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SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

Conceptualizing repetitive features in children's dramatic play



ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the complexities of repetitive features in children's unstructured dramatic play, considering which dramaturgical concepts might be employed to approach and describe this phenomenon. Repetitive features in children's play culture are a well-known phenomenon in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

In this article, we are not concerned with whether repetitive features carry positive or negative value. Rather, our focus is on how we, as ECEC teachers and university lecturers or researchers, can approach, describe and discuss this feature of dramatic play.

We discuss and provide examples of various dramaturgical concepts that may enhance our understanding of the complexity of repetitive features in children's unstructured play. Our discussion is grounded in a hermeneutic approach to the dramaturgical analysis of a single play sequence, referred to as "Garage".

By analysing the repetitive features in "Garage" through our chosen methodological lens, we gained insights into how this particular play sequence unfolded, what its repetitive features were, and, more broadly, how repetitive features in children's dramatic play can be approached, conceptualised and discussed.

Introduction

In this article, we explore which concepts Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers, university lecturers, and researchers might employ when approaching and describing the complexities of repetitive features in children's dramatic play.

We use the term *dramatic play* to encompass all forms of play in which pretence is essential. The significance of pretence means that dramatic play unfolds within a framework of fiction—of imagination and make-believe. Both the children and the space and objects involved are transformed as they assume their fictional counterparts (Guss, 2015, pp. 30–31). For example, an actual chair may become a fictional car in dramatic play by being activated, referred to, and used as a car. In this article, we focus on what is known as *unstructured* dramatic play, that is, dramatic play initiated and sustained by the children themselves—on their own terms.

The phenomenon of interest here, the repetitive features in children's dramatic play, is one encountered in ECEC settings almost daily. A well-known example in Norway, at least, is the one Faith Gabrielle Guss recounts from a play sequence she witnessed while gathering data for her PhD in Theatre Studies.¹ The two children involved captured an imaginary wolf, which they then proceeded to kill (Guss, 2015, pp. 126–129). As the wolf kept coming back to life, it had to be killed repeatedly—by jumping on it. This activity was interspersed with moans from the wolf, an assortment of verbal taunts from the wolf-catchers, and comments on the proceedings made by the players—all voiced by the two girls taking on the different roles and functions (see Guss, 2015, pp. 130–138).

We have not found any previous studies *exclusively* devoted to the repetitive features of dramatic play, which is where our focus lies. We are thus addressing a knowledge gap. In previous Scandinavian studies of dramatic play, the occurrence of repetitive features in this kind of play has, as we understand it, mainly been assessed according to two tendencies: one is an understanding of this trait as an implication of monotonous play (see, for example, Nordbø, 2023). Another line of enquiry has focused on the value and importance of this trait for the children involved (see, e.g. Guss, 2017). The various contributors do not necessarily share the same understanding of 'play', nor do they have the same aim in their interest in children's dramatic play.

Our research question for this article is:

How can various dramaturgical concepts contribute to an increased understanding of the complexity of repetitive features in children's unstructured dramatic play?

Our interest lies in how we, as ECEC teachers and university lecturers/researchers, can approach and describe this feature of dramatic play. We are not interested in whether repetitive features in dramatic play carry positive or negative value for the playing children.

Our discussion is built on a hermeneutic approach to the dramaturgical analysis of one play sequence. The aim of this article is to expand knowledge of and competence with this aspect of children's dramatic play in ECEC settings. However, before we delve into our analysis and discussion, we will clarify our methodology regarding both data gathering and analysis.

Context of study: methodological approach

The play sequence we focus on in this article is part of the data material gathered by Strømsøe for her ongoing PhD project.² Strømsøe's fieldwork generated data material consisting of 12 hours of children's dramatic play, filmed in a Norwegian ECEC unit for four-year-olds. The data material was collected over a period of four months, with each observation lasting about an hour. The play sequences were filmed with a GoPro camera attached to the researcher's forehead.³ The filmed observations were supplemented by field notes. The play sequence, which we refer to as "Garage", lasted 40 minutes in total.

