-European, and cluster the latter under the label 'African children's games' without distinguishing between physical games, pretend play and games with rules. Odendaal (2010:9), though identifying a black children's variety of make-believe play called Masekitlana, following the pioneering research of Kekae-Moletsane (2008) nevertheless proceeds to classify it as a "stone game". Such clustering, while levelling the playing fields as it were between west and east, does little to reveal the developmental stages that African child go through in developing *mind*.

One consequence is that the validity of Piaget's and Vygotsky's universal hypotheses about play as a developmental stage cannot be tested. Furthermore, the Afrocentric approach taken by Odendaal (2010:9) argues that since "Masekitlana is a form of indigenous knowledge" it should be studied through "an indigenous psychological approach". Such an approach, while seeming to have the flavour of a culture-sensitive ethnography, could veer towards nativism and cultural lock-in. We

would rather argue for a partnership between the Afrocentric focus on African genres and Vygotskyian-oriented ethnography, represented by Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry and Göncü (1993). Such a partnership should be critical but open, thereby allowing the co-construction of a universal theory that retains within it the rich diversity of cultural forms of play.

A notable exception to the relative paucity of studies of African children's pretend play is Kekae-Moletsane's 2008 study of African children's play, where she describes for the first time the traditional make-believe play called Masekitlana played by black South African Pedi children. As this game is the central focus of our paper we will return to her description of it, and our own research, later in this paper.

A Vygotskyian orientation

Because of the limitations of both Western and Afrocentric studies of play outlined above, there is a need for empirical research on play to be grounded in a strong developmental theory. We argue that the Vygotskyian perspective on play provides such a theoretical orientation, as pointed out by several play researchers (see especially Berk, 2009; Harris, 2000; Nicolopoulou, 1993). Though Vygotsky's own theory of play (in Bruner et al 1985) lacked the empirical support of primary data, his ideas served to provide theoretical insight and inspiration. As Nicolopoulou (1993) argues, Vygotsky's theory of play should draw from his more general ideas of child development. She shows convincingly that Vygotsky's ideas were oriented to a study of play in a cultural context, and suggests an ethnographic direction such as opened up by the anthropologist Geertz (1973). However, as Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry and Göncü (1993) point out in their critique of Nicolopoulou, it is strange that Nicolopoulou omits mention of cultural variations in play in different cultures. Such variations would highlight significant differences in the way pretend play is culturally transmitted. Such a cross-cultural study of play would in fact enrich the cultural historical theory of Vygotsky, as well as offer a corrective to some of his hypotheses derived from either secondary data or primary data from elicited/experimental contexts of Vygotsky's followers (Fleer, 2012; Hedegaard, Edwards & Fleer 2012; Göncü, 1999; Medina & Martinez, 2012; Rogoff et al, 1993). These studies need to be conceptualised by:

> the double move approach [which] gives a more prominent position to children's personal knowledge and interest, as well as to children's family and community background (Chaiklin & Hedegaard 2009:193).

This approach allows personal knowledge, which includes play, to be harnessed for children's attainment of scientific or school knowledge.

Aim of the current research

The aim of the research reported here is to describe the traditional African game called Masekitlana from a Vygotskyian, ethnographic perspective using the memory of the key informant, Mapelo's childhood play. Mapelo is also a teaching colleague, fellow researcher and author. Masekitlana as an African variety of pretend play was first

suggested by undergraduate students doing a course on Vygotsky's theory of private speech (see Joseph & Ramani 2011 for a fuller description). The course introduced students to the key ideas of Vygotsky but included a small-scale research project on private speech. Several cohorts of students from 2008 to 2012 went to their villages across Limpopo, where Sepedi is mainly spoken, to carry out field observations and interviews. The data they returned with motivated the team of teachers (the present authors) to more systematically research Masekitlana using the students' data and views as hypotheses.

Methodology

Emergent methods in anthropology

The cross-cultural sensitivity that Rogoff et al (1993) and Göncü (1999) advocate can work best if play researchers take advantage of the cutting-edge techniques of data elicitation and analysis in the recent advances in ethnography, often referred to as 'emergent methods'. Performance-based ethnography draws upon the methods conventionally used in the humanities, especially theatre studies, and applies these methods to genres, or 'art forms' as they are referred to, that are normally studied analytically in the social sciences. These art forms include "dance, film, plastic arts" (Finley 2005:684). Rarer is the treatment of children's activities as performances such as Dyck's 2010 research of children's sport, and the study by Davis and Davis (2010) of the everyday activities of children. Performance ethnography is thus ideally suited for genres where cognition is embodied through action and enactment. However, performance ethnographers would argue that *all* human activity is performance, that the concept of performativity applies to any "stylised repetition of communicative acts" (Alexander 2005:414), and that, in fact, "all the world's a stage". Pretend play certainly, being so close in form to theatrical performance, is obviously an appropriate genre for a performance-based ethnography.

Performance data: Written notes, 'headnotes' and 'bodynotes'

The concept of a text has taken on a much broader meaning than the written text, as Marinis (2006:232) reminds us, so that one can now talk about "a textual approach to performance" within semiotic theory.

In the present research into Masekitlana, performance is treated as part of a conventional ethnographic procedure, namely as a resource for interviewing the player/performer. Conquergood (2006:119–120) notes the dichotomy of performance/ practical knowledge and propositional knowledge that segregates manual from mental labour, privileging the latter which he calls "apartheid knowledge that plays out inside the academy". Performance-based ethnography helps to overcome this false dichotomy, and through that, levels down senior staff (often non-African language-speaking individuals in South Africa) and their junior African language-speaking counterparts, who remain closer to their everyday performative knowledge. This is the case with the present team of authors.

