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## POWER SHIFT: PLAY AND AGENCY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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### Abstract

Considerable ferment exists around the changing nature of children's play and its place in contemporary childhood. Traditional perspectives on early childhood research have tended to trivialize and obscure the possibilities inherent in children's ways of knowing. Researchers seldom ask children what play means to them. This article proffers a relatively new image of childhood, one that presents young children as collaborators in research, as competent interpreters of their lived experience. It points to the possibilities of bringing children's voices forward, in valuing their contributions to and their collaboration in the research community, and, ultimately, in securing a significant place for their perspectives in the discourse on childhood. The research upon which the article is based investigates children's knowledge: their knowledge about what play is, how it is experienced, and its role in their lives, at school and at home. Interviews conducted with primary school students reveal how they perceive their lives in relation to the mainstream world of adults. Teachers and parents are seen as those who define, control, and sanction play. These children rely on the particularities and situatedness of everyday events to describe the meaning of play in their lives. Play emerges akin to a state of mind, invariably related to issues of autonomy, agency, and power.

Key words: play; agency; power; children knowledge, children culture; School.

### Deslocamento de poder: brincadeira e instituição na primeira infância

#### Resumo

Existe um fermento considerável de pesquisas considerável a respeito da natureza mutante das brincadeiras das crianças e seu lugar na infância contemporânea. Perspectivas tradicionais em pesquisas sobre primeira infância tenderam a trivializar e obscurecer possibilidades inerentes às formas de aprender das crianças. Pesquisadores raramente perguntam às crianças o que brincar significa para elas. Este artigo propõe uma imagem relativamente nova de infância, que apresenta as crianças como colaboradoras na pesquisa, como competentes intérpretes da própria experiência vivida. Aponta possibilidades de promover a voz das crianças, valorizando suas contribuições e sua cooperação na investigação em comunidade e, por fim, garantindo um lugar significativo para suas perspectivas no discurso sobre a infância. A pesquisa sobre a qual esse artigo se baseia investiga o conhecimento das crianças: seu conhecimento sobre o que é brincar, como isso é experimentado e qual o papel da brincadeira em suas vidas, na escola e em casa. Entrevistas conduzidas com alunos da escola elementar revelaram como eles percebem sua vida em relação ao dominante mundo dos adultos. Pais e professores são vistos como aqueles que definem, controlam e punem a brincadeira. Essas crianças recorrem às particularidades e aos contextos de eventos cotidianos para descrever o significado da brincadeira em suas vidas.

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Brincadeiras surgem tal como um estado mental, invariavelmente relacionadas a temas como autonomia, instituição e poder.

Palavras chave: brincadeira; instituição; poder; conhecimento infantil; cultura infantil; escola

### **Cambio de poder: juego y agencia en la temprana infancia**

#### **Resumen**

Existe un fermento considerable en torno de la naturaleza cambiante del juego infantil y su lugar en la infancia contemporánea. Perspectivas tradicionales de investigación sobre la infancia temprana han tendido a trivializar y oscurecer las posibilidades inherentes a las formas de conocimiento de los niños. Los investigadores rara vez preguntan a los niños sobre lo que significa para ellos el juego. Este artículo propone una imagen relativamente nueva de infancia, que presenta a los niños como colaboradores de la investigación, como intérpretes competentes de su propia experiencia de vida. Apunta a posibilidades de promover la voz de niñas y niños, dando valor a sus contribuciones y su colaboración en la investigación en comunidad y, finalmente, al garantizar un lugar significativo para sus perspectivas en el discurso sobre la infancia. Este estudio investiga el conocimiento de los niños: su conocimiento acerca de lo que es el juego para ellos, como lo experimentan y el papel que juega en sus vidas, en su escuela y en su hogar. Entrevistas a estudiantes de escuela primaria revelan cómo ellos perciben sus vidas en relación con el mundo de los adultos. Maestros y padres son vistos como aquellos que definen, controlan y sancionan el juego. Estos chicos recurren a las particularidades y situacionalidad de los eventos cotidianos para describir el significado que tiene el juego en sus vidas. El juego emerge como similar a un estado de la mente, siempre relacionado a temas como la autonomía, la agencia y el poder.

Palabras claves: juego, agencia, poder, conocimiento infantil, cultura infantil, voz, escuela.

## POWER SHIFT: PLAY AND AGENCY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

### A Vignette

*The bell rings signalling recess. "Now I have lots and lots of powers," Belle explains to whomever will listen. She wedges herself into the narrow wooden cubby she shares with two of her classmates, rustling through her backpack, searching for her elusive mittens. A boy's voice answers, muffled from the adjoining cubby, "You have the same powers as me. I have the four powers of the earth!" At last, she finds them. Her mittens are pieced together from yarn ends of various colours, fuzzy and worn. It is early spring, yet the wind bites, forcing memories of winter just past.*

*Evan waits impatiently by the classroom door. "The bell rang already!" he says. His small hand clutches a crumpled piece of paper, a magazine photograph of a vividly plumed parrot, lovingly salvaged from a project he and his classmates had been assigned earlier that day. The children had spent much of the morning creating collages of animals that hatch from eggs. The classroom is tidier now, only a few errant bits of paper remain on the floor. Earlier it had been strewn with magazines, paper, scissors, glue, pencils. Children had huddled together at tables, desks, on the floor, and in the hallway, thumbing through nature magazines, searching for just the right pictures.*

