

WHEN EDUCATORS STUDY PLAY IN SCHOOLS

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It may seem strange, at first, to discuss the issue of play in the context of the elementary school. Most parents assume that their children work in school, and most teachers try to keep the children working throughout the school day. The curriculum includes messages about the importance of work, and the organization of classroom experiences demonstrates that success in school depends as much on the display of appropriate work habits as on the mastery of the curricular content.

But play, too, is important in the child's school day. Elementary schools are peopled by young children, and young children are often playful. Further, most adults believe that play is a desirable form of children's behavior. Teachers of young children, in particular, tend to be tolerant of children's playfulness because they believe play is necessary for healthy growth and development.

Many educators also believe that play is a natural mode of learning for young children. Consequently, they are unwilling to suppress play in the classroom and may even organize lessons to take advantage of children's tendency to play. Teachers also use play time as a reward for completed assignments, to emphasize the work orientation of the school, and to foster good work habits in children.

Play, then, is not an unlikely topic for serious consideration by elementary school researchers and practitioners. In this article I approach the issue of play in the elementary school from two perspectives. First, I discuss children's definitions of play, how their definitions change as they move through the elementary grades, and the categories of play that emerge. Second, using the children's definitions, I present the educational research relevant to each category of play. Finally, I assess the usefulness of this research to practitioners and theorists, as well as implications for future research.

CHILDREN'S DEFINITIONS OF PLAY IN SCHOOL

It is not safe to assume that adult recollections about childhood play will be helpful in understanding play in the elementary school from the children's perspective. To understand how children define classroom play, it is necessary to ask the children themselves. In a series of three related studies involving

94 children in three elementary schools, children were asked to define and discuss work and play in school.¹

The findings of these studies indicate that elementary school children of all ages have no difficulty dividing their school activities into examples of work and examples of play. In fact, children see the categories of work and play as entirely separate and the differences between them as altogether obvious.

While their ability to differentiate work from play is stable throughout the elementary grades, children's criteria for their categorizations change dramatically. Kindergarten children rely on the social context of their activities to distinguish between work and play. If the teacher requires the children's participation in an activity, that activity is labeled work. Kindergartners do not label assigned tasks play no matter how much they may enjoy participating. Activities are labeled play only when the children believe that their participation is voluntary and free of direct supervision by the teacher.

The criterion that children introduce in the primary grades and that gradually emerges as the single most important quality differentiating between work experiences and play experiences is pleasure. As children move through the elementary grades, the psychological context of activities becomes increasingly important and eventually supplants the social context as the primary criterion used by the children in categorizing their activities. The categorization of specific activities becomes more idiosyncratic and less uniform in the upper grades. By the 5th grade, children draw fine distinctions and offer numerous and complex reasons for their categorizations. An activity may be play if the child is "in the mood" or work if the child "doesn't feel like it." Further, what is fun for one child may be tedious or difficult for someone else, and an activity a child enjoys on one day may not be enjoyed on another.

Work continues to be identified with academic lessons that are required and evaluated, but it is no longer true that all required activities are labeled work. Required activities that children enjoy or find unusually easy or entertaining are labeled play.

As increasingly diverse activities are labeled play, the category of work narrows to include only those activities that are required, evaluated, and tedious or difficult. The category of play, on the other hand, includes all fun or undemanding activities. Play in elementary school thus becomes a broad category, which includes dissimilar activities and apparently contradictory elements.

CATEGORIES OF PLAY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A closer examination of the children's responses reveals that, within the large category of play, there are three distinct types of classroom play in

¹Nancy R. King, "Play: The Kindergartner's Perspective," *Elementary School Journal* 80 (November 1979): 81-87; Nancy R. King, "Play in the Workplace," in *Ideology and Practice in Schooling*, ed. Michael Apple and Lois Weis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 262-280.

elementary school. These subcategories are instrumental play, real play, and illicit play.

