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We're playing *Jeremy Kyle'*! Television talk shows in the playground

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This paper focuses on an episode of play in a primary school playground in England, which featured a group of children re-enacting elements of the television talk show *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. The episode is analysed in the light of work that has identified the key elements of the talk show genre and the children's play is examined in relation to conceptualisations of talk shows as cruelty-verité, carnivalesque spectacle and vehicles of social class anxiety. The paper explores the children's playful re-enactment not only as a parody of adult worlds, but also as a confirmation of the 'ordinariness' of everyday life. It is argued that in episodes such as these, the functions of play are multiple and complex, but include a desire to construct collective moral sensibilities and reinforce normative discourses relating to sexuality and what it means to be a 'good citizen'. The paper identifies spaces of continuity and discontinuity in such traditions and suggests that in play which draws from contemporary media we see the reconstruction of traditional play themes, but can also trace newer elements that are closely related to the generic conventions of reality television.

Keywords: play; reality television; playgrounds; media culture; social class

This paper focuses on an episode of play in a primary school playground in England in which a group of children aged 9 to 11 years enacted an episode of *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. This is a daytime UK television talk show, aired since 2005. The programme is typical of confrontational talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show*, which originated in the USA, and features participants who discuss controversial or taboo topics and attempt to resolve problems in their lives in a public forum. In the paper, we consider the role of such programmes in children's play and reflect on the longstanding nature of play of this kind in children's cultural practices.

The episode occurred during a two-year ethnographic study of children's playground games and rhymes focused on two primary schools, one in Sheffield and the other in London (see Willett, Richards, Marsh, Burn, & Bishop, in press). The play episode featured here occurred in the Sheffield school. The overall project aims were to identify children's playground games and rhymes in the new media age and to explore the way in which such games and rhymes are rooted within traditional childlore. A key finding of the project was that playgrounds are sites for the reproduction of many traditional forms, such as clapping games and rhymes, but that children's play is also shaped by the rich media world in which they are immersed, which leads to new and innovative forms of play (Burn et al., 2011). One of the innovative forms of play identified in the project was play based on reality and interactive television, which is the focus of this paper.

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Media informs playground activities in a number of ways. Children use and adapt aspects of media in their play, such as characters and storylines from television programmes and computer games (Griffiths & Machin, 2003; Palmer, 1986); they parody advertisements and programmes (Grugeon, 2004) and draw on language taken from media in rhymes and songs (Grugeon, 2005). Kathryn Marsh (2008) offers a detailed account of the way in which the media informs the lore of the playground. She emphasises the way in which the 'parody songs and related parodic movements aptly represent children's subversion of adult culture in their play' (Marsh, 2008, p. 171) and suggests that these activities serve to mock adult culture and concerns.

Inevitably, much of children's playground lore is transgressive, scatological and carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) in nature, with references to sex, body parts, toilet rituals and so on. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that a number of cultural theorists look to this realm of play with traces of nostalgia and regret for what they perceive has been lost, that is, childhood innocence (Postman, 1982; Winn, 1981). Frequently, play which focuses on the creation and replication of rhymes and games, perceived to be located within a 'traditional' model of childhood, is contrasted with play that draws from media, yet, these forms of play are intertwined. Inevitably, our ethnographic study of playgrounds found that all forms of media inflected children's play, including new media, such as computer games and online virtual worlds (Willett et al., in press). In this paper, we focus on the influence of television on children's playground activities.

Television is a key source of entertainment for young children. In a survey of children and young people's media use in the UK, children aged 5–7 years reported viewing TV for 16 hours per week, children aged 8–11 years watched for 15.7 hours per week, and young people aged 12–15 years watched for 17.3 hours per week (The Office of Communications [OFCOM], 2012). Television plays a central role in children's cultural lives, serving as a source of conversation and a means of expressing identity (Buckingham, 1993). There is a long history of scholarship which has demonstrated the significance of television in children's imaginative play (Götz, Lemish, Aidman, & Moon, 2005; Palmer, 1986; Singer & Singer, 2005; van der Voort & Valkenburg, 1994). It is inevitable, therefore, that television should be a key source for children's playground activities. The way in which particular genres of television programmes impact upon children's play has been less well examined, however, and, in particular, the relationship between what can be broadly categorised as 'reality TV' and children's play is relatively unexplored.