I am sitting in the corner of a room in the kindergarten watching two boys aged three and four. I have just had a chat with them about me being there, filming them while they play. I am now trying not to let my presence interfere too much with their doings. /.../ The boys lean over some chairs with wheels on them, while they investigate the ways these chairs can move. One of them says: "This is our cars, and that (he points to a large cubicle in the corner) is the garage". They then park their cars in the garage and build a wall out of small chairs, dividing the cubicle – aka the garage, into two rooms. They play with moving this wall back and forth inside the garage, making the two rooms bigger and smaller respectively. They then climb onto the seats of the small chairs, acting as a wall, to look over the roof, which is really a blanket on the top of the cubicle. They then lie down on the seats of the small chairs, transforming them into a

bed. They start crawling between the rooms under and through the row of small chairs. They take their cars out of the garage and drive around the room, before parking in the garage again. They start moving the wall back and forth, they check out the roof, they sleep on the bed, they move the wall... I am getting restless. The play happening in front of me makes little sense. (Strømsøe, extract from field-notes).

We have labelled this play-sequence “Garage”, as the activities in the play-sequence largely revolved around a cubicle transformed in play to a garage. This transformation of body, space and time to create imaginary worlds, beings and stories is a feature that dramatic play shares with the art of theatre (see Guss, 2015, pp. 40–41). In Norway, This has led to a scholarly approach to dramatic play through the prism of theatre studies, and more specifically, the field of dramaturgy (see for instance Gladsø et al., 2015, pp. 211–218; Guss, 2015; Gjervan, 2013).

Dramaturgy is, among other things, devoted to the scholarly study of the structure of plays and theatrical performances (see Gladsø et al., 2015, p. 18). In this article, we turn to this field when analysing and discussing the repetitive features of “Garage”, as well as when considering how to address these features. The lens of dramaturgical analysis, using dramaturgical concepts, is our chosen approach to studying repetitive features in dramatic play.

Additionally, we are indebted to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, both in our approach to the analysis and interpretation of the play-sequence in question and in our understanding of the phenomenon of play. Gadamer understood play as an activity without endpoint, moving back and forth between the players (Gadamer, 2010, p. 134). Furthermore, he regarded play as an essential expression of life, an aesthetic activity with intrinsic value for those who play in the here and now (see Øksnes, 2010, pp. 200–203).

Gadamer understood the production of new knowledge as a dialogue between text and subject, between the research object and researcher (Gadamer, 1976, p. 57). Along these lines, we perceive new understandings to arise in the dialogue between our presuppositions regarding dramaturgy, play and repetitive features, and what we understand to be happening in the play-sequence “Garage”. In the process of trying to understand the play-sequence and its repetitive features, our understanding *transforms* in this dialogic movement.

Thus, the dramaturgical analysis of “Garage” occurred in several hermeneutical laps, as the understanding produced by each round transformed our comprehension of “Garage”. Each round altered our presuppositions, pointing to the need for further rounds of analysis. This way of conducting a dramaturgical analysis—in laps—might appear to involve several false starts, yet each round contributed to the production of knowledge and a richer interpretation of a complex phenomenon. Central to this process of hermeneutical, dramaturgical analysis was the use of various dramaturgical concepts, such as climax, plot and structure, applied as analytical tools. The process of experimenting with different dramaturgical concepts and tools, in order to gain new understanding and conceptualise the complexities of repetitive features, lies at the heart of our article.

Repetitive features in “Garage”: dramaturgical analysis and findings

The play-sequence “Garage”, as outlined above, began with the two boys transforming their chairs with wheels into cars and then converting a cubicle into a garage. Later, some regular, small chairs were transformed, first into a dividing wall, then into a ladder, and finally into a bed. The subsequent actions that comprised the play-sequence included driving and parking, adjusting the size of the two rooms in the garage, crawling between the rooms, looking over the roof of the garage, and resting.

Searching for climax

Inspired by Guss’s research into unstructured dramatic play, our initial round of analysis focused on identifying the plot of the play-sequence. In Guss’s example with the wolf, the plot contained a clear conflict, and the climax was at the heart of the repetitive features in the play-sequence (see Guss 2017, pp. 160–175). Strømsøe found no obvious plot, conflict or climax in “Garage”. Attempting to analyse the repetitive features in this play-sequence using climax as a dramaturgical tool proved fruitless.