*Like many of their classmates Evan and Belle had saved favorites from among the myriad magazine photographs. Evan has managed to keep his prized parrot safe since morning, clutching it tightly in his hand, reading to it at book time, carrying on hushed conversations with it during math and sharing time. He perches the bird gently on Belle's shoulder. "He's going to give you a birdie kiss", he says as Belle emerges from her cubby, mittens in hand. "Let's play bird family".*

*"We should play pirates instead," she counters. "That's a pirate bird!" Together they swagger through the classroom door, out into the hallway, shifting their weight deliberately from side to side on stiff straight legs. Evan's parrot flies alongside in his outstretched hand as they make their way through the boot room and outside into the crisp afternoon air.*

*Ten short minutes later, the bell has rung again. Recess over, children stream through the heavy metal door. Evan and Belle are among the final few to re-enter the warmth of the school. Ruddy cheeked from the brisk air they kick their shoes high, scramble to retrieve them, then head back, through the boot room, and into the hallway. As they reach the classroom Belle lingers in the doorway, grabs Evan's arm and, leaning her face close to his, she entrusts him with her secret: "The cold keeps my powers. But when I get warm, I lose my power". She stuffs her mittens deep into her pockets and wriggles her arms from her jacket sleeves. The warmth of the classroom is a relief for many. Not for Belle. Turning from her locker, she slowly heads toward her desk. (From Fieldnotes, May 3, 2006)*

## Introduction

Seldom have researchers asked those who play the most what play means to them. This article is based upon research that was designed to advance understanding of how children's play is conceptualized by those who directly experience it and engage in it. It chronicles salient portions of interviews conducted with pairs of grade one children who participated in a study of children's playful social language at school. The research involved videotaping of children's in class conversations as well as the paired interviews. The interviews were conducted in order to open educational dialogue on social language and play to those who traditionally have had little occasion to be heard, to secure a more significant place for children's perspectives in the discourse on childhood. Although the interview conversations covered a variety of topics attention in this paper is focused upon the children's characterizations of play, their insights, opinions, and perceptions of its role at school and in their lives.

Scholarly discourse has historically been the domain of the expert: adult, western, and privileged. And, theories of play, its definition, and its implications, abound. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga (1949, 1970) approached play as a cultural rather than a psychological or physiological phenomenon. And so, he did not limit his treatise to an explication of children's play. He proposed that play is not definable "logically, biologically, or aesthetically" (p.25). Instead, he suggested that the best approach to understanding play is to itemize its fundamental characteristics. He described play as a "free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (p. 32).

While Huizinga stated that play exists "consciously outside ordinary life", Bateson (1976, 1955) used play as an exemplar of verbal communication which, he stated, "operate(s) at many contrasting levels of abstraction" (p.119). At the meta-communicative level, "the subject of the discourse is the relationship between the speakers" (Bateson, 1976, 1955, p.119). Bateson utilized the example, 'this is play,' to demonstrate how communication, the realization that our "signals are signals", evolves (p.119). Play can only happen if those involved are able to exchange signals which convey the 'this is play' message (p. 120). Players must have contextualized their interaction, given it a frame of reference. The frame helps the players understand the messages they are exchanging, and, that they are context specific. For example, when children play, they agree that what they are doing is, in essence, paradoxical; their playful actions do not signify or "denote" what those same actions would "denote" had they occurred in a non-play situation (Bateson, 1976, 1955, p.121).

Comparably Vygotsky (1978), who examined play from a developmental perspective, maintained that, as children begin to manipulate meanings, they move to an intellectually higher plane, capable of abstract thought (p. 101). Vygotsky concentrated upon play in early childhood, proposing that play is created in response to children's need to manage situations that are otherwise beyond their control. When children encounter "unrealizable tendencies" (p. 93), they invent imaginary, illusionary worlds where the unrealizable can be realized. For Vygotsky, then, problems are the genesis of play.

The significance Vygotsky attributed to play, its place in children's struggle to manage their life experience, intersects at its core with the thinking expounded by Erikson (1963). Erikson stated that play arises as children attempt to cope with situations where they find themselves and their social realities "wanting and trailing" (pp. 211-212). His roots in psychoanalytic theory are woven throughout his thinking. Erikson viewed play as a "function of the ego" that provides the child with power to chart his own course, to be "his own boss, because he obeys himself" (p. 211). He proposed that, for children, play is a way "to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning" (p. 222). Adults at play step sideways into another reality while children at play advance towards "new stages of mastery" (Erikson, 1963, p. 222).

Piaget too regarded play as part of the child's developmental process. However, unlike Erikson, he did not speak at any length to the issue of play in adulthood. In *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* Piaget (1962) stated that play "constitutes the extreme pole of assimilation of reality to the ego, while at the same time it has something of the creative imagination which will be the motor of all future thought and even of reason" (p. 162). Throughout the volume he fused his views of the evolution of representational thought and, ultimately of play, with his previously detailed description of a child's stages of cognitive development - from sensory motor through to formal operations. His explication of play, like his description of intelligence, is sequential, proceeding from stage to stage, from imitation through symbolic play, and on to a cursory description of games with rules.

Children constantly adapt to their environment. Through accommodation their mental structures adjust to new, unfamiliar, dynamic aspects of the environment and through assimilation they fit external events into existing schema. For Piaget play begins in infancy, its criterion being the "predominance of assimilation" (p.150). A key milestone noted in his description of the development of play is the "appearance of symbolism" (p. 162) and make believe. In later childhood, symbolic imaginative play is replaced by games with rules, and a "subtle equilibrium between assimilation to the ego - the principle of all play - and social life" occurs (Piaget, 1962, p. 168).