We find Skinner's three kinds of data relevant for this study. Skinner (2010:120) refers to "headnotes", "written notes" and "bodynotes". Skinner coins the terms "bodynote," "headnote" ("memories of field research") and "written notes" (the conventional field notes). While written notes are explicit, 'headnote' and 'bodynote' are "the unseen" (2010:121). The 'bodynote' is the co-construction of the memory of the performer (research subject) of physical movements such as in dance (that is the object of the research). Skinner (2010:112) claims that this physical movement "is a form of knowing itself" and perhaps what he means is that knowing is 'embodied' knowledge. Such knowledge is of course tangible, but tacit. Such tacit embodied knowledge is made explicit and thus recoverable as knowledge when the informant/performer's memory is stimulated by the performance (such as dance). The dialogue between researcher and research subject around the performance data is what Skinner is referring to as 'bodynote'. Skinner (2010:120) sums up his position succinctly: "Memory can be enacted physically through the unleashing of bodynotes."

Skinner's views of remembering through performance is closer to those play researchers who argue for the creative role of adults' remembering their childhood. We have referred to some of the scholars in anthropology earlier who have written in the same publication as Skinner, significantly titled *The ethnographic self as resource: Writing memory and experience into ethnography* (Collins & Gallinat 2010). Dyck (2010), writing about children's sport, uses his own childhood memory of games as an entry point, as do the twin researchers Davis and Davis (2010) of their shared childhood. But play researchers also engage with children in play (see Kelly-Byrne, 1989; Paley, 2004). For such participative performance-based research to happen they point out the importance of recalling their own childhood. Childhood memories of play are thus indispensable in the study of child play, in addition to observations of actual play. Adults who had emotionally invested in and who immensely enjoyed childhood play usually also vividly remember, and there are adults who no longer play children's games, but are able to re-enact them (Thomas 1958). Years of teaching young children and observing their 'fantasy' play in her classroom has convinced Paley (2004) that though researchers initially find it difficult to leave the world of factuality to enter the child's world of fantasy, once entry is gained understanding soon follows.

Research questions

We now list the original questions that motivated this research, and which were stimulated by the undergraduate students' field work in their own rural communities:

1. Is Masekitlana a form of fantasy/make-believe play among Pedi children?

2. From what age do children start playing Masekitlana and at what age do they stop?

3. How do children learn to play Masekitlana? Do they learn it from adults/parents or from peers?

4. What is the relation between the solitary form and the social form of the game?

5. Does Masekitlana have rules? In which ways are the rules of Masekitlana different from the rules of other games?

6. Is Masekitlana pure fantasy (even though it may draw upon reality), or is it reality-oriented?

In addressing these questions, we hoped to provide a sociocultural analysis of Masekitlana and to theorise it as a developmental stage, following a Vygotskyian-oriented ethnographic analysis.

Sources of data

The three informants in this paper are Mapelo (one of the authors of this paper), Pamla (a former student on the Vygotsky course and mother of a six-year old daughter) and Mosima (a female high school student). The first two informants are adults who played this game as children, and are therefore ex-players. Mapelo's data are memories of her childhood play, whereas Pamla's are her observations of her daughter starting to play the game. Only Mosima (the adolescent high school student) currently plays the game. Her data is drawn from her current experiences, and also from her observations of her six-year old niece to whom she has taught the game.

We rely upon the data from Mapelo, treating Pamla and Mosima's data more selectively either to complement or problematise Mapelo's perceptions. Data from other sources include the impressionistic field notes of six undergraduate students who observed children playing Masekitlana in their villages in the Limpopo province. The students' data were insightful and used as a source of hypotheses to launch the main research. We also include as data the shared memories of the childhood play of the authors. These data were not used for analysis but for doing a collective auto-ethnography to establish common ground and empathy among ourselves.

These different sources, some highly planned and structured and the others used more spontaneously and responsively, are summarised in the table below.

	Data source	Purpose
1	Six students' responses to a questionnaire on private speech, as part of a third-year module on language and cognition.	To tap the insider knowledge of Pedi students through introspection.
2	Auto-ethnographic accounts of childhood games played by the authors, focusing specifically on pretend play.	To establish the universality of pretend play and to re-live the feelings accompanying our childhood games.
3	Re-enactment of Masekitlana by Mapelo, which was video and audio taped, and transcribed.	To experience the game as a basis for an ethnographic interview of the narrator.
4	Ethnographic interviews of Mapelo based on the video of her performance.	To elicit the 'rules' of the game and skills deployed and developed in playing the game.

	Data source	Purpose
5	Ethnographic interview of Pamla on her observations of her six year old daughter's solitary playing of Masekitlana.	To contrast solitary pretend play and social pretend play.
6	Ethnographic interview of Mosima, a sixteen-year old high-school student, who currently plays Masekitlana regularly.	To further flesh out the insights obtained from the other data sources.

As pointed out earlier, Mapelo's performance and the interview of her by the other three authors of this paper are the main sources of data, with the other two informants enriching and sometimes provoking Mapelo to probe her memories deeper. Mapelo's performance of Masekitlana closely resembles the way children still play the game, except that her themes and content are adult themes, and her verbal fluency is that of an advanced Sepedi speaker. She is also partly pretending to play pretend play, for a semi-authentic audience, namely her co-researchers. Pamla is not only a mother, but also a postgraduate student and former student on the Vygotsky course, and is therefore able to understand the theoretical significance of our interview questions. Mosima is the only informant who currently still belongs to the period of childhood and actually still plays the game. She also reports being taught by her older sister and has in turn recently taught her six year old niece. Like Pamla, Mosima brings a current understanding of the game, in contrast to Mapelo, who represents a childhood of an earlier period, one that she recalls through performance.

Though our paper relies mainly upon Mapelo's accounts of Masekitlana, significant convergences and divergences between her and the other two informants help to provide a fuller description of the game.