The talk show genre

Reality television generally features unscripted performances from members of the general public and takes many forms, such as game shows, voyeuristic 'fly-on the wall' shows (e.g. *Big Brother*) and self-improvement/makeover programmes. Talk shows such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* can be included within the broad category of reality TV programming. Talk shows span a wide-range of types, from the relatively benign form which focuses on interviews with celebrities and 'real-life' heroes (such as *Oprah*), to programmes such as *The Jerry Springer Show*, often cast as 'trash TV', which involves a series of members of the general public outlining their problems to a studio and TV audience. The subject matter of the problems that participants bring

to the screen normally include sexual infidelity, criminal misdemeanours, drug addiction and physical, emotional, sexual abuse. Guests of these shows are frequently challenged in the studio by the people they refer to in their 'stories', such as ex-partners or estranged family members. The show hosts often use lie detector or DNA tests on guests in order to attempt to present a 'true' picture of a specific situation, and the participants are confronted with the outcomes of these tests on the show. The effect is a kind of people's court in which there is a victim, accused, and supporting witnesses, with the show's host taking evidence from both sides and using the mechanisms of the 'lie detector' and DNA test to unmask the villain. We, as the audience, are drawn into establishing the 'truth' of a situation and the formation of judgements as to who is to blame. The show's host is almost literally a judge who, in pointing fingers and offering scathing judgements, accuses people of wrongdoing.

These shows also contain elements of pantomime, such as the use of bouncers to break up fights, which frequently erupt between participants. Audience members engage in the programmes by booing guests, shouting out comments of a condemnatory nature or cheering on the host as he/she challenges the guests. The show hosts also elicit the views of the audience on the behaviour of the guests. Epstein and Steinberg (2003, p. 100) suggest that these programmes can be viewed as a form of cruelty-verité:

> It is not simply the notion that what we are viewing is 'real', but the particular slice of 'reality' on offer that constitutes the show's risqué appeal as well as its evidentiary plausibility. The point is that it is a performance not only of instantly recognizable, but of deliberately exaggerated tropes of racialized, sexualised and classed depravity. In turn, its currency as cruelty-verité – a mimetic artifact of a 'candid camera' – reassures us that the 'trash' we see is truly trash. (Epstein & Steinberg, 2003, p. 100)

The programmes embed a particular representation of people from low socio-economic groups, which is normally one featuring immorality and depravity. In recent years in the UK, the use of the term 'chav' has been used to present a contemptuous account of white, working-class men and women and it is this scornful representation of class which features on popular talk shows. Media texts such as these become, in effect, 'class pantomimes' in which '"the chav", a vicious and grotesque representation of the undeserving poor, is a stock character' (Tyler & Bennett, 2010, p. 381). There is, in these talk shows, a pervasive discourse in which middle-class values are promoted as desirable. Skeggs (2009, p. 640), in an analysis of reality television programmes, argues that the genre is a space in which, 'attempts to universalise the particular, to place, contain and devalue working-class people and culture, where attempts to make the middle-class particular universal and normative' are widespread.

The level of spectacle and theatre involved in such programmes is one highlighted by Tolson (2001), who outlines their carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) nature. The melodramatic performances of some of the guests and the active participation of the audience in terms of their condemnation of the participants all contribute to the sense that these shows perform something of the role that bawdy carnival, fair entertainment and public punishments had in medieval England.

The final point to be made here is that talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show* offer moral judgements on participants' actions and characters and attempt to

construct a set of normative values for contemporary society (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). *The Jerry Springer Show* closes with Jerry highlighting his 'thought for the day', which frequently consists of a trite ethical maxim. The attraction for young children of these programmes might, therefore, be identified in terms of their theatrical and episodic nature and the sense of moral closure on complex social issues.