As a child progresses from the sensory motor level to the level of “representational thought” (Piaget, 1962, p. 163), symbolism, the child’s “consciousness of make-believe” (p. 165), gradually develops. Piaget stated emphatically that, rather than “subordination to reality” (p.167), symbolic play represents “ego-centric thought in its pure state” (p.166). Make believe play or “deliberate illusion” (p. 168) – a term Piaget borrowed from Lange and Groos – is the “most important manifestation” of a child’s “symbolic thought” (p. 169). An example from his oeuvre is his reference to compensatory play – correcting reality or “doing in play what one would not dare do in reality” (Piaget, 1962, p. 132). From a Piagetian perspective, symbolic make believe is a true exercise of power, a stalwart denial of the world of adults or of the authority of everyday reality (p. 168).

In everyday life, at home, at school, and in the world, young children encounter new words, new texts, and new discourses that they must reconcile with past experience. Not surprisingly, incongruities often arise. Britton (1993) suggested that incongruity presents an opportunity for laughter – an “invitation to play” (p. 85). He characterized play as a powerful tool children utilize to “drive a wedge between words and things: to encourage openness to alternative formulations of experience”. Play “envisages something over and above the obvious” (Britton, 1993, p. 86).

For Britton, as for Vygotsky, Piaget, and others, the evolution of play behaviour is pivotal to a child’s intellectual development. In play, situational constraints evaporate and a child “begins to act independently of what he sees” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 97). And so, the meaning of a situation becomes of utmost importance, rather than what is seen or experienced. Play is instrumental; a way to sever the meaning of something from the thing itself. As children begin to manipulate meanings, they move to an intellectually higher plane, capable of abstract thought (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 101). Play was seen by Vygotsky as a transition state, “free of real situations” (p. 98), a stage between the purely situational constraints of early childhood and adult thought.

Transitional objects and phenomena form the bedrock of Winnicott’s (2005) approach to understanding play, creativity, and aspects of cultural life. Winnicott proposed that the terms transitional objects and phenomena designate an area of betweenness, a “third part of life...to which reality and external life both contribute”, a “resting-place” (p.3), which develops in infancy and endures throughout life. Winnicott claimed that when an infant latches on to a transitional object – his first “not-me possession” (p 130) – the edge of a blanket or some soft object, for example – the not-me object symbolizes a union of the child and mother. As well as being the “child’s first use of symbol”, the use of a transitional object is the child’s “first experience of play” (Winnicott, 2005, p 130). And, importantly for Winnicott, in play,

children, or adults for that matter, are “free to be creative” (p. 71). He juxtaposes creativity with compliance; compliance being an attitude of acquiescence to the world as it is. Living creatively or playfully colours an individual’s “whole attitude” (p. 87) to reality. It is a healthy way of being.

Sutton-Smith (1997) questioned key taken-for-granted assumptions that maintain a correlation between play and development. For him, those who perpetuate rhetorics of progress, developmentalists presumably, ultimately succeed in maintaining adult power over children. He lamented that little attention has been paid to the power rhetoric of play where children address issues of hegemony and hierarchy in their own right. Sutton-Smith, proposed that it is the “public transcript of adults”, the “rhetoric of progress”, that maintains and justifies children’s subordination (p. 116).

Scott (1990) dissected how subordinates deal with those in power in public and private ways. He claimed that the powerless create a “hidden transcript”, a power critique, “spoken behind the back of the dominant” (pp. 4-5). This hidden transcript, a covert discourse of sorts, is obscured by virtue of its seeming innocuousness. Sutton-Smith aligned his perspective with Scott’s, asserting that the hidden transcript of children’s culture can be revealed by examining their play: their songs, texts, rituals. Hidden transcripts “press[es] against and test the limits of what may be safely ventured in terms of a reply to the public transcript of deference and conformity” (Scott, 1990, pp. 157-158). Both Scott and Sutton-Smith suggested that children’s play can be regarded as an attempt to ward off the dominant adult culture. Certain institutions, schools, camps, sports teams, are presented to and encountered by children as bastions of adult power; places where children’s culture is forced underground; places where covert discourse, often enacted out of the earshot of adults, becomes a way to exert power and resistance (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 118). Sutton-Smith (1997) proffered that play can be understood as childhood’s autonomous response to reality, a deconstruction of everyday life, perhaps. He argued that, if the world is seen as text, then children’s play becomes their response to that text (p.166).

Historically, children’s responses to the world, their viewpoints and their ways of knowing have been underrepresented in scholarly research. Still research does exist which examines play from a child’s perspective. King (1987) examined the results of three studies in which elementary school children from Kindergarten through grade five defined and discussed work and play at school. She explored play through the words of the focal children, and then utilized the categories that emerged from the children’s play and work definitions to examine educational research relevant to each category.



King's findings uncovered a clear distinction between work and play as defined by Kindergarten children and a less definitive characterization by older children. Like Dewey (1933), who characterized "externally assigned" tasks as work and "fanciful and arbitrary" activity as play (p. 213), the older children in the King study described work as "required, evaluated, and difficult or tedious" and play simply as "fun and/or undemanding" (King, 1987, p. 145).