Description of Masekitlana

As the first published account of the game Masekitlana, and reflecting an insider's observations of play within her own community, Kekae-Moletsane's (2008:368) description deserves extensive quotation:

> [Masekitlana] is a monologue play, played by one child at a time, alone or while other children are listening attentively. During play children usually relate stories about things that worry or excite them, things they imagine, their wishes, things they detest, things about people they detest, and things around them. Players need only two small stones. Masekitlana players hit one stone with the other several times while relating their stories. The pace, frequency and the way the stone is hit differ. When the players relate stories or events that interest them, they hit the stones softly, at a slow pace and infrequently. They speak softly with a sweet tone. Their facial expressions show happiness in the form of smiles or laughter. When the players relate aggressive incidents, and sad or depressing stories, they hit the stones very hard, frequently, and show aggression and anger on their faces. They usually shout and yell while talking. They also display anger and sadness on their faces to the extent that they sometimes frown or cry. The game involves many emotions, such as happiness, excitement, anger, sadness and aggression. When the storyteller stops telling a story, comments, remarks, suggestions and questions are usually posed or made by the listeners. If an interesting story has been told, the usual comments and remarks are: "That

was great! What a lucky girl! I wish I had been there". In the case of a sad story, the listeners' comments, questions or suggestions are: "Poor child! Shame. Where is she now?" In some cases the children become so emotional when playing Masekitlana that they cry or stop playing without finishing their stories. In such cases the usual remarks, comments and questions are: "What happened afterwards? What else? What did he do? Don't worry, he will be safe" and so on. Here the listeners give support and act as counsellors or therapists.

It is clear from the above account that Masekitlana is an advanced form of socio-dynamic role play or pretend play. It has most of the essential features of pretend play that characterises Western urban middle-class children's pretend play – imaginary situations represented through role play, use of symbolic resources such as stones for characters, gestures to represent actions and emotions, and improvised language used in narrative fashion.

Kekae-Moletsane's account of Masekitlana is a background to her main research involving a young boy traumatised by the violent murders of his mother and grandmother by his father, which, tragically, he witnessed. Kekae-Moletsane used Masekitlana as a form of therapy to help the boy come to terms with his tragedy. Her pioneering research launched a spate of research on using Masekitlana for therapeutic purposes (Modikwe, 2010; Odendaal, 2010).

Apart from some minor differences, Kekae-Moletsane's account corresponds in the main with the data we have uncovered. Mapelo writes, based on her memory of her own childhood play, as follows:

Masekitlana is a story-telling game in which the narrator uses stones as characters to enact a story, which often includes a complex plot and conflictual situations leading to a satisfactory resolution. Each time a character speaks, the stone representing the character is struck on the ground. Girls usually sit in a circle and take turns telling a story. The game is frequently played by young girls between the ages of 4 and 15, with younger children, both boys and girls, being part of the audience.

It will be noticed that Mapelo's account is more sociological, referring to factors such as gender, age and taking turns. These observations emerge from her memories of her own play in naturalistic settings.

In the light of our understanding of Masekitlana, Kekae-Moletsane's account suffers from some limitations. The boy's monological performance is an instance of solitary play rather than social play. The child is very young in terms of the more mature social element of Masekitlana, and his motives are primarily related to trauma. The audience is the therapist who elicits this solitary play. Such elicited data is used for therapeutic ends, and tells us little about how such play will develop into mature play with motives beyond the primary one of expressing and overcoming pain. In fact researchers following Kekae-Moletsane provide a textbook definition of Masekitlana as "a traditional South African game that is usually played by distressed children" (Eloff & Ebersöhn 2004:175). Though Odendaal (2010:8) adds "This is not to say that this game is solely played by distressed children" the norm for the game is that it is usually played by distressed children, a point that Mapelo and all the female students on the Vygotsky course strongly disagree with:

> We seem to disagree, as it is played by all the children who are both happy and sad. It is a game that is played daily in the communities (Mapelo interview, July 27, 2011).

These critical observations on therapeutically-driven studies of make-believe play opened up a new direction for the present team of researchers – the study of Masekitlana in non-laboratory settings such as homes, classrooms and the outdoors, and which included normal children, rather than only traumatised children using a Vygotskyian cultural historical theory rather than a clinical theory with Africanist underpinnings.

Analysis and findings

In keeping with performance ethnography and cultural historical activity theory, we examined the data for aspects of Masekitlana such as settings, age, rules, cultural and historical transmission, self-regulation and motives.

We present our findings, into which we weave insights from Mapelo's re-enactment of Masekitlana and the interview with her, which was based on the joint viewing of her video recorded performance, converting in the same session 'body notes' into auto-ethnographic accounts. We also draw upon observations made by Pamla and Mosima.

Masekitlana *is a complex socio-dynamic (CSD) mode of make-believe play*

The playing of Masekitlana requires a number of semiotic resources: drawings to represent homes, stones to represent characters, gestures, intonations and language to role play these characters. Language, moreover, has to be deployed in a narrative style where all the elements of drama come in, most notably plot, climax and resolution. Berk (2009) and Nicolopoulou (1993) refer to such socio-dramatic play as *complex* to distinguish it from early socio-dramatic play where actions predominate and narrative is yet to emerge.

CSD play partly derives its complexity from the environment, but mainly from the maturity of the player. Mapelo points out the flexibility of Masekitlana where stones are chosen according to availability. But it is clear that mature players will choose different shapes, colours and textures of stones or sticks with some *a priori* idea of these characters representing social types. There is therefore social generalisation implied by such choice that very young players are unlikely to possess. Variations in choice of stones could of course be a matter of local diversity and not something typical of all mature players. Mapelo's account of variations of choice of stones may therefore not extend to children in other settings, but the freedom to increase sophistication of 'symbols' remains a generalisation that applies to mature players benefitting from certain environments that favour such choice.