There is little information on the extent to which young children watch these programmes. Zilmann and Vorderer (2000) suggest that fewer than 5% of 3–13-year-olds watch talk shows, but this study is now 12 years old and based on data from Germany. Given the proliferation of such programmes on satellite and cable television in the UK over recent years, one could assume that this figure is now larger. This raises issues relating to the appropriateness of the content of such shows for child viewers. Kelley, Buckingham, and Davies (1999) suggest, however, that whilst television is frequently blamed for raising children's awareness of sexual attitudes and behaviour at too early a stage, children themselves make sense of such content discursively and have a complex relationship with the material they view, using it both to construct nuanced identity positions and reproduce traditional gender and heteronormative roles. Furthermore, there are also problems with categorizing such shows as 'adult' and, therefore, not suitable for viewing by children. Davies, Buckingham, and Kelley (2000) point out that adulthood, like childhood, is a construct and the boundaries can be blurred when tracing television choices.

Pretend play in the playground

Pretend play has long been identified as a staple of playground play. The Opies include various kinds of pretend play in their landmark publications on children's play and games in the UK (Opie & Opie, 1959, 1969, 1997). They distinguish between acting games (with more or less set dialogue), also noted by the nineteenth-century folklorist, Alice Gomme (1894/1898), and pretending games in which children 'make-believe they are other people, or in other situations, and extemporize accordingly' (Opie & Opie, 1969, p. xxv). However, pretend play is notable by its almost complete absence from discussion in two more recent folkloristic texts on children's play (Bronner, 1988; Tucker, 2008). The focus in this paper is on play which draws heavily on the scripts of a talk show.

Pretend play takes many forms and the term can incorporate play which is dramatic in nature, that is, taking the form of a theatrical performance, although the participants do not perform from a script. Such play can embed one of the principles of dramatic engagement, as identified by Dunn (2010), namely the act of participants co-constructing a shared dramatic world whilst being aware of themselves and the 'real' world. This was one form of play alongside many other instances of pretend play captured in the ethnographic data. Much of this play drew on media, the recognition of which has a long history in children's folklore scholarship. The Opies held a rather reductive view of children's pretend play, but did note that they drew on media in this play:

> . . . their pretending games turn out to be little more than reflections (often distorted reflections) of how they themselves live, and of how their mothers and fathers live, and

> of the books they read, and the TV programmes they watch. Whatever has latest caught their fancy is tested on their perpetual stage. (Opie & Opie, 1969, pp. 330–331)

The role of media in children's pretend play has also been identified by Grugeon (2004, 2005), who points to the way in which children include the language and lore of media texts in their imaginative and fantasy play. In this paper, we explore the way in which children engage in dramatic play in the playground, dramatic play that draws heavily on reality television in terms of its scripts and characters.

Methodology

The data discussed in this paper arose in an ethnographic study of a primary playground in a school in Sheffield, Monteney Primary School. This was one of two schools involved in a large-scale project studying playground rhymes and games in a new media age. The data collection took place over two years. The school was located in an area of both public and private housing on an ex-public housing estate and the children came largely from white, working-class families. The area is one of socio-economic deprivation. Children aged from 5 to 11 years were involved in the study.

The authors were involved in observations of playground play, using written field notes, digital video cameras, still cameras and digital audio recording equipment. The second author, Julia, visited the school on a weekly basis, and filmed extensive episodes of playground play. She filmed the episode focused upon in this paper. The episode took place during lunchtime and was one of several that had occurred over time focused on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. Children were filmed playing *The Jeremy Kyle Show* on three occasions, and Julia watched a play episode of this nature once without filming it. All of the play episodes were similar in terms of their adaptation of melodramatic storylines from *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and a core group of children were involved in all of the episodes, joined by others for specific episodes. The episode selected for this paper was chosen because it offered a clear structure, from the opening to the closing of the show. This enabled a full analysis of the way in which the play episode contained features of the talk show genre.

All parents of children in the school were invited to give their informed consent for participation in the project. Additional consent was gained to share the video data in public spaces. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study, as the complexities of studying children's play were recognised. It was accepted that children might not want to offer full information about their play to the adult researchers. Children were involved as active participants in the project and collected data through the use of digital video cameras, digital voice recorders and notebooks. A Children's Panel was set up, which was involved in the ongoing management of the project. There were 24 members of the Children's Panel at Monteney. The children were not involved in the collection of the data which is discussed here.