King established three categories of play based on her interview data: instrumental, illicit, and recreational. Instrumental play is sanctioned play that teachers either program or allow. Illicit play is unsanctioned and is predominantly oral. Illicit play is often characterized as aberrant and dysfunctional, play that teachers make regular efforts to control and/or quell. King submits that illicit play provides a point of social contact for children whereby a community is formed that excludes adults and reveals something of the social world of children. Illicit play offers children a sense of autonomy and control over experience, a chance to comment on the imposition of adult norms and the relevance of the classroom agenda. King separates recreational play from illicit play essentially as a function of place; recreational play is playground activity that children initiate and control (King, 1987, p. 146-151).

In a later study King, this time with Apple (1990), found agency to be a powerful determiner in Kindergarten's naming of their daily school experience. Apple and King discovered that, after just two weeks of school, children had learned to dichotomize classroom activity and to categorize classroom materials according to their perceived use: "things to work with and things to play with" (p. 54). The materials characterized as work materials were consistently those used as directed by the teacher. All work was compulsory. The materials the children *chose* to use during free time were classified as "play materials or toys" (Apple & King, 1990, p. 55). Interestingly, the children distinguished between work and play solely on the basis of freedom to choose.

Advocates of a children's culture approach maintain that, while children's ways of knowing and doing may be different from adults', that does not mean that their knowledge should be considered to be inferior to adults'. Their mandate is to honour children's voices. Still, there are attendant risks attached to such a perspective. Although children may speak and be heard, they may not matter. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) say it best: "one of the things being subaltern means is not mattering, not being worth listening to or not being understood when one is 'heard'" (p. 559).

Mattering – being asked, being heard, and being valued – places children firmly within the research community as collaborators in, not merely the objects of,

research. It moves them from a position of deficit to a position of competence and agency. Increasing the opportunities children have to participate in research, to express their ideas and to share their ways of knowing, is a crucial first step towards moving their knowledge into mainstream education dialogue. And, this can occur only if educators and researchers rethink what counts as knowledge. To that end, and to remain true to its conceptual framework and to its intended empirical purpose, this article is designed to highlight children's insights about play and its role in their lives.

### ***Research Method***

Findings cited in this article are based on interviews conducted in a western Canadian urban elementary school. The interviews were part of a larger 2006 study of the social language of children. The study's mandate was twofold: to examine the nature of children's social language at school, in a grade one classroom, and to determine the role of play or playfulness in their social language and in their culture. The interview portion of the research was conducted in June of the children's first grade year. The interviews were designed to provide the children with an opportunity to reflect upon their discursive lives, to explicate their thoughts and impressions of the nature of their play and social talk, particularly at school.

Permission to conduct research was obtained through the customary channels: a behavioural research and ethics committee vetted the study, application to the school division and to the specific school site was made and accepted; and the participants and their parents provided the researchers with assent and consent. Even though permission forms had been signed, at the outset of each interview, the children were informed again of their right not to participate and asked whether or not they wanted to proceed. In all cases the children reiterated their willingness to take part in the interviews. After the interviews were completed, transcripts were provided for parents and their children. Corresponding data release forms were signed by all participants and their parents.

A loosely structured paired interview format was utilized. Related studies, cited by Graue and Walsh (1998), support the use of paired or group interviews with young children and underscore the effect of group interviews upon participants' likelihood to answer questions collaboratively and keep each other truthful. A video camera recorded the interviews which were conducted in a multipurpose room in the school, away from the children's grade one classroom.

The interviews conducted in this study were designed with an expectation of lateral rather than vertical interaction. And, the execution of the interviews was grounded upon certain essential premises: that children's knowledge and understanding of the world is worth researching, that children should actively

participate in the inquiry process, and that children can and do reflect upon their life experiences. Children are, as Corsaro advocates, and I concur, able to “actively interpret ... and shape ... the research process” (Corsaro, cited in Christensen & James, 2003, p. 5). Participants in the study were encouraged to ‘tell about’ their school and life experiences through the use of six open-ended, descriptive questions. The use of the unstructured interview framework foregrounded the children’s voices; it distinguished the children as subjects of the research process.

Still, interviewing young children is not without its challenges. And certain realities must be acknowledged. Even a desire to place young children at the centre of the research process - to break away from an adult-centric research lens - does not erase the power differentials that, in reality, exist between adults and children. In addition, the interviews for this study occurred in a school setting where the power imbalance between adults and children is often exacerbated by formal elicitation/response/feedback interaction patterns. To ensure a sense of equality in the research process, to provide opportunities for the children to take ownership of the interviews and the research process, and to limit the possibility that a question and answer format would result in a tendency for the children to strive to respond with ‘right’ answers, hypothetical situations were embedded in the question scripts. It then became possible for the children to be actively, if not directly, involved in the design and direction of the research project. Their responses to, and discussion of, the interview topics not only informed the structure of the interviews, but also facilitated subsequent interpretation and analysis from the perspectives of the children themselves, creating a research atmosphere of dialogue and agency.

Six randomly selected pairs were interviewed for the study. The following interview synopses illustrate how the participants view play and its place in their lives, how they modify, extend, agree, and disagree with each other’s thinking, and how they related their comments, theories, and philosophies about play to their lived experience.

### *The Interviews*

#### *Tim and Brooke*

Tim and Brooke share a certain social reality which noticeably affects the ease with which their conversation unfolds, and how thoughtfully they build upon each other’s ideas. Both reside in the school neighbourhood. They attended Kindergarten, day care, and preschool together and, besides being classmates, spent time together at the same after-school program. Both Brooke and Tim remain focused, thoughtful, and responsive throughout the interview.