The weaving of a story through deployment of multimodal semiotic resources (drawings, stones, and gestures) turned out to be so complex to us who observed Mapelo's performance as to suggest a degree of being planned. We got this impression from her fluency, speed and absence of exploratory in-frame talk (there

were no instances of, for example, "Now, let me see what should happen next"). Plannedness was also inferred by the duration of her performance. The first time her play went on well beyond half an hour. The second time we had to request her to shorten her presentation to about five minutes. Furthermore, her first performance was not recorded properly, and when asked to re-enact it, she surprised us by claiming she couldn't remember her story and preferred to tell a new story. In other words, her performance was improvised. While improvisation is a key criterion of pretend play and is used to distinguish it from such games as early role play which mimics real persons and games with *a priori* rules like chess, soccer, Marabaraba etc., it seemed to us initially that Masekitlana must have been rehearsed much like a play written beforehand and then enacted. Once our scepticism was dispelled we realised that Masekitlana is unlike other pretend play in that a single player engages in an extended monologue. This monologue is protected by rules of non-interruption which we will describe in the next section. Monologue makes an even greater demand upon the competence of a player than, say, dyadic pretend play. The former requires complete self-regulation, whereas the latter is co-constructed and has features of mediation by others.

The complexity of all CSD play, as in Masekitlana, is explained *developmentally*, rather than just structurally, by sociocultural theorists. Nicolopoulou's claims (1993) that CSD is the basis for more decontextualised activities (such as story reading and writing) is in keeping with Vygotsky's developmental view:

> At first, in a child of preschool age, action dominates over meaning and is incompletely understood; a child is able to do more than he can understand. It is at preschool that there first arises an action structure in which meaning is the determinant (Vygotsky in Bruner et al 1985:550).

Vygotsky adds that "towards the end of development in play, what had originally been embryonic now has a distinct form, finally emerging as purpose and rules" (in Bruner et al 1985:553).

However, as Vygotsky astutely notes about preschool action, "the action is not a sideline or subordinated feature; it is a structural feature" (Bruner et al 1985:550). In other words, complexity is the outcome of the retention and incorporation of the props of earlier play. The child achieves mastery of complexity through self-regulation, which Vygotsky points out is the pathway to internalisation of activity/performance as inner thought.

Rules of the game and rules of symbolisation

Mapelo points out that although "the stories are not planned" and "the narrator just goes with the flow as she plays along", there *are* rules. During the monological performance the audience is not allowed to interrupt with questions or comments (according to Mosima, one of our informants). But according to Mapelo "the audience is allowed to ask and comment during the game but they are not allowed to tell the narrator what to say next or how the story should end". This rule of non-interruption appears to flow from the centrality of the monological role play which ensures that

the player, and not the audience, is centre stage. The audience tends to obey the rule because among them are aspiring performers queuing for their turn. Mapelo asserts:

> For instance some children prefer to only observe, but others want to play all the time. It is only fair for these that they be given a chance, but supposing I as a player go and do something else, they'll be very angry. The rule-breaker could also be punished by deliberate interruptions when her own turn came. (Mapelo interview, July 27, 2011).

This *quid pro quo* expectation arises from the unstated view 'I listen to your story; you have to listen to mine'

It is interesting that the rule of non-interruption is linked to taking turns, but furthermore that it occurs in a structured form, i.e. *after* the performance, in what we would like to term 'the commentary'. In terms of frames there is little tolerance for commentaries during performance itself unless a procedure is flagrantly violated by the player, observes Mapelo, commenting on an error in her own performance which she staged for us. The error lay in her not sticking to the same stone for the character she chose at the beginning of her narrative. The audience could interrupt to correct the player in such cases. We prefer to call such errors as violations of 'rules of the game'.

However, these are not the only kinds of rule. There are rules that relate to matching symbol to reality. A drunken man for instance must be role played as staggering and speaking in a slurred voice. A mother must sound like a mother and behave like one. A child must be mimicked through a high-pitched, squeaky voice etc.

> Bigger stones are used to represent older people and the smaller stones younger children. Sticks are also used to represent (weak) male characters in the story. The sticks in this case are chosen because they are easily broken. The female character, usually a stone ... will sometimes crush the stick and the female audience will be cheering with victory (Mapelo interview July 27, 2011).

She also describes choice of shapes, textures and colours of stones to represent characters: smooth, beautiful stones for young women, for instance. The correspondence is not only between suitable objects to represent characters, but actions to represent emotions related to how a female player feels about how men treat women in the society they observe around them.

The audience during the 'commentary' usually praise good representations of reality, and occasionally criticise poor representations. Mapelo says: "The audience compliments and often ask 'What would have happened to so and so if you had continued the story?'" This often leads to the narrator continuing the story in a speculative fashion. The audience and performer could then engage in co-constructing such a reality.

The rules of Masekitlana suggest that children develop cognition through self-regulation of their social realities through the rules of play. This is in keeping with Vygotsky's theory of symbolic play in contrast to Piaget's.

Piaget (1959:264) sees the early speech of the child and symbolic play as being 'egocentric', "because the subject does not sufficiently differentiate between himself

and the outer world but projects into that world the content of his own subjectivity". In later works Piaget (1962:168) also asserts:

> Symbolic play … has for the two to four year old child … as its sole aim satisfaction of the ego, i.e. individual truth as opposed to collective and impersonal truth.

'Collective play' according to Piaget (1959:168) "either has no effect on the egocentric symbolism or, when there is imitation, it enhances it". Accommodation or the modification of internal schemes to fit reality applies only to 'adapted thought' as in

> games with rules (marbles, hopscotch etc.), which are transmitted socially from child to child and thus increase in importance with the enlargement of the child's social life' (Piaget 1959:59).

It is only in these mature forms that lead to rational thought that "a state of permanent equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation" is arrived at (Piaget 1959:287). In short, in play (as in dreams) the child "loses the sense of reality" (Piaget 1959: 62).