The episode which is considered in this paper (MPJB2009-07-09v00046[1]) involved 10 children, one boy and nine girls, from the Year 5 and 6 classes (children aged 9–11 years). These children had previously played *The Jeremy Kyle Show* together. Joe, an 11-year-old boy, was the instigator of this play and he always played the part of Jeremy Kyle. The episode focused on in this paper was 5 minutes and 13 seconds long. It consisted of a build-up to the play, in which the roles were assigned. It is not clear to what extent the children assigned themselves roles through

negotiation. At one point in the video data Joe appears to assign the roles of mothers to two of the girls, but there had been a previous discussion between the group, which was not clearly heard, and this may have involved more independence in terms of roles assigned. Five girls became the audience for the show and sat on one wall, which formed the side of a covered quadrangle. Four girls were the characters in the show and these children sat on a second wall. The episode included Joe coming onto the 'stage' (in the middle of the quadrangle) and introducing the characters one-by-one. He then participated in a question and answer style interaction with the characters, as the audience participated with boos, claps and cheers. Inevitably, the children were aware of Julia filming the episode and it may be the case that they performed in particular ways because of the context, which will have heightened the sense of this being a media-related event. It was the case, however, that the pattern of the play was similar to the episode when Julia had watched the children without filming them.

Following the selection of the film for analysis, children who featured in the episode were invited to discuss their participation in the course of semi-structured interviews. Some of the children who had been in Year 6 (aged 10 and 11 years) at the time of filming subsequently left the school to attend secondary schools, but their parents were contacted by telephone and their children invited to participate in the interviews. Three parents agreed that their child could participate, but only one of these children was interviewed because other arrangements for home visits did not work out, as families were not at home at the pre-arranged times. Joe was visited in the home by the first author, Jackie, and took part in a semi-structured interview in the presence of his mother. This interview was constrained, in that Joe appeared uncomfortable at times discussing his participation in the play episode in front of his mother. Jackie, therefore, did not extend the interview through the use of probing and supplementary questions. Joe was also interviewed with some of the girls who had appeared in the episode with him; this interview took place at school. In addition, two girls who were in Year 5 (ages 9 and 10 years) at the time of the episode were interviewed together in the school library during a lesson period (with the agreement of their teacher). These interviews were much more comfortable and the children were expansive in their responses to questions.

We watched an episode of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and made a list of its distinctive features. The video data were analysed in order to identify how many of the features appeared in the children's play and how they were incorporated into the play. The data analysis then involved a close scrutiny of the video data and the interview data from three children in the light of the research questions. The research questions that informed this analysis were:

(1) What are the features of children's replaying of a reality TV talk show?
(2) What are children's views on the purposes and significance of this type of play?
(3) What are the implications of this analysis for the study of children's play?

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the data was undertaken. The data were viewed and read a number of times and an initial set of codes was developed. These codes were: talk show generic form; copy; postural intertextuality (Taylor, 2011); parody; sex; hegemonic masculinity; emphasised femininity; physical

dominance; 'real' life reference; capital; ethics, morality, structure/s, agency, transgression, creativity, empathy and reflection. The codes then informed the analysis of the data at the broader level of themes, which drew together clusters of codes.

The themes which emerged were: (1) play and reality television (incorporating the codes 'talk show generic form', 'parody' and 'postural intertextuality'); (2) play and social class (incorporating the codes ''real' life reference'; 'capital'); (3) play, gender and sexuality (incorporating the codes 'hegemonic masculinity', 'emphasised femininity', 'sex', 'physical dominance'); (4) play and power (incorporating the codes 'physical dominance', 'structure/s' and 'agency'); (5) play as therapeutic (incorporating the codes: 'empathy'; 'real life reference'); (6) play as constructing ethical selves (incorporating the codes: 'ethics', 'morality'). Themes (1–4) relate to the first research question and themes, (5) and (6) to the second research question. There is insufficient space here to discuss all of these themes. In this paper, we focus on a discussion of themes: (1) playing reality television, (2) play and social class, (5) play as therapeutic and (6) play as constructing ethical selves, as these have been discussed less extensively in the play literature than the themes of gender and power (see Blaise, 2005; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