As the interview begins the children are asked about their favourite things to do at school. Tim responds first stating that gym and free time are his favourites. Brooke's favourites are crafts and Writers' Club. Tim reasons that in gym you can do "whatever you want." Brooke focuses upon how craft time provides opportunities to develop a social network, to interact, and to talk with friends. In response to the interviewer's request that they provide definitions of work and play, they answer jointly stating that play involves situations "when you get to choose whatever you want", but that work is externally regulated.

Tim clarifies further however, noting that even if choice is provided - for example, if, at home, parents "get you to choose your chores" - the event should still be considered to be work, not play. Tim's idea of regulated choice leads Brooke to comment that chores such as cleaning her room are work, but that, even so, she does enjoy doing them since they provide an opportunity to listen to music as she cleans. So, work, like play, can be enjoyable to some degree if coupled with desired, self-determined activity. Tim refers to gym-time primarily as play. However, he brackets music and dance saying that dance differs because of its classification as an "activity". For Tim, dancing is "usually" work. But Brooke is not as convinced:

Brooke: Well, I'm not sure because sometimes me and my friends like to pretend that we're dancing just for play.

Pretence affects the arbitrariness of the play-work dichotomy. If you pretend to do something that is normally considered to be work, then, it becomes play. Both children's comments indicate that an event may be considered to be work in one circumstance, or for one person, yet for another person or in another situation; it could be considered to be play. Clearly neither child saw work and play as discrete categories. Rather, they considered play and work to be multilayered and multifaceted, often associated with one's state of mind. Reading, which Tim confidently places in the work category, Brooke characterizes as "in the middle". And math too is not so easily categorized. Tim reasons that telling time on a "fake clock" cannot be easily categorized as either work or play:

Tim: It's sort of playing when you say "It's 12 o'clock" and you look at the real clock and it's 5:15.

Tim sees a conceptual link between the presentation of hypothetical situations utilized to illustrate curricular objectives, such as learning to tell time, the imaginative quality of pretend play, and what he describes as "real time stuff". The coexistence of binary opposites - reality and fantasy - within the same curricular event, he suggests, is possible and acceptable.

For Tim and Brooke imagination is neither work nor play:

Tim: It's sort of in-between I think

Brooke: Oh yeah. Tim's right. It's in the middle.

Both children admit to having vivid imaginary lives. Brooke describes how she engages her imagination to anticipate events, enact desires, and exercise power over situations that may seem beyond her control:

Brooke: Sometimes when my real teacher's not there, hasn't been at swimming lessons for two whole months, I'm like imagining that he'll be back the next time ... 'cause I kind of miss him.

Brooke identifies play as a way to overcome situational constraints. She articulates how inventing an imaginary world allows the unrealizable to be realized.

For Tim, imagination plays a key intellectual role:

Tim: The thing why it's important is that ... when you use your imagination you get more stuff in your brain. You get more imagination and like there's more to your imagination.

Tim's observation hints at the idea of neuro-plasticity, that the brain can change itself through "thought and activity" (Doidge, 2007, xv), that imaginative thoughts can actually change the structure of the brain (p. 214). Brooke agrees, stating that using your imagination "makes your imagination get stronger". And Tim equates the ability to use your imagination as key to carrying you forward intellectually, to "grade two, three, or four".

Brooke and Tim agree that play can involve toys but needn't. And Tim cites games such as Hide and Seek as play without props. Nevertheless, he cautions that "not all games are always play". Brooke concurs, explaining how people can tire of games. Their comments underscore the variability of play, how play is connected to one's state of mind. Sport is a key example; it fits "in the middle", "in between" the ideas of absolute work and play. Tim and Brooke refer to the impact of adult power and authority upon play and, consequently, upon their perception of sports as more or less playful. They identify feeling pressured by parents, and lament that they "have to" go faster, or try harder. Their remarks raise key issues that move sport along the continuum away from play and towards work, once again reflecting the impact of agency on children's characterization of events as playful.

### *Olivia and Kate*

Like Tim and Brooke, both Olivia and Kate regularly attend the school's after-school program. They are friends both in and out of school and can often be overheard at their lockers planning their social lives, or recounting weekend adventures. Olivia and Kate regard play as separate in time and place from their

classroom experience: play is something children do at lunch, at recess, before and after school, far from the eyes of adults. Only occasionally do they play in the classroom: when inclement weather necessitates an indoor recess, or at “choice time” late Friday afternoons.

From Olivia’s perspective the key difference between work and play is that play is “more fun than working”. Kate agrees that play is fun, but cautions that in-class curricular activities are “better” than play because they “help you learn”. The girls cite “cleaning” and “writing stuff down” as typical examples of work, and “going on the slide, colouring a picture, hide and go seek, tag, and tickling people” as playful pastimes.

Still, Olivia and Kate’s answers to subsequent questions indicate that, like Brooke and Tim, they place play and work along a continuum where situational elements act as key determinants of their characterization. Olivia points out how contextual nuance can impact upon the nature of simple playful acts, causing her to re-characterize them. If an activity is presented in a curricular context by an adult, then it moves away from play, towards work along the work-play continuum. It becomes “in-between”:

Olivia: If your teacher asks you to do your picture after she does something that matches what she said or something, then it would be work. If you’re colouring a picture and it’s ... indoor recess ... that would be playing colouring a picture.