Vygotsky (1987:78), in contrast, points out:

> The child's egocentric speech is not divorced from reality, activity or adaptation … but constitutes a necessary feature of the child's rational activity, or adaptation.

Vygotsky saw the balance between assimilation and accommodation (that Piaget restricted to games with rules and rational knowledge) as applying to both rational thinking and to 'autism' (symbolic play). In one of his most insightful and comprehensive statements he pointed out:

> The zigzagging development of thinking and fantasy that is reflected in the fact that any abstraction is at one and the same time a flight from life and a more profound and accurate reflection of life – creates a potential for studying realistic and autistic thinking (Vygotsky 1987:78).

In opposition to Piaget, who ignored the activity of the child as a means to realistic thinking, Vygotsky (1987:79) pointed out "what we have in mind is … reality as it is encountered in practice". Make-believe play promotes "voluntary intentions, real-life plans and volitional motives" (Vygotsky 1987:102).

The unique feature of Masekitlana is that peer regulation happens through the commentary of the listeners through their reality-oriented critiques, which are of three kinds:

i)   Story grammar (genre features of stories)

ii)   Rules of the game (Searle 1969:33)

iii)   Rules representing behaviour in the real world

Masekitlana then, requires the operation of three kinds of rules: generic rules of storytelling (rules of the genre), rules of the game (particular to each game), and rules of symbol-reality convergence (reality-oriented rules). Rules of the game in Masekitlana are similar to games with *a priori* rules like marbles, Marabaraba, soccer and chess, which Piaget gave more attention to as being more adapted to reality

than fantasy play. The last of the three rules occur during improvised role play of real characters and events in their generalised form when incorporated into the imaginary situations created by the child so typical of pretend play. The fact that these three kinds of rules of Masekitlana are embedded in the local cultures of the Pedi people explains perhaps why Mapelo and Mosima refer to Masekitlana as 'a cultural game' independently of each other. We interpret this to mean that Masekitlana has to be learnt through a cultural process unlike other make-believe games which are learnt quickly and almost spontaneously.

The 'cultural game' perspective of insiders encourages us to hypothesise that cultural transmission of some kinds of fantasy play must be examined within "child-structured play", a term used by Schwartzman as cited in Goldman (1998:102) for play that is directed by children and excludes adults. CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity theory) scholars (Berk, 2009; Medina & Martinez, 2012) have argued that this absence of child-structured play in Vygotsky's theory of play, reveals a gap in his theory of mediation which tended to emphasise the role of adults, despite his inclusion of the phrase more capable peers as mediating agents. This gap has been redressed in the last two decades (see Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Hedegaard, 2012). Medina and Martinez (2012:97) further show that within child-structured play, there is a distinction between "individualistic and collectivist cultures" as reflected in Dutch and Andalusian children's play respectively. Masekitlana falls within child-structured collectivist cultural forms of play where

> the value of seeing themselves integrated into a group was more important than their individual interests and was the motive for children to organize their acts (2012:111).

Children within these cultures also serve as collective mediators and historical agents, transmitting their games without much adult intervention in what Rogoff et al (1993:151) term "guided participation" or scaffolding that more expert children provide to novices. Broadly then, ethnographic studies of play support CHAT that cultural tools and social formations are historical in nature, but contribute significantly to the finding that communities of children have a stronger agency in the shaping of their own games and the transmission of these games across time than previously thought. This is certainly the case with the communities of Pedi children who play Masekitlana. This local variety of children's make-believe play is consistent with Hedegaard's 2012 synthesis of Vygotsky's cultural historical approach with Leontiev's activity approach.

Solitary and social play

An early hypothesis given by students in their field observations was that Masekitlana exists in two versions: solitary play and social play. The relation between the two was not suggested. However, based on Vygotsky's general law that socially-mediated activities are the precursors of solitary private speech that is then internalised as inner thought, we speculated that there must exist a stronger relation between Masekitlana in the child alone, and in the child-with-others situation. The data support this view. Mapelo recalls she first started playing Masekitlana at the age of 4:

> I remember because we had this sand; they were extending the day care centre, we would dig, mould houses. At that time we were not telling stories. It was more about beautiful homes, stones, no plot or ending. (Mapelo interview, July 27, 2011)

Mosima says that the solitary and social play are the same game, emphasising that "older children never play alone". (Mosima interview, August 15, 2012) In the solitary version she says: "The young child may be able to teach herself". Mapelo too agrees that solo play is 'rehearsal play' (Mapelo interview, September 12, 2012) for the social play that will come later when the child has mastered the rules (of the two kinds we have identified). "When young children become confident they play with others" affirms Mosima (Mosima interview, August 15, 2012).

While the above descriptions suggest a move from very young solo play, to mature adolescent social play, this is only one part of the socialising process of play. Where or from whom does the child learn Masekitlana? The young child observes older children playing when s/he is part of the audience. The young child could be a boy or a girl, but usually only older girls are players. Once they observe in silence how Masekitlana is played, they seclude themselves to play a simple version of the game. This solitary play might be equated with private speech, but accounts suggest that they lack the unselfconsciousness of private speech.

Mosima points this out in her six-year old cousin Charlene, who "can tell a kind of story but can't pronounce words properly; Charlene is still learning (Sepedi)". She adds:

> Most children don't like adults (to observe them play) because adults will laugh at them "'cause they can't pronounce the language ...'cause if you miss a single word they are going to laugh at you ... if someone comes she stops playing, saying "Ha, mum, go!" (Mosima interview, August 15, 2012).