Instrumental Play

The first category of play includes activities that are required and evaluated by the teacher, but which older elementary school children label play if they enjoy participating. Examples of instrumental play named by the children in these studies include watching a movie, playing vocabulary relay races, writing poems, drawing pictures of Eskimo life, listening to the teacher read a story, and preparing a Thanksgiving mural. Children enjoy instrumental play for a variety of reasons. For example, these activities may include energetic physical activity, or they may be undemanding and require little effort. They may permit social contact between children, encourage individual expression, or include intriguing content.

Although upper elementary school children call these activities play, there are numerous differences between instrumental play activities and the spontaneous play activities usually associated with children. Most important, instrumental play activities are not voluntary or self-directed, and they serve goals beyond the purposes of the participants. Teachers organize these activities so that playful elements are included but maintain control of the situation, the playful elements are not permitted to obscure academic messages.

During instrumental play, entertainment becomes part of the curriculum as teachers provide games and other playful curricular events. Simultaneously, achievement as measured by external standards becomes part of play.

Real Play

The second category of play includes activities that are voluntary and self-directed as well as enjoyable. These activities meet both the social and the psychological criteria of play, and all elementary school children agree that such experiences are examples of play in school. Activities during recess are the best examples of this type of school play.

All children say they like recess, and many say that it is the best part of the school day. Children value recess because it provides them opportunities to participate in active, often boisterous, physical activities, to seek out specific children with whom to interact, and to dictate the flow of events without adult intervention. Their comments thus emphasize the freedom and autonomy they have during recess to shape activities to suit themselves.

Illicit Play

The final category of play includes all unsanctioned, surreptitious interaction among children during classroom events. Whispering, passing notes, and silly laughing are examples of illicit play. Such play is intrinsically motivated and takes place in spite of the rules and regulations of the classroom. Teachers ordinarily view illicit play as a disruptive nuisance, and they take steps to prevent and control it. Children realize that their illicit play is unwell-

come in the classroom, and they are usually careful to hide these activities from the teacher.

Examples of illicit play were observed in every classroom included in these studies. Some teachers ignored the children involved, others reminded them to get back to work or instructed them to move to a separate area of the room for the remainder of the lesson. In every observed instance, the teachers' actions or remarks were sufficient to convince the children to discontinue their play.

Summary

Children's play in the elementary school calls forth a variety of responses from teachers.² Teachers ignore much of the playful behavior children exhibit in the classroom. What they cannot ignore, they incorporate into the academic curriculum. These activities make up the category of *instrumental play*. What teachers cannot incorporate into the curriculum, they contain outside the school building. These activities make up the category of *real play*. Finally, what teachers cannot contain, they suppress. The suppression of play forces children to conceal their playfulness, and these activities belong to the category of *illicit play*. All the examples of play activities identified by the children fall into one of these three categories of school play. Taken together, then, they encompass the meaning of play in elementary school from the children's perspective. It is not difficult to use the children's definitions to organize recent research about elementary school play, and to explore what researchers have learned about each category.

RESEARCH ABOUT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PLAY

Instrumental Play

The belief that play is a natural mode of learning for young children has a long history in the field of education. Instructional strategies based on play activities have been popular with classroom teachers and continue to be an important element in the elementary school teacher's repertoire.

Play activities used to teach academic lessons are examples of instrumental play in school. This category of play is the one most widely researched and discussed by educators. Unfortunately, few researchers recognize the distinction between play and games, and instrumental play is usually equated with classroom games.

Play and games are actually separate concepts, which may or may not include common characteristics.³ Games, for example, do not include playful elements if children do not enjoy participating. In such a case, children would categorize the game as an example of work in spite of the teacher's intent to

²Nancy R. King, "Classroom Play as a Form of Resistance in the Classroom," *Journal of Education* 164 (Fall 1982): 320-329.