Playing reality television

In play, children imitate and parody the adult world around them (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In the play episode featured here, the children demonstrated that they had a good understanding of how talk shows such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* were structured. Many of the generic features of such programmes could be identified in the play. For example, in *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, guests sit in a backstage area until they are called in by Jeremy Kyle to the studio, a strategy which builds dramatic tension. In the children's play, Joe directed four of the girls, who were the guests on the show, to sit on a side wall, which was designated the backstage. They were then called on to the 'frontstage' in turn in order to tell their stories, in a manner which replicated the style of the show. The audience of girls, who sat on another wall in the quadrangle, cheered loudly as each guest appeared, as happens on the programme. Joe then sat to the side of the girls as he questioned them, imitating closely the source media text. Joe knelt down to pose a question to the girls, just as Jeremy Kyle does frequently in his studio, demonstrating what Taylor (2011) terms 'postural intertextuality', that is, when postures from one context are used in another. It is frequently the case that children will adopt postures observed in popular cultural/media texts in their play. Joe raised his voice in an accusatory fashion when interrogating his guests and then watched as they began arguing with each other, again a recurrent theme of *The Jeremy Kyle Show.* Stock features of the show, such as drug tests, appeared in the children's play. Through these patterns, the children demonstrated familiarity with the generic conventions of these types of talk shows and, in particular, *The Jeremy Kyle Show.*

The dialogue in the play closely resembled dialogic patterns in the programme, as in this excerpt when Joe interviewed the 'mothers' of the errant girls:

Joe: Right, so what's gone off then?
Girl 1: Well, our daughters are taking drugs which is terribly disgusting.

Joe: [To other mum] Is that right?
Girl 2: Yeah. And both are pregnant.
Joe: Both of them are pregnant. How old are they?
Girl 1: They're 22, Jeremy.
Joe: What, they're on drugs and they're pregnant?

The moralistic tone adopted in the final sentence was delivered in the style of Jeremy Kyle and can be considered parodic in nature. Willett (2009) argues that the difference between parody and homage is that in the process of homage, the creator of an imitation text intends to treat the original with respect; in spoof or parody, a greater distance exists between the original text and the imitation and this leads to satire. The replaying of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* in this playground moved along this continuum, with the children displaying both an appreciation of the original text and intention to create a spoof. Sharon and Amy, two of the audience members in this episode, articulated this position:

Jackie: So is it serious playing, or were you making fun of the programme?
Sharon: Serious.
Amy: Yeah, it's serious, but . . .
Sharon: It's like middle; seriously in bits of it but also we were having a joke around at the same time. (MPJB2010-05-20a001132)

The spoof-like nature of the play emerged throughout the episode. For example, at one point the children in the audience begin to chant in imitation of the studio audience on the television programme, as Joe accused the 'drug-taking pregnant young women':

Joe: You're 22, you're on drugs. You're both 22. What do you think you are?
Audience: Well done, Jeremy! [Chanting] Jeremy, Jeremy!

Drawn to the theatricality inherent within these talk shows, the children gravitated to the more melodramatic elements, such as the lie detector and drugs tests.

Girl 3 [Pregnant mother]: Jeremy, I'm trying to stop but I can't.
Joe: Right, we'll have the lie detector test and see if you come off the drugs. Let's have the lie detector, please.
Joe: Cheney Wood has been on drugs since she was ten. Sit down then.
Girl 3: I've been on drugs since I was five . . . tried to stop.
Joe: Could we have drug test, please? [Pause as Joe 'reads' the results] . . . You were on drugs!

At the close of the play episode, Joe has the last word on the matter at hand, just as Jeremy does on screen:

Girl 1 [Mother]: I think it's absolutely atrocious.
Joe: So do I. That's it for today. Goodbye.

Throughout the play episode, therefore, the children could be seen to be drawing directly on the generic conventions of the talk show in their play. They were familiar with the programme, and members of the group informed us that they watched the

programme with their parents when they were off sick from school, some of the children insisting that their parents and grandparents were 'addicted' to *The Jeremy Kyle Show*.