The dramaturgical concepts of plot, conflict and climax originate in an Aristotelian dramaturgy, where the plot progresses linearly towards the release of suspense at a high point. This was not the structure of “Garage”.

Research into the aesthetic forms of children’s play culture has highlighted the need for an alternative to the Aristotelian dramaturgical approach when describing how children’s unstructured dramatic play unfolds (see for example Gjervan 2013). However, although several

We identified a need for more varied analytical and conceptual tools to address the complexities of repetitive features, as a multifaceted phenomenon requires diversity in the concepts we use to capture and describe it.



play researchers agree on the necessity of including alternatives to Aristotelian dramaturgy, terminology rooted in Aristotelian concepts—such as plot and climax—is still used to describe dramatic play (see for example Guss 2017, pp. 160–175). In our view, the dramaturgical *structures* suggested in “Garage” clearly differ from the Aristotelian tradition, although the *concepts* we used in our initial round of analysis remained anchored in Aristotelian terminology. Thus, relying solely on these Aristotelian concepts to approach repetitive features in children’s dramatic play would do a disservice to a complex phenomenon. The Aristotelian dramaturgical tradition still dominates western storytelling and continues to shape our assumptions about both dramaturgical structure and the structure of children’s dramatic play. What, then, are the attributes of this dramaturgical tradition?

Our contemporary understanding of this dramaturgical tradition is not necessarily a form Aristotle himself would have recognized. Aristotle primarily described the structure and components of Greek tragedy (see Gladsø 2015, p. 25). His descriptive analysis of that genre subsequently became the foundation for centuries of normative discourse regarding the proper structure and content of the evolving face of tragedy, and later, other dramatic genres as well. Nevertheless, his name remains attached to a particular dramaturgical form, alternatively labelled as classical or Hollywood dramatic form (see Szatkowski 1992, p. 38).

According to Aristotle, tragedy is a dramatic form whose plot has a clear beginning, middle and end

(Aristotle 1974, p. 38). There is a single throughline of action in the plot, with each action leading to the next according to the logical principle of cause and effect (Aristotle 1974, p. 40). Furthermore, the action should unfold in a linear fashion, demonstrating the chain of cause and effect that propels the plot from its beginning to its end, in chronological order. Another hallmark of this form is that the sequence of events should produce a necessary and probable increase in suspense, in both the characters and the audience, as the consequences of the unfolding actions drive the plot towards its conclusion. The point in the plot where this suspense reaches its peak is what Aristotle termed *peripeteia*—a sudden reversal of fortune (Aristotle 1974, p. 40). This high point has also, much later in history, been understood and referred to as “climax” (see for instance Freytag 1974, p. 814).⁴

For a play-sequence in which the killing of a wolf is repeated (see above), the concept of climax proves useful. However, when considering the repetitive features of “Garage”, this concept offers little assistance. For play-sequences that are not structured according to classical western story structure, we must seek alternative dramaturgical concepts to enhance our understanding of repetition in children’s unstructured dramatic play. What, then, could serve as alternative analytical and conceptual approaches to this phenomenon?

Elements of dramatic fiction

As mentioned above, the transformation of body, space and time to create fiction is a feature that dramatic play shares with the art of theatre. In a Norwegian

educational context, these three – space, time and figure (rather than body) – as well as fable, have been regarded as the core elements of dramatic fiction since 1987 (see Grunnskolerådet 1988, p. 10). By employing these elements as analytical tools, one can determine **who** does **what**, **where** and **when** within a sequence of dramatic action or play. What insights might be gained by analysing “Garage” in terms of how these elements are used within the play-sequence?

“Garage” began as the two boys transformed their chairs with wheels into cars and then a cubicle into a garage. These transformations and uses of space and objects remained consistent throughout the entire sequence: the rolling chairs were cars throughout, and the garage retained its function for the duration of the play. Later, some regular, small chairs were transformed first into a dividing wall, then into a ladder and a bed. The use and transformation of these regular chairs changed repeatedly during the sequence.