³Alex Makedon, "Playful Gaming," *Simulation and Games* 15 (March 1984): 25-64.

organize the lesson as play. At best, classroom games include a substantial element of enjoyment and playfulness, without sacrificing a focus on academic learning. When the organization and the goals of the game coincide with the organization and the goals of academic content, the game is likely to be both a learning and a playful activity.

Every content area can—and, according to many educators, should—include academic experiences that are organized as instrumental play. For example, logical reasoning skills can be taught outdoors as part of recess and inside the classroom using a variety of games and play experiences.⁴ Other social studies concepts can also be taught in the form of games.⁵ Simulation games that provide children the opportunity to experience work on an assembly line are quite easy to develop and organize in a classroom setting. Such activities introduce children to economic concepts, social relations skills, and the work reality of many adults.⁶

The language arts also lend themselves to organization as games. Riddles, experiences with concrete objects, and activities involving sociodramatic play are recommended for the teaching of reading.⁷ The use of singing games is encouraged to take advantage of children's natural interest in games and play to facilitate learning and engender positive attitudes in mathematics and science. Active games, puzzles, and brain teasers are typical examples of the games that are suggested and recommended.⁸ Finally, there is a growing interest in computer education and the ways in which computers lend themselves to instrumental play.⁹ Computers can offer children a wide variety of experiences with simulations and games in many curricular areas, in addition, lessons in programming can also be designed as games.¹⁰

Although there are many books and articles that present examples of instrumental play and exhort teachers to provide such play in their classrooms, the literature includes little evidence that instrumental play increases learning.

⁴John A. Van de Walle and Charles S. Thompson, "Fitting Problem Solving into Every Classroom," *School Science and Mathematics* 81 (April 1981) 290-297.

⁵Loyda M. Shears and Eli M. Bower, eds., *Games in Education and Development* (Springfield, Ill: Charles C. Thomas, Publishers, 1974).

⁶James Palermo, "Education as a Simulation Game: A Critical Hermeneutic," *Journal of Thought* 14 (July 1979) 220-227.

⁷Lance M. Gentile and James L. Hoot, "Kindergarten Play: The Foundation of Reading," *The Reading Teacher* 36 (January 1983) 436-439; Eleanor S. Tyson and Lee Mountain, "A Riddle or Pun Makes Learning Words Fun," *The Reading Teacher* 35 (November 1982) 170-173.

⁸Loye Y. Hollis and B. Dell Felder, "Recreational Mathematics for Young Children," *School Science and Mathematics* 82 (January 1982) 71-75; William H. Kraus, "Math Learning Games: Simple vs. Complex," *School Science and Mathematics* 82 (May-June 1982) 397-398; Paul B. Hounshell and Ira Trollinger, "Games for Teaching Science," *Science and Children* 15 (October 1977) 11-14.

⁹Thomas W. Malone, *What Makes Things Fun to Learn? A Study of Intrinsically Motivating Computer Games* (Palo Alto, Calif: Xerox, 1980).

¹⁰Frederick L. Goodman, "The Computer as Plaything," *Simulation and Games* 15 (March 1984) 65-73; William H. Kraus, "Using a Computer Game to Reinforce Skills in Addition: Basic Facts in Second Grade," *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 12 (March 1981) 152-155.

In fact, most authors are forced to admit that the evidence that does exist is inconclusive and fragmentary.¹¹ Nonetheless, a number of studies compare the merits of lessons organized as games with the outcomes of lessons using traditional instructional strategies. Zammarelli and Bolton,¹² for example, studied 24 children aged 10–12 years and concluded that those who had used a toy designed to teach a mathematical concept achieved greater insight into the nature of the concept and exhibited greater short-term memory of the concept than did children who had not used the toy.

Bright, Harvey, and Wheeler¹³ studied the effects of games on the cognitive achievement of upper elementary children in mathematics. The children played games that required them to practice using multiplication and division facts. The authors found an overall improvement in the posttest scores of the children and concluded that instructional games are an effective way to retain mathematics skills. Since the study did not include a control group, however, the authors could not conclude that instructional games are preferable to other instructional strategies.