Clearly, it is the presence of constraints upon their ability to exercise agency that colour the girls’ perception of the play-likeness of particular activities. Neither play nor work can be categorized consistently nor are they uniformly meaningful. They are, as Brooke and Tim’s comments indicate, relative, temporal, contingent.

And, for Olivia, as for Tim and Brooke, imagining is similarly difficult to characterize. Olivia sees imagining as helpful at school in a curricular context, “when someone wants us to write a story”:

Olivia: It wouldn’t be play because you’re working on a story. Then you’re working on imagining.

Play and work are not simply this or that, they can be both. Imagination can be either work or play, depending upon circumstance. Kate and Olivia both recognize a continuum based conceptual framework for play and work and are comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in that perspective. For them, play and work do not necessarily represent binary opposites. Some activities the girls suggest, overlap. “Imagining”, “drawing”, “colouring pictures”, and “baking a cake” can be either work or play.

### *Belle and Connor*

Connor is a wiry active boy, a fast talker, lively, inquisitive, and full of fun. Belle is a sprite of a girl, slender and fair. Belle and Connor banter throughout the interview, sometimes conferring with each other, crafting corporate answers, at other times candidly disagreeing. When asked to distinguish between work and play, Belle focuses upon the importance of freedom to choose:

Belle: Well the difference is you have to do what you want to do.

Connor: Play is more like, 'Hey let's go over there and play some Lego'.

Work is more like pencil, glue, paper and folding and stuff like that.

That's why it's no fun.

Belle agrees in essence with Connor's explanation, but she adds a contextual caveat. Drawing and making things that are used for play, such as swords, should be considered to be play as well. Both children agree that fun is a key defining quality of play. Yet Connor purposefully points to play's ambiguity. He comments that "sometimes" an activity can still be play even if it is not fun. He cites baseball as an example, stating that sports are "sometimes... play and sometimes ...not":

Connor: Sometimes, play is not fun. Like when you're playing a little game...

Belle: That you don't like.

Belle acknowledges play's practical benefits as well. She sees play, particularly pretending and imagining, as possibly a rehearsal for life, a potential problem-solving strategy. Belle connects play, official curricula 'learning a second language, health, and personal safety lessons' and the pragmatics of everyday life:

Belle: If you're playing 'teach French', you can learn to speak French.

And if you're playing 'go do the right thing', you can practice trying to get away from a guy who's trying to touch your private parts.

Playing is fun, but it can be utilitarian as well.

### *Lauren and Chloe*

Like Connor and Belle, Lauren and Chloe often piece together answers to the interview questions. Both girls are spontaneous, direct, often bold and opinionated. "Math, play time, gym and Writers' Club" are their favourite school activities. Writers' Club tops Lauren's preferred list, while Chloe's favourite is play. She explains:

Chloe: Because you get to colour and do stuff, kind of fun things.

Lauren: And you usually don't get them.

Chloe: Cause you only get it in Kindergarten and preschool.

The girls' joint response is loaded with implications about the nature of play, autonomy, agency, and the institutionalization of their young lives. The same issues arise as Lauren attempts to define work and play:

Lauren: Playtime you can stop and work you can't stop.

Differences between work and play, either at home or at school, are inexorably linked to the presence or absence of adult power and control. For Chloe too, play is undoubtedly, self-determined activity. Even writing, which both she and Lauren had earlier classified as work, could fit into the play category, "if you wanted to" do it. An activity's prior definition as play or work is superseded by one's attitude towards the event. Play is contextual and situational, yet clearly linked to agency, intentionality, and fun. Play shifts power into children's hands. And for Chloe, empowerment is intrinsically related to her ability to choose.

For Lauren though, even mandated curricular activity can be considered to be somewhat playful:

Lauren: Like when the teacher makes you make those caterpillars. They were fun.

When asked whether that particular event was work or play, Lauren's answer is thoughtful:

Lauren: Both ... 'cause you're building and that's kind of fun. And in work, you have to do it.

Lauren's perception of the activity as something "the teacher makes you make" prevents her from seeing it as pure play. Yet, the creativity involved in the task similarly prevents its polarization as work. Lauren explains how mandated activities can move along the continuum from work towards play. She talks about reconfiguring and transforming particular art projects, "draw[ing] things", playing with her pencil, or making her writing go "funky". Freedom to embellish an assignment can potentially make the process more playful. Overcoming the situational constraints embedded in the prescriptive nature of various curricular acts moves those acts along the continuum toward play.

Undoubtedly, the girls recognize the artificial bifurcation of work and play and its impact upon their institutionalized lives. And, they understand the power of play and the imagination to loosen the hold these arbitrary categories have upon them. For them work is synonymous with disempowerment and adult hegemony. Play is code for empowerment and freedom.



### *Celia and Ally*

The beauty of randomly selecting interview partners is the opportunity it affords for unlikely pairings, for hearing talk between individuals who may not normally choose to interact. Celia and Ally are just such a pair. Equally delightful, yet as different as night and day, these girls do not run in the same social circles.

Playing at recess is Celia's favorite part of school. She identifies the social aspect of play as a reason for her choice. "Because you get to play with your friends", she states. And, she states, "having fun" and "getting to do whatever you want" are integral to play. Celia explains that the freedom to "do whatever you want" does not exist in the classroom and that teachers make decisions about classroom interaction.

According to Ally, ideas about play originate "in your mind" and sometimes in music and movies. She explains how she watches movies or video games with friends, then selects scenes to "try to act ...out". When asked which has a greater potential for fun, playing video games or acting out ideas from the games, Ally prefers "the acting out part". Celia agrees that ideas for play can come from the media: television, movies, and video games:

Celia: Yeah. Like, I've got this secret agent Barbie game. We played it and sometimes I pretend to be, like, a spy!