The transformation of body was not particularly prominent, as the boys spoke and moved in their usual manner. The actions comprising the play-sequence included driving and parking, adjusting the size of the two rooms in the garage, crawling between the rooms, looking over the roof of the garage, and resting. These actions were not linked into any traditional plot or fable. Each of these actions – which we will refer to as play-segments – was, however, explored in play more than once, in a somewhat haphazard rotation.

DRIVING AND PARKING
ADJUSTING ROOM SIZE
CRAWLING BETWEEN ROOMS
LOOKING OVER THE ROOF
RESTING

Figure 1. A list of the five segments occurring in the play-sequence “Garage”: Driving and parking, adjusting room size, crawling between rooms, looking over the roof, and resting.

One repeated segment in “Garage” involved the boys exploring how the two rooms in the garage could be made smaller or larger by moving the (pretend) dividing wall; another involved driving their (chair-)cars in and out of the garage. However, these recurring segments

were not played as mere, identical repetitions. Each revisit constituted a new exploration of the segment, differing slightly from previous iterations. The various explorations of each segment can thus be understood as iterations in the computational sense – that is, repeating a set of steps multiple times and performing it in each loop with slight variations, much like musical improvisations. Throughout “Garage”, the explorations of each segment expanded and contracted, constantly taking new directions. Dramaturgical analysis revealed that one way the various iteration loops of each segment differed from one another was in their transformation of time. The revisited action, for instance, might take longer or shorter than in previous or initial explorations of the same segment.

Focusing on the transformation of time when analysing dramatic play prompts us to consider: when are we – during the day or in the history of mankind? Are we in a different universe, with different rules governing the progression of time? Just as importantly, time often passes at a different speed during play than outside it. Any action – such as drinking a cup of tea, killing a wolf, or sleeping through the night – might take anywhere from two seconds, twelve minutes, or several days of playtime. Sequences are magnified and elaborated upon, blown out of their real-time proportions according to their potential and interest for the players. The same segment can be reiterated with minute variations, much like a minimalist, post-modern performance piece or a music piece by Philip Glass⁵ (see Gladsø et al., 2015, p. 151). Thus, (play) time may unfold not according to a notion of linear progression, but as loops in evolving iterations or magnified moments of exploration.

This became apparent in “Garage”. Within each exploration, repetitive features emerged as the same action was often performed several times. When the boys parked in the garage, this was not simply a matter of parking and leaving; instead, they drove in and out, parking repeatedly. Furthermore, repetition occurred on another level, as the boys throughout “Garage” moved back and forth between the different segments and their explorations. The dramaturgical structure of “Garage” thus appeared to be characterised by repetition, with the most prominent repetitive feature being the recurring explorations of the segments shown in Figure 1.

Structures of dramatic play

Through the dramaturgical analysis of “Garage”, using the elements of dramatic fiction, it became clearer what