There are also a number of studies indicating that a play environment is *not* conducive to learning cognitive skills. For example, a study of ten primary grade classrooms found that the play-based curricular programs used by some of the teachers were less successful in teaching reading and mathematical skills than the formal traditional programs used by other teachers.¹⁴ Baker, Herman, and Yeh¹⁵ also found that the use of play materials in academic lessons was negatively correlated with pupil achievement. They concluded that play activities distract children and hinder academic growth.

In spite of the lack of conclusive supporting evidence, most educational researchers and theorists continue to encourage teachers to use instructional games and other forms of instrumental play in the classroom.¹⁶ Play advocates are careful to emphasize, however, that games are not intended to replace traditional instructional strategies; rather, teachers are encouraged to use play

¹¹ George W. Bright, "Cognitive Effects of Games on Mathematics Learning," paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Cincinnati, April 1977.

¹² J. Zammarelli and N. Bolton, "The Effects of Play on Mathematical Concept Formation," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 47 (February 1977): 155–161.

¹³ George W. Bright, John G. Harvey, and Margariete Montague Wheeler, "Using Games to Retain Skills with Basic Multiplication Facts," *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 10 (March 1979): 103–110.

¹⁴ Mary Ann Evans, "A Comparative Study of Young Children's Classroom Activities and Learning Outcomes," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 49 (February 1979): 15–26.

¹⁵ Eva Baker, Joan Herman, and Jennie Yeh, "Fun and Games: Their Contribution to Basic Skills Instruction in Elementary School," *American Educational Research Journal* 18 (Spring 1981): 83–92.

¹⁶ James Schoedler, "A Comparison of the Use of Active Game Learning with a Conventional Teaching Approach in the Development of Concepts in Geometry and Measurement at the Second Grade Level," *School Science and Mathematics* 81 (May–June 1981): 365–370. Loye Y. Hollis and B. Dell Felder, "Recreational Mathematics for Young Children," *School Science and Mathematics* 82 (January 1982): 71–75.

activities to enhance and enliven academic lessons.¹⁷ The most frequent reasons given by authors for using instrumental play have more to do with children's attitudes than with their achievement.¹⁸ It is usually argued that games are particularly effective motivators, and that children who are given the opportunity to play participate more willingly and energetically in classroom events. The wholeheartedness of their participation seems, to many educators, to be an overriding positive consequence of play in the classroom.

Though researchers are eager to have teachers use play activities, they do not assume that developing excellent instructional games is an easy task. The challenge to teachers and other curriculum developers includes a number of difficulties. First, teachers must be careful that the game or simulation integrates the playful elements with the academic content.¹⁹ If the playful elements dominate, children may fail to attend to the academic aspects of the lesson, if the academic focus does not permit playfulness, children may not participate with enjoyment. In the latter case, it is likely that children will see the game as an example of classroom work.

Second, teachers must remember that different children react differently to the same experience. Therefore, children's personality characteristics, orientations to learning, levels of academic achievement, and abilities to play games must be considered when designing play activities for them.²⁰ Third, teachers must be particularly careful to assess the impact of instrumental play experiences organized as competitive games. For young children, cooperative experiences may have more positive cognitive and social outcomes than competitive situations. Consequently, cooperative games may be a better choice for the elementary school teacher.²¹ Finally, teachers must be aware of the constraints the school environment imposes on play situations.²² It is difficult at times to protect the playful elements of an academic lesson from the influences of the work orientation of the elementary school structure.

In summary, there is a considerable body of literature that discusses elements of instrumental play. A careful inspection reveals, however, that we actually know very little about the contribution instrumental play makes to children's cognitive growth and intellectual development. Most articles are written to convince the cautious, caution the over-zealous, or encourage the reluctant.