Still, neither girl is limited by what she has seen or heard in popular culture. Both transform and reconfigure kernel ideas and make them their own. "I do different stuff though", Celia elaborates. The girls appropriate key elements of popular culture which have been produced by adults for children. Then, they imaginatively extend, reinvent, and transform them to meet their needs. Even though both girls enjoy playful interactions that involve imagination, neither admits to pretending during formal class time. However, both admit to engaging in imaginative play during their Friday free time and at recess. Ally differentiates between *playing school* and being *in school*. Drawing during free choice time, or when you are "playing school", is not the same as drawing in class:

Ally: You can draw and that's not really part of school.

Implicit in her differentiation are matters of free will and choice and the artificial boundaries between play and work that have become part of her lived school experience.

And so, decisions about play are children's decisions. The decision making process can be individual or shared, depending upon whether the play is social or solitary. The social aspect of play is essential to Ally's characterization, so much so that solitary play becomes social in her imagination. She reconfigures it to suit her desires. She reasons that you can even play hide and seek on your own:

Ally: If you ... pretend[ed] that there was an imaginary friend.

For Celia too, play can be individual or social. She identifies “sliding” and “swinging”, as examples of solitary play. Playing at home can also involve spending time “helping my Dad...build stuff and do stuff”. When asked whether or not she considers building things with her Dad to be play, she answers thoughtfully:

Celia: Yeah. It feels like it’s playing.

Celia’s response – that what she does with her father “feels like... playing” – points to the aesthetic nature of play, the unfinalizability of it. Play is freshly constructed in each instance. And so, it is amazingly difficult to define. Play is not a specific state, nor is it a specific set of activities per se. For the participants in this study, play exists along a continuum. Its essence, as Celia has cleverly noted, is closely associated to how one “feels” when engaged in it. Play, for the most part, is an emotional aesthetic event. It is ephemeral; situationally, not universally, definable. Play can be recontextualized and reconfigured. It can be this and/or that, for this person or that person.

Later in the interview, Celia identifies “building something” as an activity she also considers to be work. Several subtleties are involved in this seemingly contradictory classification. Work, in this context, lacks the social element Celia spoke to earlier when she stated that helping her father “feels like play”. Also, there is implicit reference to the impact of choice to the characterization of this activity as playful. Dad works on building a birdhouse. Yet, when Celia helps Dad, when she has freely chosen to engage in the activity, it falls more into the realm of play. Celia’s response supports Tim and Brooke’s determination that an event can be play or work in differing circumstances. Like Tim and Brooke, Celia clearly places the two on a continuum:

Celia: Working is sort of in the middle of fun and playing is a lot of fun.

### *Jake and Evan*

The girls’ arbitrary definition of play and its impact upon free will is echoed by Evan and Jake as they talk about life in grade one. They take charge of the interview from the outset, moving into a discussion of play and work almost immediately. When asked to tell about his experience in grade one, Evan begins:

Evan: You get lots and lots of work

Jake: And, you get play time.

Evan is quick to clarify that play time in grade one is significantly less than in Kindergarten:

Evan: [In grade one] a little bit [of play time]. But Kindergartens get humongous play times. And do a teeny tiny bit of work.

The boys present a shared world view, an intersubjective understanding of their school experiences despite the fact that they attended different schools the previous year. Corporately they continue, taking turns completing each other's sentences:

Jake: When I was in Kindergarten you do one page of work and

Evan: then you get to have play time for a hour.

Jake: At my school, two hours.

They juxtapose Kindergarten and grade one, lamenting the fact that, as they see it, in grade one you get only "one or two minutes of play time and you get a humongous bunch of work". Evan dichotomizes the two:

Evan: It's the opposite, Kindergarten and grade one.

And Jake agrees.

When Jake is queried, he defines play succinctly. It is when "you do whatever you want." The boys define work in terms of events typically associated with formal schooling: "science, math, picture word chart, sentences, reading". Jake associates work with the acquisition of "good things in your mind". Although it is apparent that he treasures his play time, Jake sees few intellectual benefits in his favourite pastimes. The "good things in your mind", which occur as a result of work, "all fall out", during play. His explanation points to the impact of schooling upon how he perceives play, how he has learned to compartmentalize and redefine his everyday life:

Jake: Play is all bad for your brain and stuff. Work is all good.

For Jake, play has come to be valued, or not, only in direct opposition to work. Evan too sees them as polarities:

Evan: Work is, like, working hard and sweating. [He drags his hands deliberately down from his forehead to his cheeks, wiping make-believe perspiration from his face.]

Evan: [bouncing in his chair, his arms swinging freely above his head] and play time is playing like - ah-hhh - and not doing any work.

Play for Evan is unpretentiously defined. It is not work. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that limitations do exist upon the freedoms that play affords. With freedoms come attendant responsibilities, embedded social controls:

Evan: You can to lots of stuff - whatever you want - but not like fighting or anything. So playtime has a little bit of rules.

For Evan play is as much about social interaction as it is about doing what you want. Each play episode he describes is linked to his relationship with his closest friend Belle, with whom he shares an almost obsessive interest in furbies. Furbies are small, commercially produced plush toys with large eyes, protruding ears, and mouths that move when they 'talk'. Furbies 'speak' furbish and communicate using a voice recognition system. Evan deconstructs his and Belle's obsession with furbies, relating their common interest to a certain intersubjectivity that is operationalized through mutual thought and shared playful social language:

Evan: And every time it's recess, the furby word comes up and Belle's furby word comes up, and we both say it at the same time, all the time.