The children's familiarity with the programme enabled them to construct a shared play practice around it, which also served to strengthen friendship groups. The use of parody and humour facilitated the expression of enjoyment of the programme and also suggested that the group could adopt a critical distance from it. It may be the case that children are attracted to these reality TV programmes in their play because they offer safe and predictable, strong dramatic scripts (Dunn, 2010; personal communication 2009).

For much of the play, the children drew on the kinds of exchanges they had witnessed on screen. This play did not require much improvisation, yet, allowed participants to enjoy dramatic tension. Some commentators might suggest that this type of play does not offer much in the way of opportunities for creativity and transformative play. One reading of these data is that the children are engaging in mere replication of the cultural scripts embedded in reality TV programmes. Here we have a situation in which the only male in the game berates females in an aggressive and bullying manner, and strongly directs their play. This, of course, is the case, but is also clear that this play offers the girls opportunities to adopt transgressive identities that challenge what girls of this age should know about and do (i.e. drugs, sex and pregnancy). This is not to suggest that the identities offered in the reality TV programmes are ones which create spaces for agency and power; the issues faced by young pregnant women who are drug users are challenging, to say the least. Nevertheless, these are taboo identities for primary school girls, and adopting them may allow a frisson of danger and defiance. Such play also fosters a sense of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984), in which cultural norms and traditions can be held up for question and ridiculed in practices that draw on humour and melodrama. This is a play episode that reflects something of the 'dark play' referred to by Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 57), play which challenges romanticised notions of an innocent, asexual childhood (see also Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

This episode of play demonstrated, therefore, both replication and transformation of the reality television generic form. Familiar tropes, such as harsh judgements made about the morals of individuals, could be seen, alongside rather two-dimensional representations of stock characters. These aspects of the play served to reinforce traditional values and normative judgements made about using drugs in pregnancy. At the same time, the children were able to engage in the play in a way which enabled contestation of these norms. Some participants were able to take up subject positions not normally available to them and this enabled them to challenge adult expectations about what kind of play children should engage in as well as empathise with those who are often seen as social outcasts.

Play and social class

The Jeremy Kyle Show does not deal with problems that are alien to the lives of these working-class children. Sharon and Amy suggested that the show portrayed 'real life' problems:

Jackie: So the kind of things that they talk about, I mean, do you think that they're real?
Amy: They're real problems.
Jackie: Are they? How do you know they are real problems?
Sharon: Yeah, because . . .
Amy: Because like there's another TV programme . . . go on, you can talk about it.
Sharon: Yeah, because, like, if you've like got a baby or something and then, like, you smoke, it will harm the baby and they won't have no life because they'll . . .
Amy: And also I watch this thing called 'Cops on Camera'.
Jackie: Oh right, OK.
Sharon: And that's, like, saying about people who shouldn't be taking drugs with babies. And then we're, like, with all these because there is people on drugs in the world and there is people who are pregnant.
Jackie: Teenagers who are pregnant. Do you know anybody on these estates like that?
Amy: Yeah.
Jackie: You do?
Amy: Do you know, there's somebody in the audience called Kate, her best mate's sister is 16 and she's pregnant. (MPJB2010-05-20a001132)

The class dynamics that Tyler and Bennett (2010) and Skeggs (2009) highlight as a feature of these talk shows did not arise in conversations with the children. There was no sense in which the children distanced themselves from the cultural milieu depicted in the programme. The audience in the play episode expressed disapproval of the girls, but this was due to a moral stance taken in relation to issues of drug-taking and pregnancy, not because of any sense of class superiority. As children living in a largely white, working-class community, the people featured on *The Jeremy Kyle Show* were not identifiable as different in any way in socio-economic terms from the children themselves – they were people the children could recognise, albeit if they did not always see themselves as sharing the same moral values. Indeed, Joe revealed that one of his family members, an uncle, had been a guest on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. The programme was, therefore, familiar in terms of the social and cultural identities encountered and embodied in the children's everyday lives.