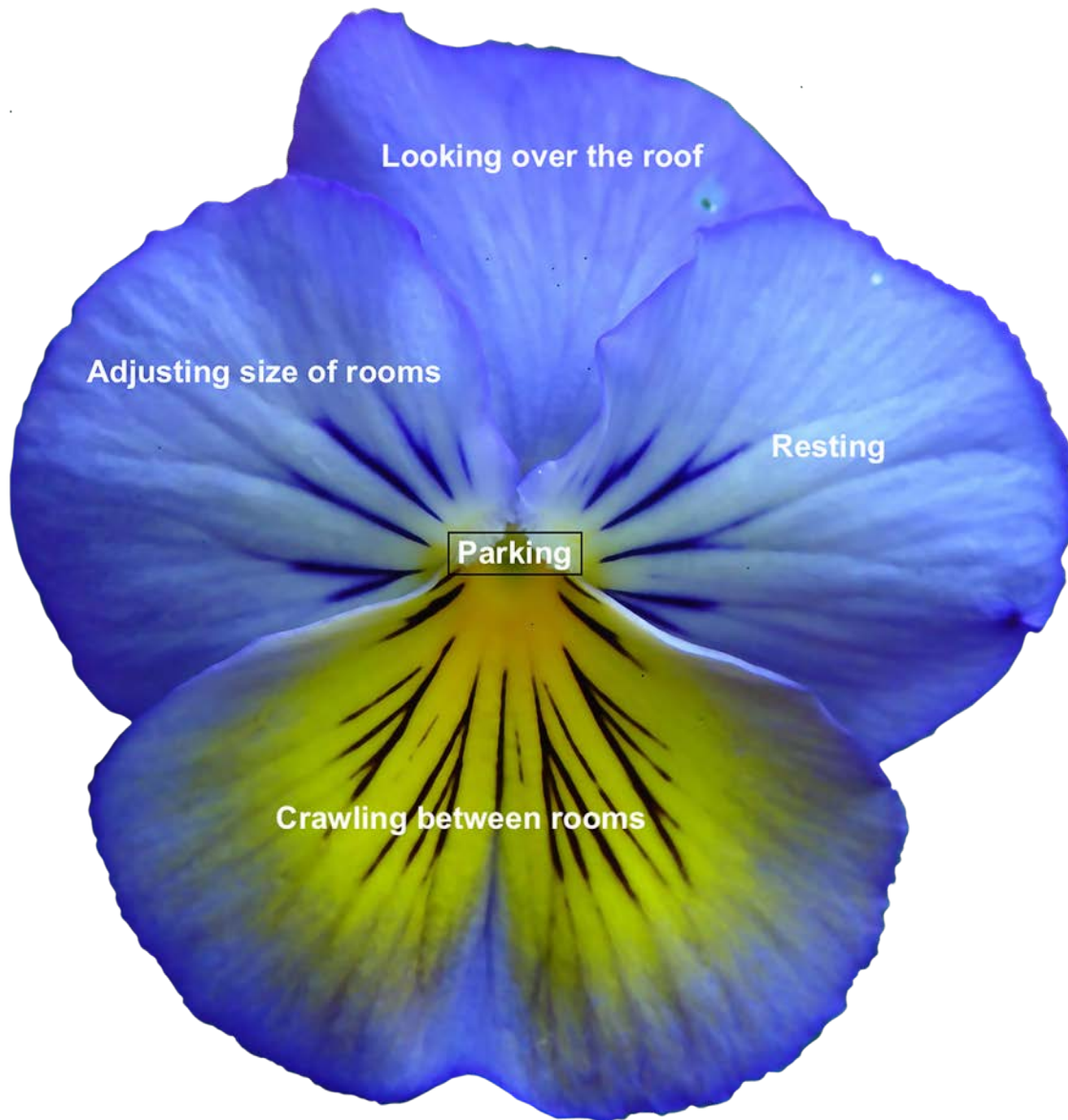


Figure 2. Visualization of a possible dramaturgical structure of “Garage”, in the shape of a pansy. The segment ‘Parking’ is at the heart of the flower, with four petals branching out. These petals each represent a play-segments: resting, crawling between rooms, adjusting size of rooms, and looking over the roof.

was being repeated in this play-sequence. It also became evident that “Garage” itself was structured repetitively.

Mapping the different explorations of each segment illuminated how each segment expanded and contracted, and how the play-sequence oscillated between these segments. It became apparent that “Garage” seemed to expand rather than progress linearly, it was expanding in multiple

directions. This multidirectional expansion in “Garage” aligns with what several researchers have identified as a central feature of children’s play: it is an activity without a specific aim or goal, characterised by back-and-forth movements (see e.g. Gadamer, 2010, pp. 134–135).

In addition to children’s play being structured in this non-linear way, repetitive features also occur (see Lausen



When play is understood as a back-and-forth movement with no predetermined endpoint, a greater understanding of repetitive features in children's dramatic play can be gained by focusing on what is repeated and the various explorations thereof.

et al., 2024; Guss, 2017, pp. 162–163; Løkken, 2004, pp. 71–73). Any segment of play is not necessarily completed or finished after being played through once. It can be adjusted and seemingly repeated, over and over again. These repetitions might appear to the adult observer like a broken record, as the same action is repeated without any immediately apparent development or change. However, the children may thoroughly enjoy being in the moment: experiencing, re-experiencing, and testing out emotional, verbal, and physical responses and solutions to the segment in question (see Lausen et al., 2024; Guss, 2017, p. 163).

