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THE SHARED DREAM OF THE SETTING

When Whole Groups Begin Playing the Same Emotional Story

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Sometimes the symbolic life of a setting does not belong to one child at all. It moves through the group, gathering bodies, roles and endings as it goes.

Nobody planned the prison.

It began with two crates pushed against the fence and a child shouting, "You cannot get out."

By the end of the morning there were guards, prisoners, secret tunnels and a rescue team operating from beneath the climbing frame.

The next day, the prison returned.

Then it spread.

The home corner became a locked castle. Babies were hidden from a monster. The sand pit became a dungeon. Children who had never joined the original game arrived with keys, maps and increasingly complicated escape plans.

No adult had introduced the theme.

No single child owned it anymore.

The story had entered the setting.

Early-years practitioners see this again and again.

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For a while, everybody is rescuing.

Then everybody is hiding.

The room fills with fires, floods, babies, monsters, hospitals, battles, weddings, funerals, police stations or journeys home.

A theme catches, mutates and begins to organise the social life of the group.

It can be tempting to say that the children are sharing a dream.

That phrase is useful only if we hold it lightly.

The children are not literally asleep together, receiving one secret message from the collective unconscious.

Steady on.

But a setting can develop a symbolic weather.

And sometimes the play tells us that everybody has noticed the storm.

WHEN THE STORY BELONGS TO THE GROUP

Children do not play only as individuals.

They build cultures together.

A phrase invented by one child becomes common language. A rule appears. A role gains status. A joke travels across the room. A story is borrowed, challenged, improved and handed back changed.

Sociologist William Corsaro described children as active participants in peer cultures, not passive recipients of adult society.

They take material from family life, media, stories, settings and one another, then remake it for their own purposes.

This is easy to see in role play.

One child announces that the den is a spaceship.

Another says it is under attack.

A third introduces an injured animal.

A fourth decides the enemy is actually a lost baby dragon.

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Within minutes, the original idea has disappeared into a shared symbolic world.

The play belongs to nobody and everybody.

That shared world can carry emotion as well as plot.

A group may become fascinated by capture and escape.

By danger and rescue.

By disappearance and return.

By powerful villains and fragile babies.

The important question is not, "What does this theme mean?"

It is, "What is this shared story allowing the children to do together?"

A shared story is not a diagnosis of the group. It is an invitation to notice the emotional weather.

IMITATION, CONTAGION AND SOMETHING MORE

Sometimes children repeat a theme because it is exciting.

One child has seen a film. Somebody has a new superhero costume. The fire service visited on Tuesday. A wolf appeared in the story at group time and was simply too good to leave on the page.

Children copy one another.

That is not a shallow explanation.

Imitation is one of the ways culture travels.

But copied play rarely stays copied for long.

Children bend it towards the questions that matter to them.

The film villain becomes a nursery cook.

The fire engine collects abandoned babies.

The wolf moves into the block area, marries the doctor and develops a fear of crocodiles.

This is not a failed reproduction of the original story.

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It is the group thinking in play.

A theme spreads when it offers enough energy, uncertainty and flexibility for many children to enter.

It gives the Mover something to chase.

The Builder something to construct.

The Planner a system to organise.

The Rebel an authority to resist.

The Helper somebody to save.

The Joker a rule to turn upside down.

The Watcher a drama to study from the edge.

The Friend a group to belong to.

A successful shared story is often archetypally generous.

It contains enough doors for different children to enter through.

THE SETTING HAS AN ATMOSPHERE

Every setting has an atmosphere long before anybody names it.

The pace of the morning.

The tone adults use when the room becomes noisy.

Whether mistakes are repaired or remembered.

Whether the week feels settled, hurried, watchful, playful or brittle.

Children are not little emotional barometers giving us perfect readings of adult life.

But they notice rhythm, expression, absence, tension and change.

They notice when a familiar practitioner leaves.

When rooms are rearranged.

When adults whisper.

When a new child cries for several mornings.

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When Christmas is approaching and the whole world appears to have consumed three cups of coffee.

The group does not need a formal explanation to register that something is different.

Shared play may offer a way of handling that difference.

A period of staffing change might coincide with games of lost children and homecoming.

A move into a new room might be followed by maps, borders, keys and repeated decisions about who is allowed in.

A setting under pressure might see more controlling, policing or rule-bound play.

Or it might not.

This is where adults must keep their feet on the ground.

Sequence is worth noticing.

It is not proof of cause.

The prison game may reflect the emotional climate of the setting.

It may also have started because somebody found a padlock in Grandad's shed.

Both possibilities deserve room.