Skeggs and Wood's (2008) research on women's responses to reality TV demonstrates how members of working-class communities resist the attempts by producers to denigrate working-class values as the viewers make judgements about the participants, judgements which embody an element of care and connect the participants to their own lives. Skeggs and Wood contrast this to the textual analysis they undertook of reality TV programmes, which offered a rather depressing picture of social class identities. They suggest that:

> Against the almost wholesale denigration of the working class on reality television, always in need of transformation, our viewers see something quite different. Our textual analysis produced severe pessimism of the intellect; our empirical analysis provides optimism for the will. (Skeggs & Wood, 2008, p. 569)

Similarly, the data from Monteney playground suggest that, for these working-class children, playing *The Jeremy Kyle Show* was not a means to denigrate or deny their social class identities, but provided an opportunity to draw on the textual resources available to them in ways which enabled meaningful connections to their own lives.

Play as therapeutic/play as constructing ethical selves

Exploring matters relating to drugs and pregnancy, which lie within the realm of the children's experiences even if they are too young to be mothers themselves, enabled the children to think about moral issues that are present within their communities. The children believed that these programmes offered them valuable lessons on life:

> Jackie: So what would you say to people who said, 'Oh well, you shouldn't be watching these programmes because you're still at primary school and these are on about really difficult . . .'
> Amy: . . . Because we need, like . . .
> Sharon: . . . My mum says if you know what people do in life, you know how to talk if they're having drugs and that lot, and, like, act and that lot.
> Amy: And you know, like, for when you're older what not to do, what to do. And watching it, like, just gives you, like, and real viewing of life, like, 'Why would you go on drugs, why would you do this?' and it just gives us, like, a shock type . . . of not doing it. (MPJB2010-05-20a001132)

Such play, therefore, offers almost a therapeutic role, a means of exploring difficult issues in a safe environment. Children can metaphorically 'play with fire' and not get their hands burnt. Through this kind of play, children frequently explore moral issues and construct ethical frameworks. Indeed, Edmiston (2007) suggests that in play, ethical identities are formed:

> When people play together as they make meaning they can co-author possible selves and over time possible ethical identities. Along with the deeds of their everyday selves, the actions of the possible selves that children (and adults) explore in pretend play create the fabric of their identities. And when children are answerable for their imagined actions they are forming their ethical identities. (Edmiston, 2007, p. 22)

The notion of play as offering the potential to explore 'possible selves' is one that has long been recognised within the scholarship of play and development (e.g. Bruner, 1987). In the talk show play, children were able to take on identities that were outside of their own personal experiences, but they felt able to 'get inside' these characters. Sharon was one of the audience members in this play episode, but she had played the role of a daughter who had been raped in a previous play episode based on the show:

> . . . when you was acting out you could actually feel it. When you got into character properly it made you feel like it did happen to you and it made you realise what it's like. When you were looking at the other people and you could see how devastated they were and stuff like that, because it was acting, it could make you feel like you was in that position as, like, a kid who that had happened to. (MPJB2010-05-20a001132)

In *The Jeremy Kyle Show* play episode, we can discern the desire to establish a universe in which certainty regarding right and wrong is established and, in this way, the children continue long-established traditions of play in which moral values are at the heart of their pretending: goodies and baddies, superheroes, witches – these scenarios all offer opportunities to explore the concepts of good and bad and/or right and wrong. What is different in play episodes based on contemporary reality TV is that classed identities become part of the frame. The material for this play does not

lie entirely within the realm of fantasy, but is borne out of the material world of contemporary childhoods, in which drugs, pregnancy and sexual abuse are part of the everyday fabric of society.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined one play episode in a primary playground that was based on reality TV. Returning to the first of the research questions relating to the features of this type of play, we have identified that they included both replication and transformation of the source text. It was not the only instance of play related to *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, nor was it the only example of play related to reality TV. The children also played games based on *Britain's Got Talent*, *X Factor* and the mock-trial programme, *Guilty*. In all cases, the children built on the familiar structures of these programmes in order to create new and innovative texts and performances.

In relation to the second of the research questions, children's views on the purposes and significance of this type of play, the data indicate that the children felt that it allowed them to engage in reflection on serious issues which affect society. In this sense, such play continues in a long tradition of pretend play within playgrounds that draws on media texts, mentioned by the Opies in the 1960s. We would suggest that the contribution this study makes to the literature on play is that it identifies how reality TV programmes can provide opportunities for play which connects to children's everyday lives and social class identities and enables them to reflect on significant moral themes that are embedded in the experiences of their communities.