¹⁷Donald R. Cruickshank and Ross Telfer, "Classroom Games and Simulations," *Theory Into Practice* 19 (Winter 1980): 75-80

¹⁸Elliot M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, eds., *The Study of Games* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1971); James H. Block, "Making School Learning Activities More Play-Like. Flow and Mastery Learning," *Elementary School Journal* 85 (September 1984): 65-75

¹⁹Alex Makedon, "Playful Gaming," *Simulation and Games* 15 (March 1984): 25-64

²⁰Mary E. Bredemeier and Cathy Stein Greenblatt, "The Educational Effectiveness of Simulation Games," *Simulation and Games* 12 (September 1981): 307-332

²¹Mara Sapon-Shevin, "Cooperative Instructional Games. Alternatives to the Spelling Bee," *The Elementary School Journal* 79 (November 1978): 81-87

²²Francois Saegesser, "The Introduction of Play in Schools," *Simulation and Games* 15 (March 1984): 75-96

Real Play

Educators study real play far less often than they study instrumental play, most studies of real play are written by anthropologists, linguists, or folklorists. These researchers ordinarily focus on playground activity and neighborhood play groups, though there are also a few studies that focus on classroom interaction.

Sylvia Polgar²³ is one of the few researchers to compare classroom play in a teacher-directed situation with school play that is initiated and controlled by children. Polgar studied 6th grade boys during physical education class and during recess. The activities in which the boys participated were similar in the two settings. However, the boys' experiences during their play were quite different.

The games played during physical education classes were organized by the teacher. They included many teacher-imposed rules and regulations, and they focused on ends beyond the playing of the games themselves. In contrast, play groups developed informally on the playground. The games had fewer rules and were played simply because the children enjoyed them. These differences convinced Polgar that children's experiences during play depend on the context in which they participate. Further, she found that only experiences during recess included elements of spontaneous play.

Polgar's research highlights the essential differences between real play and instrumental play. Her study also indicates some of the reasons why researchers studying real play ordinarily observe playground activity. In most schools, recess is the only time of the school day when children are not subject to the direct supervision and guidance of teachers. Consequently, it is the time of the school day when real play activities are most likely to occur.

Children participate in a wide variety of activities during recess. Many play active games such as tag, soccer, jump rope, and hopscotch; others prefer quiet games such as jacks. Some children stroll with friends or sit in small groups while they chat and observe the activity around them. Still others romp and shout in a boisterous display of seemingly boundless energy.

The research about real play emphasizes three major categories of playground activity. First, there are studies of children's word play, which focus on aspects of storytelling as well as on childhood jingles, rhymes, puns, and riddles.²⁴ Although most of these studies focus on playground interaction, Stuart Reifel²⁵ found examples of spontaneous word play in an elementary

²³Sylvia Knopp Polgar, "The Social Context of Games: Or When is Play Not Play?" *Sociology of Education* 49 (October 1976): 265-271.

²⁴Mary Knapp and Herbert Knapp, *One Potato, Two Potatoes* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1976); Richard Bauman, "Ethnography of Children's Folklore," in *Children In and Out of School*, ed. Perry Gilmore and Allan A. Glatthorn (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982), pp. 172-186.

²⁵Stuart Reifel, "Play in the Elementary School Cafeteria," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, Clemson, South Carolina, April 1984.

school cafeteria. Because the children were confined to their seats and expected to focus on their food, they could not participate in physically active games. In spite of the constraints of the setting, the children developed numerous opportunities for real play. Reifel's observations include examples of word games such as riddles, teasing, dramatic play, and clever repartee.

The primary cafeteria activity (i.e., eating) influenced the children's play, and the themes and focus of most of their word games concerned food. Those children who initiated play events emerged as group leaders and were admired for their ability to entertain themselves and others. The adults in the cafeteria were largely unaware of the children's play. If the children were reasonably quiet and seemed to be eating reasonably quickly, the adults paid little attention to other aspects of their cafeteria behavior.