Pamla says the same about her six-year old daughter, who plays by herself in the yard in front of the house, within the line of vision, but out of earshot of her mum (Pamla interview, August 10, 2011). Mosima reports she overheard solitary speech of one child of three years: "She got stones but she can't build houses. But she's talking. If someone comes, she stops as she can't pronounce properly" (Mosima interview, August 15, 2012). Mosima's account suggests that the child is self-conscious about her performance, showing that the child knows the difference between immature and mature play. Though very young children (3–7 years) develop solitary play as silent participators in social play, they take some time before they become social performers. Moreover, there are some exceptions. A very precocious child might say:

> I want to play Masekitlana, will you come and listen? The older [sic] will collect stones and do the drawings ... and arranging (of the rooms and sofas) and the four year old will tell the story (Mosima interview, August 15, 2012).

This kind of adult-supported social play is rare, the solitary form of play being the norm in very young children. Rare also is the 'teaching' of Masekitlana by an adult (parent, uncle, cousin). Young children appear rather to acquire or appropriate the rules of this game by participating as silent, observing, and absorbing members of the audience.

Thus their social participation provides the basis of their later solitary play, or to use Vygotsky's (1987:211) well-known concept of the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development):

> What lies in the zone of proximal development at one stage is realized and moves to the level of actual development at a second. In other words, what the child is able to do in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow.

So, whereas Piaget presented child development chronologically as egocentric speech to social speech, Vygotsky (1987:75) reversed this order from "social speech to egocentric (private) speech to inner speech".

This position of Vygotsky in its most general form is his general genetic law of cultural development, stated as follows:

> [A]ny function in the child's cultural development appears on stage twice, that is, on two planes. It firstly appears on the social plane and then on a psychological plane (Vygotsky cited in Veresov 2004:5).

However, Veresov (2004:2) criticises Western scholars like Cole and Scribner (1978) and Valsiner (2000) for the way they interpret Vygotsky's terms 'stage' and 'plane'. Veresov (2004:6) argues for understanding these terms in the context of the "language of the Russian theatre", where "on the stage" and "on two planes"

> are not metaphors … [but] literally the place in the theatre where actors play. Scene has two planes – the front plane (also called "the first plane") and the back plane (often called "the second plane"). According to theatre's traditions, main events of the performance should happen on the front plane of the scene […] So, it means that on the stage of our development, the category appears twice –inter-psychologically (on the first, front plane) and then intra-psychologically (on the second, internal individual plane). Therefore there are no two levels in development, but there are two planes of one stage, two dimensions of one event (Veresov 2004:7).

Veresov's rejection of the limited views of Cole and Scribner (1978) and Valsiner (2000) is, in our view, an important attempt to restore Vygotsky's view of 'drama,' 'dramatic collision' and its resulting dialectic (the zigzagging alluded to earlier in this paper) in the place of the linear, abstraction of internalisation that Cole and Scribner and Valsiner present. Veresov sees this as a misrepresentation of Vygotsky. For reasons of space, we can only present a very sketchy account of Veresov's (2004:3) deeply reasoned restoration of Vygotsky's dramatic view, or as he calls it, "the hidden dimension" of the ZPD. The hidden dimension (namely drama) better captures the way the public and solitary forms of Masekitlana play themselves out in children's lives. In other words, solitary play is itself a performance. Methodologically as well, Vygotsky's theatre-oriented cognition on the one hand, and the performance-oriented study of genres by ethnography on the other, provide a powerful synergy of these two paradigms, to study play.

Motivation as an outcome of mastery

The long duration of a single monologic performance – anywhere between fifteen minutes to an hour – moreover one of spontaneous, unrehearsed storytelling made us

speculate about the source of the child's motivation. Kekae-Moletsane's therapeutic research draws upon the initial emotions of repressed feelings that are projected by the traumatised child in his expression, intonation and clashing of stones in socio-dramatic play. Death, hunger and separation are often the motives identified. The child thus derives emotional release and overcomes trauma through role playing these repressed feelings (Vygotsky's 'unfulfilled wishes'). This suggests that once the child is 'cured' she would stop playing Masekitlana. This is not the case, as even Kekae-Moletsane's therapeutic case study (2008) shows the cured child wants to continue play, apparently for the sake of play. The adult memories of play of Mapelo and Mosima are always joyful ones, even when the play was about sad or gruesome events. Odendaal (2010), however, following Kekae-Moletsane, is puzzled why children narrating sad or scary events nevertheless seem like they are enjoying their self-narrative.

Our data suggests a different explanation. Unlike her, Mapelo's older cousin preferred to tell scary tales of witches, based on the belief of 'real' witches in their village.

> She would choose three black stones for three black cats that represented the witches. She would choose a stone for a hyena believed to be roaming the village at that time, terrorising the villages so that at night children who had to fetch water felt afraid to do so. We didn't enjoy her stories, but we were sitting there [listening] feeling miserable. At the end of the story we would say we would never again listen to her stories, but we kept on coming back to hear more. (Mapelo interview, July 27, 2011).

The cousin who was older than her audience relished the fear she so inspired in the younger ones. Her competence in tuning in to the 'real' stories and creating fantasies out of them through her masterly narrative style suggests that the 'enjoyment' of the performer and audience must come from emotions other than the primary one of overcoming unfulfilled desires.

We suggest that much of the motivation comes from mastery of behaviour of the characters represented realistically through deployment of the symbolic resources such as stones, drawings and story sequence. These motivations appear similar to what we will term 'secondary motivations' that Vygotsky argued superseded "immediate impulse" (Vygotsky in Bruner 1985:548), or what we term 'primary motivations'. These primary motivations can be inferred from Vygotsky's position that

> towards the beginning of preschool age, unsatisfied desires and tendencies that cannot be realised immediately make their appearance, while the tendency to immediate fulfilment of desires, characteristic of the preceding stage is retained.

> [But] … every advance from one age stage to another is connected with an abrupt change in motives and incentives to act (Vygotsky in Bruner 1985:538).