The analysis of this episode of play raises a number of implications, related to the third of our research questions. The first is that this kind of play should be recognised as offering a space in which children can be children, whilst also enabling them to rehearse some of the key issues that affect young people and adults in the communities in which they live. One of the attractions of this type of play could be its potential to enable children to occupy two worlds: the world of childhood and the realities of everyday adult life. The notion of simultaneity is one that has long been recognised by researchers who study drama. In particular, the concept of 'metaxis' is one that could apply in this context. Metaxis is 'the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds' (Boal, 1995, p. 43). As the actor adopting an alternative identity onstage, one is both the player and the played. Similarly, metaxis was at the heart of the children's replaying of *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. Playing the show under a canopy that was in full view of the rest of the playground ensured that the children could not forget that they belonged to the world of this primary school. At the same time, they could occupy adult worlds in which problems such as individuals drug-taking whilst pregnant had to be dealt with. The play was a self-conscious, wilful act (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 198). Dunn (2010) contends that this kind of double-consciousness is important in dramatic engagement, a process in which participants willingly suspend disbelief whilst creating connections between what is going on and what is happening either within or beyond the dramatic moment. We do not wish to make a clear distinction here between dramatic play and pretend play; we would suggest that the former is closely related to the latter and the difference between them is more a matter of the degree of metaxis present within any play episode. The more conscious the players are of the relationship of their play episode to ideas in the actual world, the more play moves

from fantasy play to dramatic play. Such an analysis can move us away from a reductive reading of this play episode, which could position children as passive dupes of a particular television trope that sets up a specific set of classed (and sometimes gendered, raced and sexualised) subjects for condemnation and ridicule. Whilst this may certainly operate as one dimension of this genre, there are other aspects of this play that point to more complex understandings at work, such as the challenges faced by members of the community who take drugs.

A second implication is that this analysis points to the way in which play based on reality TV can be seen as fostering dramatic engagement and enabling children approaching their teen years to use such play as a means to explore issues that they anticipate might face them as teenagers and young adults. There is a need for further research into the role of play in the middle years of childhood (Willett, in press), as it might be the case that dramatic play is an attractive vehicle for the promotion and management of play that draws on adult themes, play which may inform the construction of pre-teens' understanding about issues relating to family, sexuality and anti-social behaviour. Such research needs to acknowledge as a starting point the way in which programmes such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* can offer material for older children as they grapple with key discourses of morality in their own lives and the lives of people in their communities.

Third, this study points to the need to take seriously the relationship between social class and play. Our analysis has been undertaken in recognition of the fact that talk shows such as the one featured here do operate as cruelty-verité (Epstein & Steinberg, 2003, p. 100) and carnivalesque spectacle (Tolson, 2001). We acknowledge the anxieties that some educators may feel in relation to this kind of play because of these features. In some cases, however, these concerns may reflect the fact that this kind of reality TV show can function as a vehicle of social class anxiety (Gamson, 1999) given the emphasis on 'class pantomime' (Tyler & Bennett, 2010) as a form of media entertainment. These programmes are, quite simply, worlds away from the daily realities of many teachers; we make the case that they may be closer to the worlds of some of the children those teachers work with and, as such, this kind of play deserves greater attention than many may wish to give it on first encounter.

Finally, the features of the play highlighted here bear similarity to more traditional types of play. Children have always been attracted to play which enables them to explore ethical and moral issues and question adult-imposed rules and regulations and the play frames used within the *The Jeremy Kyle Show* episode are ones which can be traced to older generic forms. The construction of these play frames may differ according to the context of the play, with less structured play enabling a more discursive and less constrained exploration of complex issues and facilitating the adoption of a wider repertoire of subject identities, but the fundamental desire to make sense of the world, to spin 'webs of significance' (Geertz, 1973) through such playful activity, remains fundamentally the same. Play based on talk shows or reality TV is not to be dismissed or derided, but needs to be taken seriously as part of a long tradition in which play offers children a means of coming to terms with their complex, and often challenging, social and cultural contexts.

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Note

1. This and similar numbers related to excerpts from transcripts refers to the file name of the original data, which are stored at the British Library for researchers to access.

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