The culture of the school playground
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sequence of illustrations. There is also the problem of the degree of match or concordance between the text and its accompanying illustrations.

Each of these questions was illustrated in the lecture by slides of pictures taken from children's books and examples of the responses children made to them. Despite unusual styles of representation most five year old children were able to identify most of the pictures in their books but there were some important exceptions to this rule. For example in a book about the Circus a drawing on one page shows a cannon firing and on the opposite page a man landing in a net. Few children were able to identify this sequence correctly nor were they able to grasp the trajectory of the man shot from the cannon.

Most groups of children accepted and assimilated the correct interpretation of such pictures as soon as it was given. Often, if a group did not perceive the meaning of an illustration at once, further questioning about particular aspects of the picture brought answers from one or another member of the group which, in turn, brought about a rapid re-interpretation of the picture.

Some pictures in children's books contain important information which is not mentioned in the text and conversely some significant information in the text finds no counterpart in the illustrations. Several examples of these inconsistencies were demonstrated by means of slides.

On the basis of such observations it seems that young children's interpretation of pictures cannot be looked upon in terms of an existing psychology of children's perception. In the first place the available psychology of children's picture perception is extremely limited in scope. And in the second place it is a very one sided way to try and account for the interpretation of pictures. The psychology of picture perception provides only one side of a process of communication between the adults who write the stories and paint the pictures and the children who listen to the stories and look at the pictures.

The most profitable contribution an educational psychologist can make is to show where communication is likely to go astray and where it can be enhanced.

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The culture of the school playground

The empirical data of my study consists of my own descriptions whispered into a portable dictaphone over about six months of playtimes during the three years, concerning what the children did and said to produce solutions to problems that they met. Initially my criteria for what to record as a problem were relatively loose; any « dispute or clash of wills or argument ». Later on I became more specific as to the type of episodes that I wanted to look out for; e.g., ones that included fights, threats, racist comments, arguments, teasing, nicknaming, bullying, ownership disputes, bargaining, methods of choosing roles and the problems presented to the playground supervisors. I was not just looking for aggressive behaviour at playtime, but rather situations which, if not managed skilfully, could lead to violence.
The analysis of episodes of disputes involved only a few concepts. The most fundamental is the distinction between an action and an act. An action is what a person intends, while the act is the way it is understood by the community. And the extent to which one's intentions are clearly understood by other delineates a dimension of solutions. At one extreme, the meaning of the action is clear; at the other the meaning of the action is open to a number of conflicting interpretations.

Those where the meaning of the action is clear can be called standard solutions. Whereas standard solutions to problems rely on appealing to conventional meanings, improvised solutions capitalise upon the possibility that the meaning of the action is not totally clear and hence open to conflicting interpretations. Children are either not clear about others' intentions two broad classes of improvised solutions — ones that in some way 'play about' with the meaning of the action and ones where knowledge of another person's goals provides a strategy to get them to do as you want. I shall discuss these in turn.

Solutions that play about with meaning rest on one more concept — that of the situation. I am referring to the fact that any action is played out against a scene that consists not only of the physical scenery but also of a crucial conceptual element which can be called the situation. Among children, two contrasting situational definitions are «pretend» and «real». Part of the initial action is directed towards defining the situation in a particular way, and once defined, each actor is more-or-less committed to toeing a certain line.

Other solutions aim to change the meaning of the action and do so by redefining either the situation, the actor or the act. And within these categories I have identified a number of specific techniques. If a child redefines the situation, then this automatically places his and others' actions within a different context and they take on a new meaning. If the new situational definition is one in which a person's actions' or intentions) are now automatically discounted then this manoeuvre can be called situational discounting.

Whereas situational discounting changes the scenery around the action in such a way as to automatically discount the action, a parallel technique is the redefine the person responsible for the action, and in this way to discount the action.

The playground as well as the preschool are both very important contexts in which to begin to appreciate that doing things together can be fun and children are eager to find a way in which they can cooperate. Whilst many succeed there are others who find this adjustment more difficult. They tend to get the selves repeatedly into almost identical situations in which they always react the same way. These children do not experiment like «normal» children in new games, new roles, new situations and new ways out of difficulties. They are, so to speak, «in a rut» and it is this limited quality of difficult children's behaviour which gives most cause for concern. It suggests that these children are constraing by their expectations of hostility from others and that they are unlikely to modify their behaviour of their own accord unless their expectations can be dispelled.