The advance from initial motives that propel the child to the more advanced motives is brought out by Vygotsky's reliance (in Bruner 1985:549) on Spinoza "that an affect can be overcome by a stronger affect". This view of Spinoza in the realm of play is stated by Vygotsky forcefully as "the essential attribute is a rule which has become an affect" (in Bruner 1985:549). Vygotsky (in Bruner 1985:549) concludes: "In short

play gives a child new desires". The mastery of rules of the game, a goal motivated by primary motives from an earlier stage, once attained becomes a motive itself. The CHAT tradition that emerged from these insights of Vygotsky is best represented by Hedegaard (2012), Fleer (2012) and Medina and Martinez (2012).

Vygotsky (in Bruner et al 1985:552) famously sums this up in this well-known quotation: "In play the child stands taller than itself in real life". Play creates a higher reality out of the mundane, which not merely represents reality but also the child's aspirations for its future. This is shown in Mapelo's preference for suitable endings: The child performing Masekitlana often has to end a social crisis in favour of the underdogs, and show justice that must be achieved. If this is not done, the audience feels disappointed and expects the performer to suggest a different ending. Those players who do not satisfy the audience risk losing their popularity, whereas popular players are those who satisfy their audience's cravings and thereby get larger audiences returning for their next performance. Motivation in storytelling is thus socially directed, and socially stimulated, lifting the child out of its primeval motives towards social motivation, or as Davydov (1995:41) put it "a person has … desires of a humanitarian nature", which get transformed through activity into needs.

The teacher researcher Paley (2004) notes that adults might be able to enter the child's world of play by following the rules of play, but find it very difficult to understand the feelings of the child. She is here referring to secondary motivations. Vygotsky's own theory of child development ends on the relation between emotions and motivation, and much of it was theorised in his ideas on play. However, as Vygotskyian scholars (Leontev 1945, 1977, 1978; McInerney, Walker & Liem 2011; Hedegaard 2012) note, the centrality of advanced emotions and motivations is the cornerstone of Vygotsky's entire theory, but nevertheless remains under-theorised. The study of Masekitlana, like make-believe play of children in other societies, provides evidence of advanced motives, which are vital clues for a theory of human motivation that goes beyond the theory proposed by Freud, and continued by Piaget's claim, that according to Vygotsky (1987:77), "knows of no adaptation to reality, because pleasure is the only spring of action." Leontiev (1979), on the other hand, derived motives solely from the reality-oriented goals of the child and implicitly devalued the child's initial desires in an attempt, we think, to depart from the subjectivism espoused by the psychoanalytical tradition. Leontiev goes too far here in excluding what Hedegaard (cited in Fleer, 2012:91) refers to as "the interest the children bring" to an activity. Hedegaard's dialectic (2002, 2009) between initial interests and goals has profound implications for formal education. We take this up in our conclusion.

Age range

Children between the ages of 3 and 16 play Masekitlana. We believe this wide age range is quite unusual. Pretend play is supposed to give way to realistic (scholastic, scientific, imitative) thinking according to Piaget, or to use his words "the ludic symbol is evolving towards a straightforward copy of reality" (1962:137). Vygotsky (in Bruner 1985:549) on the other hand, sees such play as yielding realistic thinking, i.e. "subordination to a

rule in the renunciation of something he wants" such as candy, and that furthermore claimed that play does not just disappear as Piaget predicted. It was this perception of reality through rules resulting in the child's "self-determination" that Vygotsky attributed to Spinoza and Piaget (Vygotsky in Bruner 1985: 549). It was this also that led him to claim a developmental status for pretend play or to use his term a "leading activity" of the pre-school child (Vygotsky in Bruner 1985:552). Mapelo does agree that Masekitlana peaks at about 7 or 8 years, but the data from the three informants and the students show the continuation of the game into adolescence. Moreover, Masekitlana is a parallel activity to both scientific reasoning (school subjects) and to games with *a priori* rules like Marabaraba, Kgati and soccer. This suggests that Masekitlana is not limited strictly to a stage (at least in terms of the upper end of the age limit), but is rather a mode of representing reality. The theories of Bruner (1976) best capture the trajectory of Masekitlana from early childhood to adolescence. Bruner argues for two modes of representing reality, namely the narrative and the scientific, neither of which is superior to the other – they are separate, but complementary.

This picture of complementarity challenges both Piaget and Vygotsky's theories, but is complexified once we examine the play of Masekitlana in actual contexts. Masekitlana is a traditional make-believe game played in rural and township localities of black South African communities. In big cities and suburbs there is a considerable lessening of play. Mapelo, who has the experience of having lived in early childhood in a village, and then shifted in her secondary school years to a big city suburb, sees Masekitlana differently from Mosima, who has lived all her life in the rural part of Limpopo. Mosima is sure that Masekitlana is played by high school girls, because she still plays it as a high school girl. Mapelo is surprised at Mosima's claim, assuming that the game is either not played beyond primary school, or else goes underground among older girls, by which is meant that older girls do not play the game in public places like the playground, but in the teacherless privacy of classrooms during breaks. Mapelo concedes that her view may come from the fact that age differences in the play of Masekitlana may arise from the differing geographical factors of rural and city areas. Urbanisation, with TV, computer games and commercial toys, she laments, is leading to a loss of culture. Mosima, on the contrary, claims that the effects of modernisation on rural children are being absorbed into the game. Her cousins see TV programmes and use super heroes from the Sepedi programmes in their Masekitlana role play. Mapelo speculates this may be because rural parents still regulate the amount of TV viewing of their children, unlike urban parents who tend to have much less control. These socio-geographical differences aside, it seems plausible that make-believe games such as Masekitlana are alternative and parallel modes of representing reality to the 'realist' scientific mode, and do not disappear with early childhood. The realities they represent are moreover different: One represents social behaviour, the other is knowledge about objects in the natural and physical world.