THE STORIES THAT RETURN

Certain group themes appear frequently because they contain broad human tensions.

CAPTURE AND ESCAPE

Prisons, cages, traps, locked rooms and guards create a clear contest between control and freedom.

Children can become the authority, resist it, submit to it, trick it or redesign the rules.

DANGER AND RESCUE

Fires, floods, monsters and injured animals allow children to move between vulnerability and competence.

One moment they are helpless. The next they have the hose, the medicine or the map.

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LOSS AND RETURN

Missing babies, lost pets, disappearing parents and long journeys create repeated opportunities for separation, searching and reunion.

INVASION AND DEFENCE

Castles, bases, borders and secret passwords let children explore who belongs, who threatens the group and what must be protected.

DEATH AND REVIVAL

Children die constantly in play and are usually back on their feet before lunch.

Play gives final things another round.

THE BAD ONE AND THE GOOD ONES

Villain stories distribute power dramatically.

One child gets to carry appetite, danger or refusal while the others organise around stopping, saving or joining them.

None of these themes has one universal meaning.

They are forms spacious enough to hold many meanings at once.

That is why they travel so well through a group.

The story spreads because it can hold more than one child's question.

THE ADULT WANTS TO SOLVE THE ROOM

Once adults notice a collective pattern, we become very pleased with ourselves.

Everybody is building walls.

Clearly they feel emotionally contained.

Everybody is playing prison.

Clearly the routine is too restrictive.

Everybody is rescuing babies.

Clearly the group is processing attachment anxiety.

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Maybe.

Or perhaps one child introduced a brilliant game and the rest joined because it had danger, status and running in it.

The same rules that protect the individual child from over-interpretation must protect the group.

Do not turn a play theme into a psychological opinion poll.

Do not announce that the room is "collectively dysregulated" because the children have spent three days fighting dragons.

Do not use symbolic language to disguise weak evidence.

Instead, ask practical questions.

When did the theme begin?

Who introduced it?

What stories, media, visits or events may have contributed?

Which children enter easily and which are excluded?

What roles are available?

Can the plot change?

Does the play create delight, mastery and connection, or fear, coercion and repeated distress?

What happens when adults add time, space or materials without deciding the meaning?

Good observation multiplies possibilities before it narrows them.

THE GROUP THROUGH THE SIX AXES

The six axes of the Archetype Approach can help practitioners notice the shape of shared play without decoding it.

The question is not which archetype the group "is".

Groups are not giant children waiting for a personality test.

The axes simply help us see which movements are abundant and which have become difficult to reach.

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MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS

Is the shared story almost entirely chase, attack and escape?

Can the children pause, hide, plan, watch or recover?

CARE AND PLAYFUL DISRUPTION

Is everybody rescuing, nursing and protecting?

Is there room for mischief, absurdity and the child who refuses the caring role?

TRUTH AND HARMONY

Does belonging depend upon following one dominant child's script?

Can somebody disagree, change sides or tell the group that the game is no longer fun?

IMAGINATION AND ORDER

Can the world transform, or has the fantasy become a rigid set of rules policed by its most powerful players?

INTENSITY AND INTELLECT

Is the play all roar and impact?

Can the children think, negotiate, map, explain or create a strategy?

EXPLORATION AND CONSTRUCTION

Does the story endlessly flee into new danger?

Can the children build a home, base, bridge, hospital or place of return?

The balancing response does not end the shared play.

It gives it more range.

The prison game might need keys, courts, tunnels and an amnesty.

The monster chase might need tracks, maps, nests and a place where the monster sleeps.

The flood might need boats, weather stations and the rebuilding of a village.

Balance enriches the story rather than tidying it away.

FOLLOW THE PLAY WITHOUT FEEDING THE FIRE

Adults can support a shared symbolic theme in several ways.

MAKE THE MATERIALS AVAILABLE

Offer fabric, blocks, signs, maps, clay, figures, boxes, torches, mark-making tools and loose parts that can become many things.

Avoid producing a laminated prison pack because the children mentioned a cage on Monday.

Leave some dignity in it.

ADD POSSIBILITY, NOT PLOT

An adult might wonder aloud, "I wonder whether there is another way in," or place rope and chalk nearby.

They do not need to direct the rescue mission or assign everybody a role.

PROTECT THE EDGES

Shared play can become coercive.

The same child may always be imprisoned, chased or made into the baby.

Adults must protect consent, bodily safety and the right to leave the game.

NOTICE THE OUTSIDERS

Some children cannot find a door into complex group play.

A practitioner may help them enter through a prop, role, shared task or parallel version rather than demanding, "Let them play too."

ALLOW THE THEME TO DIE

Adults sometimes become more attached to the project than the children.