Second, researchers focus on the games children play during recess—the games themselves, the children's strategies for solving disputes and adjudicating rules, and the nature of the groups that evolve during game activity.²⁶

Finally, researchers explore the exercise of leadership and the nature of authority on the playground (e.g., the role of dominant children and aspects of children's culture).²⁷ These studies of playground interaction indicate that elementary school children are capable of creating their own subculture complete with rituals, traditions, rules, loyalties, and values. It is during real play that children's eagerness and ability to develop their own cultural context can be realized.²⁸

Research into the nature of playground activity enables educators to become aware of the value of these play experiences to children. Children's games also teach the astute observer about the larger cultural context in which children live. For example, Farrer's field study of tag as played by young Mescalero Apache children reveals important aspects of the culture of their community.²⁹ The game is usually played by groups of cousins, which highlights the importance of familial ties in the community. The children organize their play on a jungle gym, which establishes a circular configuration and encourages close physical contact. There is little verbalization during play, and children are expected to learn to play the game by observing. Even when game rules are violated, the children simply stop playing and reorganize the game without verbal interruption. Thus their play stresses important aspects of the larger culture including physical contact, circularity, and teaching by example.

²⁶Linda A. Hughes, "Beyond the Rules of the Game: Why Are Rooie Rules Nice?" in *The World of Play*, ed. Frank E. Manning (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1983), pp. 188–189; Kathryn Borman, "Children's Interactions on Playgrounds," *Theory Into Practice* 18 (October 1979): 251–257.

²⁷Andy Sluckin, *Growing Up in the Playground* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

²⁸Barry Glassner, "Kid Society," *Urban Education* 11 (April 1976): 5–21.

²⁹Claire R. Farrer, "Play and Inter-Ethnic Communication," in *The Study of Play: Problems and Prospects*, ed. David F. Lancy and Allan B. Trindall (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1977), pp. 98–104.

Though there are fewer studies of real play than there are of instrumental play, the research about real play is more detailed, descriptive, and informative. We may learn more about children and their experiences because they are freer to express themselves during real play than they are during instrumental play. It may also be that the research methodology preferred by most researchers of real play—qualitative anthropological techniques—permits a close look at the play phenomenon itself without the need to evaluate or prescribe.

Illicit Play

There is little research available about illicit play, and the studies that do exist often start from the premise that illicit play behaviors are aberrant and dysfunctional. Consequently, the focus of the researcher is on controlling or eliminating rather than on exploring and understanding the children's play.

The fact that educators rarely study illicit play does not diminish its importance. Illicit play is important to children because it provides them a sphere of autonomy within the classroom structure. Though they realize that such play involves some risk to the participants, children use illicit play activities to avoid assigned tasks or to make contact with peers during periods of classroom work. Despite the danger, or, perhaps in part because of it, children appear to delight in episodes of voluntary illicit play.

Although teachers may find incidents of illicit play to be disruptive, annoying, or exhausting, such play has value for them as well. The social life of children, which is ordinarily hidden from teachers, becomes visible during periods of illicit play. Further, episodes of illicit play are conducted in an area easily observed by teachers and researchers alike. If taken seriously, the study of illicit play promises a substantial harvest of insights and understandings about both children's peer culture and the nature of play itself.