Although Guss has advocated climax as an analytical tool when approaching repetitive features in dramatic play, she has also proposed more circular dramaturgical structures as models for describing and understanding the dramaturgy of dramatic play (Guss, 2017, pp. 165–174). In theatre studies, a paradigm shift occurred in the early twentieth century when new dramaturgical forms and structures emerged that challenged the Aristotelian dramaturgical hegemony. A common denominator among these new forms – such as simultaneous, meta-fictional, and interactive dramaturgies – is that they tend to suggest less linear structures and offer conceptual and analytical alternatives that may be useful when approaching and discussing repetitive features in children's play (see Szatkowski, 1992, p. 41; Gjervan, 2013; Hovik & Nagel, 2017, pp. 13–15).

Strømsøe, while mapping the different explorations of each segment in “Garage”, became aware of how the boys seemed always to return to one segment: the parking in

the garage. The parking segment appeared to function as a ground position or core exploration, a reset before beginning either a new exploration of the same segment or switching to new explorations of another segment. Thus, a dramaturgical structure of ‘Garage’ could be one in which the segment *parking* is ground zero, and the other segments loop out from this point and back again, with each iteration varying in length as well as in the ratio of repetition to variation (see Figure 2).

Discussion and final comments

Analysing the repetitive features in “Garage” through a hermeneutic, dramaturgical lens has provided insight into how this specific play-sequence unfolds, what its repetitive features are, and how repetitive features in children's dramatic play can be conceptualised and discussed.

We found that “Garage” embodies repetitive features operating on multiple levels. Structurally, these features centre on recurring segments, while on another level, they involve recurring elements unfolding within each segment. The recurring segments constituted the content of the play-sequence, rather than following a traditional fable. The transformation of space and body remained quite consistent in “Garage”, whereas the transformation of time varied throughout.

We set out to investigate how various dramaturgical concepts could enhance our understanding of the complexity of repetitive features in children's unstructured dramatic play. Although dramatic play can be structured according to a plot that progresses towards the

release of suspense in a climax, this was not the case in “Garage”. By employing a broader range of dramaturgical concepts than those offered by the Aristotelian tradition—exemplified here by plot and climax—we have begun to expand possible approaches to repetitive features in children’s play. We identified a need for more varied analytical and conceptual tools to address the complexities of repetitive features, as a multifaceted phenomenon requires diversity in the concepts we use to capture and describe it. There is a risk of losing sight of what is happening right before us—here and now—if we approach the phenomenon with a “one tool fits all” attitude. If we wish to understand this feature of children’s dramatic play, we must be able to discuss the repetitive features in a way that helps us focus on the activity unfolding before us.

Drawing on our experience with a hermeneutic, philosophical understanding of play, it can be rather counter-productive to use an Aristotelian form as a point of reference when approaching children’s unstructured dramatic play. When play is understood as a back-and-forth movement with no predetermined endpoint, a greater understanding of repetitive features in children’s dramatic play can be gained by focusing on what is repeated and the various explorations thereof.

In this article, our aim has been to engage with the complexities of repetitive features in children’s unstructured dramatic play, and to consider which dramaturgical concepts we might use when approaching and discussing this phenomenon. To play is a way of being in the world. The importance for children of being in a state of play should not be underestimated. The concepts we use when dealing with the phenomenon should likewise capture and appreciate this state of being. Regardless of whether the repetitive features are a negative or positive occurrence in children’s dramatic play, these features nonetheless occur regularly. Thus, finding functional concepts that aid our grasp, understanding and discussion of this phenomenon is important.

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NOTES

- 1 Guss’s PhD was focused on the possibilities and significance of form in children’s play-culture (see Guss, 2000).
- 2 The project, supervised by professors Maria Øksnes and Ellen Karoline Gjervan, is a qualitative study of repetitive features in children’s dramatic play and how these features can manifest. The finds presented in this article are analysed according to the aims of this article, which are not identical to the aims of the PhD-project.
- 3 This kind of wearable technology is increasingly used in qualitative data collection (see for instance Polkinghorne 2018).
- 4 See also ‘Dramatic structure’ on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z6vwcqt/revision/3>
- 5 Philip Glass is an American composer and pianist.