Once the beautiful display board is up, everybody is apparently studying dragons until half-term.

If the group moves on, let the story compost.

Symbolic hospitality includes knowing when not to keep digging up the corpse.

WHEN THE STORY GAINS A NEW ENDING

One of the most interesting things to watch is not whether a theme disappears, but whether it becomes more flexible.

The prison develops a door.

The guard changes sides.

The monster becomes ill and needs medicine.

The missing baby turns out to have built a house in the woods.

The flood recedes.

The villain joins the feast but still refuses to apologise properly.

A story that began as pure danger gains negotiation, humour, care, order or return.

Children begin to exchange roles.

The quiet child becomes the dragon.

The habitual rescuer asks to be saved.

The powerful leader tolerates somebody else changing the rules.

The Watcher at the edge contributes a map and enters without having to roar.

These changes may show that the group has found more agency within the theme.

They may also show that the children are simply getting better at the game.

There is no need to force a grand distinction.

Development often arrives wearing the clothes of better play.

WHEN SHARED PLAY NEEDS CLOSER ATTENTION

Most dramatic group play is ordinary childhood culture.

Fighting dragons is not evidence of trauma.

Pretending to die is not a safeguarding disclosure.

A week of prisons does not prove the setting is oppressive.

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But adults should pay attention when play becomes persistently distressing, coercive, sexualised beyond developmental expectations, unusually literal or connected to a waking disclosure.

Notice when one child is repeatedly targeted.

When saying stop does not stop the game.

When roles reproduce humiliation rather than imaginative tension.

When a child appears frightened outside the play or avoids particular people, places or routines.

When words refer to specific waking events that may require safeguarding action.

The theme itself does not prove what happened.

A waking disclosure must not be dismissed as "just symbolic play."

Equally, symbolic play must not be interrogated until it becomes a disclosure the child never made.

Record accurately.

Use the child's own words.

Follow ordinary safeguarding procedures.

Do not gather the cast for a group dream-analysis session.

That would be weird.

The setting can receive the story without claiming to know whose story it is.

THE ADULTS ARE PART OF THE WEATHER

Practitioners are not outside observers looking through glass.

We enter the atmosphere too.

A group theme can excite, irritate, frighten or flatter us.

The endless police game may stir an adult who dislikes authority.

The abandoned baby story may touch recent grief.

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The noise of repeated battle may feel unbearable to a practitioner already running on fumes.

Another adult may love the theme and keep feeding it because it makes the provision look wonderfully child-led.

Both reactions shape what happens next.

Reflective teams can ask:

What are we feeling when this play begins?

Which children or roles are we quietly siding with?

Are we stopping the theme because it is unsafe, or because it embarrasses us?

Are we extending it because the children need more possibility, or because we want a brilliant observation for the website?

Has the setting itself become tense, controlling, fragmented or overexcited?

What balance do the adults need before they try to balance the room?

A shared symbolic theme may sometimes reveal something about the adult ecology.

Not through magic.

Through relationship, rhythm and the ordinary human fact that children live among us.

A SHARED DREAM HYPOTHESIS

The Night Garden proposes a cautious hypothesis.

When a group of children repeatedly develops the same symbolic theme, the play may be doing more than reproducing one child's idea.

It may become a shared cultural form through which children explore common tensions, recent events, environmental changes, peer relationships and the emotional atmosphere of the setting.

Several mechanisms may be involved at once.

Imitation.

Narrative excitement.

Media and traditional stories.

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The influence of confident players.

Shared developmental questions.

Changes in the setting.

The mood and behaviour of adults.

Perhaps even recurring human images that readily gather meaning across different lives.

The phrase "shared dream" should remain a metaphor, not a clinical claim.

But it gives us useful questions.

Which themes gather the group, and which fall flat?

What roles and archetypal powers become available inside them?

Who gains agency and who loses it?

Does the play become more flexible when the environment offers balancing forms?

Do shared themes shift after transitions, losses, celebrations, staff changes or powerful stories?

Can practitioners notice emotional weather without claiming to read hidden minds?

Can a setting make room for collective symbolic life without turning childhood into therapy?

The prison returns for a fourth morning.

This time, one child builds a courthouse.

Another makes a tunnel.

The quietest child arrives with a cardboard key and announces that everybody is free except the dragon, who has chosen to stay because it likes the snacks.

The story has changed.

Perhaps the group has changed with it.

Perhaps they have simply found a better ending.

Either way, the setting has listened without forcing the answer.

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Sometimes the room dreams in public: not because every child feels the same, but because one story has become large enough for many lives to meet inside it.

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Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.