Children's illicit play is evident in individual acts such as doodling, playing with small metal cars behind an open textbook, and sneaking a piece of candy. Pairs of children or small groups may pass notes, whisper, pull each other's hair, make faces, tell jokes, or giggle together. Illicit play may also take the form of speech play when children sing new words to familiar tunes in order to challenge authority, ridicule adults, and satirize established norms of behavior.³⁰ Such parodies are particularly popular in elementary schools; they enable children to express their disdain and resentment for schooling in general and individual teachers in particular. These satirical songs as well as writing notes and trading ritual insults often involve verbal fluency and social skills ordinarily admired by school officials. In the context of illicit play, however, these competencies become offensive.³¹

³⁰Marilyn Jorgensen, "Anti-School Parodies as Speech Play and Social Protest," in *The World of Play*, ed. Frank E. Manning (West Point, N.Y.: Leisure Press, 1983), pp 91-102

³¹Perry Gilmore, "Spelling 'Mississippi': Recontextualizing a Literacy-Related Speech Event," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 14 (Winter 1983): 235-256.

The teacher's organization of the curricular environment shapes the nature of illicit play episodes in the classroom. The nature of classroom work and the teacher's leadership style are particularly important factors that influence children's illicit play.³² For example, in classrooms where children were grouped by ability for academic lessons, Schwartz observed that the ability groups developed distinctive forms of illicit play.³³ The most academically able students interacted covertly and quietly during teacher-directed lessons. They established a variety of subtle devices for passing notes and maintaining peer contacts although the teacher openly discouraged such interaction. At those times, during which the teacher did permit peer interaction, the covert network dissolved, and the children substituted a system of informal peer contact.

Children who were in the least academically able groups, on the other hand, participated in overt, disruptive, and illicit play during academic work periods. Their illicit play distracted the teacher and undermined the academic efforts of other children. Illicit play thus became a substitute for lessons rather than an accompaniment to academics. The teacher viewed these children as disruptive and uncooperative and believed that the appropriateness of their placement in a low-ability group was confirmed by their behavior during periods of schoolwork.

Spencer-Hall³⁴ also found that many intermediate grade children hide their illicit play from their teachers. Her observations show that potentially disruptive behavior is often quietly and carefully concealed. Children who are sufficiently accomplished at avoiding detection are seen as compliant and cooperative by teachers, though their illicit play activities are as numerous and as varied as those of other pupils who are less clever about concealing their play. The children whom teachers think of as disruptive are those who are caught playing, not those who play more frequently.

Occasionally, illicit play can become a group effort. For example, Williams³⁵ observed a group of students stage a mock fight. The other children in the classroom realized that the fight was not serious, but they reacted with fear, horror, or partisan comments nonetheless. The teacher did not recognize the fight as play and devoted the considerable time and energy required to stop the "fight," settle the "dispute," quiet the children, and regain order in the classroom. The children laughed together later at the teacher's gullibility.

Such examples of group illicit play are rare, and the disorders caused by illicit play are usually not a serious challenge to the teacher's authority. Still, the opportunity to be disorderly may be one of the primary attractions of

³²Stephen Bossert, *Tasks and Social Relationships in Classrooms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

³³Frances Schwartz, "Supporting or Subverting Learning: Peer Group Patterns in Four Tracked Schools," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1981): 99-120.

³⁴Dee Ann Spencer-Hall, "Looking Behind the Teacher's Back," *The Elementary School Journal* 81 (May 1981): 281-289.

³⁵Melvin S. Williams, "Observations in Pittsburgh Ghetto Schools," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 12 (Fall 1981): 211-220.

illicit play. Illicit play permits children to deny the relevance of the school's agenda and to create a peer community that excludes the teacher. Children thus assert their control over both their loyalties and their activities during illicit play.

CONCLUSION

For each category of play, researchers have gathered and shared evidence concerning the experience and meaning of the play activities to the children and to the educational enterprise. Most of the work by educators has been in the area of instrumental play. Anthropologists and folklorists have investigated children's culture and the nature of real play. There are extremely few studies of illicit play, although these activities occupy teachers' time and attention daily in classrooms.

Advocates of play in the elementary school reveal their instrumental perspective when they extol play as a powerful motivator or a meaningful reward. Classroom play thus becomes one possibility in a range of instructional alternatives; it is, or is intended to be, controlled by adults in the interest of adult goals. Largely because of the instrumental attitude educators have toward nearly all school activities in general and toward school play in particular, the category of instrumental play is of overriding interest to educational researchers.