It is quite possible that games such as Masekitlana might offer a better balance of the assimilatory and accommodating aspects than school (scientific) knowledge alone, even though the latter is regarded as cultural capital. The educational implications of

this balance is that make-believe games such as Masekitlana, rich as they are in the 'what if' or hypothesising and predicting functions (often associated only with realistic thinking), could be turned into cultural capital if incorporated into the curriculum. But this requires a major rethinking of curriculum in terms of Bruner's (1986:12–13) parallel modes of the construction of reality, what he terms "the paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode […] and the narrative mode". Bruner (1986:11) is clear that the two modes of thought "though complementary, are irreducible to one another", "each providing distinctive ways of … constructing reality". Of the two, the more mysterious is the narrative mode, focussing on verisimilitude in contrast to the scientific mode's testing of hypotheses to establish truth through facts. Bruner (1986:13) stresses the role of narratives in the development of imagination through "good stories, gripping drama, believable [though not necessarily 'true'] historical accounts". He might have added 'and sociodramatic play'. All these genres fall within the narrative mode, the criteria for validity being "not truth but verisimilitude … of lifelikeness" (1986:11). Bruner's two modes offer different but equal routes to a full-blown curriculum, which is currently lopsidedly in favour of the scientific mode. It resonates with Veresov's (2004) restoration of the 'drama' approach of Vygotsky, that Western representations of Vygotsky have omitted due to their unfamiliarity with the Russian legacy of theatre and art that Vygotsky was immersed in.

Masekitlana: An African embodiment of CHAT

Masekitlana is a cultural variety of the make-believe play of South African Pedi children. The different functional stages of play, such as the purely motor functions of imitations that Piaget identified in very young children – drawings representing people's homes, using stones to represent characters, and then telling a story impersonating these characters, with all the features of plot such as sequence of actions, climax and resolution – show Masekitlana to be a multi-staged, multimodal game of a complex kind. Its unique feature is the extended monologue, a feature protected by child audiences and players through the rule of non-interruption that is enforced during performance. The high level of competence that monologue demands of players explains why novices (preschoolers) go through the sequence of being 'recruited' as part of an audience where they observe the older children perform, retreat into solitary play where they rehearse and finally emerge as players at a later age. The most advanced players are adolescents.

These findings support Vygotsky's theory of the precedence of social activities as the source of self-mastery through solitary play. However, the 'long childhood' of Masekitlana implied by our finding that this is a multi-aged, multi-staged game ranging from 3 years to 16 years necessitates a reconsideration of Vygotsky's developmental stage theory (as popularised by Cole & Screibner and Valsiner, and correctly criticised by Veresov) in the light of Bruner's more plausible two modes of cognising reality. Bruner's ideas are also echoed in the Bakhtinian notion of multivoicedness (Holquist 2002), internalised as advanced human thinking. Our findings on Masekitlana support these theories, but in turn such theories need to inform and be informed by

ethnographic performance-based studies to yield richer descriptions of the semiotic resources that underlie the apparent simplicity of such play.

Conclusion: Therapy, community health, and pedagogic implications of Masekitlana

Though this paper has focused upon theorising a monologic variety of the Pedi children's fantasy play, one that may also be played in other African ethnic groups, there are practical social benefits, not only for its use in psychotherapy as shown by Kekae-Moletsane and her team, but also for community-initiated early childhood development in local contexts.

Play researchers within the CHAT paradigm who identify a role for youth is summarised by Berk and Winsler (1995:78) as follows:

> Older siblings and cousins serving as first playmates and also as caregivers while mothers tend to new babies or work responsibilities.

Such a role is in harmony with the African 'family', where siblings play a major care-giving role.

However, there is a need to go beyond both therapy and individual household care to recognising the youth as cultural preservers of the heritage of children's play for the well- being and happiness of young children. Reynolds, like Berk, argues for an "implicit pedagogy" that she draws from the political struggle of the youth in forging their identity in a South Africa in transition:

> Many young people in southern Africa rejected the established order imposed by undemocratic governments, and in doing so they had to stand against much of the order represented by parents and other authorities at the local level. *They drew on material and symbolic means* in rejecting the definition of the real imposed on them (our emphasis).

> The political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly and very early ... What is "remembered" in the body is well remembered (Reynolds 2005:97).

The convictions of these scholars in the power of the youth echo the belief of this paper: the memory of youth of their own childhood, recovered through body-notes of enactments, will enable them to be re-membered back into their communities. Re-membering through remembering will enable youth to restore more fully the mythic culture of children by creating new zones of proximal development for the child's existing spontaneous play, which to recall Vygotsky, has within it the maturing "buds or flowers of development" (Veresov 2004:1, citing Vygotsky) Here play, as Vygotsky (in Bruner et al 1985:552) put it so well, enables the child to "jump above the level of his normal behaviour".

For formal schooling, both preschool and primary school, the role of older peers in being 'scaffolders' for young children is argued as the best route by play researchers (see Berk & Winsler, 1995; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007).

> Older siblings from some ethnic-minority families may be particularly adept at such scaffolding … in classrooms with a multicultural mix of children (Berk & Winsler 1995:79).

The relevance of play forms such as Masekitlana as a resource that can be used by African children to teach children in South African urban schools from dominant language groups such as English and Afrikaans should be obvious. However, for schooling purposes, play needs to be developed within the concept of the "double move" that Hedegaard puts forward based on Davydov's ideas on "theoretical thought" (1990:249). Davydov extends Vygotsky's educational theory (1987:212) that the everyday knowledge of the child must be connected with scientific, theoretical knowledge, and that instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development. One way for doing this, as already suggested, is to extend spontaneous play through older children serving as models. Additionally, we suggest that classrooms be used as sites to implement what Fleer and Quinones (2009:86) "term children as researchers", where the children are required to study, as ethnographers, the generic features of their own play.

If fantasy play is 'a child's work', as Paley (2004) puts it in the title of her famous book *A child's work: The importance of fantasy play*, then schools must both continue and extend play, through advanced storytelling and child-friendly research.

Acknowledgements

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