Not only does the educational community have an instrumental attitude toward classroom activities, but it also has an instrumental attitude toward educational research. Research is usually intended to further the official goals of the school. Play is of interest to the researcher, then, because of what can be learned about the use of play to achieve official school goals. Other aspects of play may not be relevant to a research agenda so closely tied to the immediate, concrete reality of schooling.

While the focus on instrumental play is not surprising, it is surprising that, despite the large number of studies about instrumental play, researchers have learned little from these studies. Most findings are suggestive rather than definitive, and conclusions are, in fact, inconclusive. Further, since the paramount interest is to establish a causal relationship between classroom play activities and academic achievement, the quality of the participants' experiences is rarely examined in detail. This does not, however, prevent researchers from extolling the importance of play and urging teachers to include play in academic lessons. Hortative rather than reasoned, much of this body of literature is seriously flawed as a source of understanding about play in the elementary school. Unfortunately, it also appears to be limited as a source of understanding about its primary focus, the relationship between goals of schooling and play.

With their research focus shaped so decisively so early in the research process, many educational researchers have an extremely narrow view of play, its manifestations in the classroom, and its meaning to participants. Their focus

on instrumental goals blinds researchers to the importance of real play and illicit play as aspects of children's experiences in school. The children continue to play, of course, but their play is invisible to researchers, it conceals rather than reveals

By ignoring or discounting real play and illicit play as appropriate phenomena for study, educational researchers do not have the opportunity to learn about child-controlled play situations. Although it is not directly controlled by teachers, real play, for example, is not without educational consequences. The opportunity to organize their own play experiences helps children to learn and requires them to practice a variety of interpersonal skills in a range of social situations. As they use social skills to accomplish immediate purposes, children also practice skills they will need in adulthood.

An exclusive focus on teacher-controlled play also leads to an idealization of children's play. Anti-social, unsavory, and uncouth aspects of play are ignored or controlled. Only "good" play comes to the researcher's attention, and "excessive" playfulness becomes a form of deviant behavior.³⁶ Researchers thus narrow and purify the play they choose to study and present a view of play that is, therefore, inevitably incomplete and distorted.³⁷

The focus on instrumental goals and the consequent idealization of children's play both explains and is explained by the choice of methodologies used in most studies of instrumental play. Most researchers develop clearly stated research hypotheses that link the play situation to learning outcomes, then they collect evidence that is relevant to their hypotheses and can be analyzed using quantitative research techniques. Their findings are presented numerically and either affirm or deny the original hypotheses. While this methodology has proved helpful in many research projects, it permits (and requires) researchers to ignore aspects of play that are not part of their original hypotheses. The actual experiences of participants are eclipsed as the researchers' preoccupation with adult goals forces them to view other categories of play as extraneous and insignificant.

While it is important to study instrumental play, it is equally important to understand the categories of children's play that adults may find more difficult to appreciate and condone, and that researchers may find more difficult to study. The qualitative research techniques used by the anthropologists and folklorists who study real play and illicit play reintegrate the concrete experiences and meanings of the players into the concerns of the researcher. The findings are not always of immediate use to teachers, the observations may reveal cruelty and rowdiness, and the research is time-consuming and difficult

³⁶Brian Sutton-Smith, "Play Theory and Cruel Play of the Nineteenth Century," in *The World of Play*, ed. Frank E. Manning (West Point, N.Y.: Leisure Press, 1983), pp. 103-110.

³⁷Brian Sutton-Smith, "Play Theory of the Rich and for the Poor," in *Children In and Out of School*, ed. Perry Gilmore and Allan A. Glatthorn (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982), pp. 187-205.

The results, however, are indispensable in helping adults to explore the nature of play in the lives of children and to understand the culture of childhood that emerges during play.

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