Evan is unwilling to credit the media or popular culture with the ideas he and Belle utilize in their daily imaginative furby play. And, he criticizes media for presenting furbies in a static, one-dimensional manner:

Evan: I'm doing lots of thinking, and me and Belle too. So we have lots of stuff in *our mind* ... The people that made up the furbies just wanted to go with normal furbies. Me and Belle wanted to go with combining other stuff with one furby.

Reconfiguring furbies is one way Evan and Belle evaluate, act upon, and respond to popular culture. They extend, elaborate, and transform the furbies to meet their particular play needs rather than accept them at face value:

Evan: Like, you just take the furby's identity and you put it in the camera. And they can talk and they can walk ... like it's a talking, walking, furby-camera. Like it sounds like a furby and a furby head just pops out of the top.

Evan is remarkably aware of how the appropriation works. He describes the hybridization process he and Belle engage in as they create their special furbies. Evan also repeatedly makes reference to their social thinking by stating that he and Belle are constantly "combining our brains together" and by characterizing his imaginative furby play with Belle as originating in "our mind". Ideas "just come in our mind", he says as he describes how they collaborate to create butterfly furbies:

Evan: Me and Belle combined it together ... Take the caterpillar kind of thing off (when it used to be a caterpillar), and then you take a furby, and then you put on the wings. So, Belle made the thing, like the caterpillar that's turned into a butterfly, and I made it up that how you put it together ... We put it together but it's only different ... We combined it to quite a few things.

Evan clearly identifies cooperative thinking and the importance of social interaction in his reflections upon play. The social bond created through play is

palpable. Even solitary play becomes social play for Evan. Without Belle, he still plays:

Evan: I just play alone and I pretend that Belle is there.

Evan and Belle's imaginary furby play world, complete with "boss furbies" and "rock star furbies", in many ways, parallels the world as it is. It differs fundamentally, however, because the furby play world is a world they control, a particular social space where together they exercise agency. Evan is metacognitively aware of the ubiquity of his imaginary life, play's social core, and the implicit power play and imagination have to manipulate and to transform. He freely acknowledges that he does "a lot of imagining". As he reflects on his classroom experience, Evan explores the paradoxical nature of play and its relationship to work:

Evan: Sometimes I think about work *and* do the imagining. My brain, half my brain goes, like, this side goes like: 'Another type of furby is born' and the other one is doing work. So I do two things ... I think imagining is work for me.

### *Conclusion*

Evan's reasoning, and the views of his classmates, echo Bateson's representation of play as paradoxical, Vygotsky's focus upon the power of the imaginary, and Sutton-Smith's preoccupation with play's ambiguity. Just, what is play? *Can* play be work? Is it this or that? Or, can it be this *and* that?

By virtue of their embeddedness in adult culture young children are introduced to the ideas of play and work as pre-existing dichotomous structures. Authoritative adult discourse has defined work and play as polar opposites. Their meanings are already fused to them. And so, predictably, the children interviewed in this study spoke of the institutional bifurcation of work and play as being associated with either adult-initiated or child-initiated activity.

All the children interviewed utilized and understood the dichotomized reference terms, work and play, as opposites. Still, even though the children utilized these reference terms to qualify certain aspects of their official lived experience at school, their unofficial understanding of the terms was less than definitive. They recognized the dichotomization of work and play institutionally and interacted officially in class on that basis. However, they understood work and play differently, and unofficially, from a philosophical perspective.

Play, although understood by all children, was not understood similarly by all children. More often than not, a child's sense of an event determined its characterization as play, not some fixed, finite, immutable notion or set of features. Specific events, depending upon situation, could be placed at varied points on the

experiential spectrum. And, many activities were determined to be “in the middle”, that is, neither play nor work. Contradictoriness and variability in the children’s definition of play reflects their aesthetic response to events. Ultimately, it was their own unique lived-through experience that became the primary feature the children relied upon to determine whether or not an event should be considered to be play. Accordingly, even though all children understood the sense of it, a consensus about play’s particularized meaning was not reached.

Through their answers to interview questions the participants expressed a layered understanding of play and, similarly, of work. The meanings they attached to play, in particular, were contextual, free of certainty and absolutes, sometimes contradictory, always multilayered. The children understood play and work officially, at school and at home, as dichotomous, as endpoints on an experiential continuum. They understood them unofficially, in their local culture, as ephemeral and contingent.

The children rejected universal representations and meanings for play, instead relying on the particularities and situatedness of everyday events to determine their characterization and understanding. The key to the meaning of play lies in its unfinalizability. Play is powerful. It can be this and that; context driven and situation specific. Or it can be this or that; finite and immutable. Play can be “doing what you want”. Or, it can be doing what others want you to do, your way. That these children agreed regarding the unfinalizability of play, its impact, and its importance to agency in their everyday lives, is critical. Their deep understanding of play interrogates modernist assumptions about the concrete, simplistic thinking of young children, about representations of children as receivers rather than creators of knowledge. That these young children recognized elements of contradiction and discontinuity within their lives places them well within the conceptual space of a postmodern childhood. Paradox and contradictoriness are acceptable. Meaning is local, temporal, and unfinalizable.

Although all interviewees acknowledged the ambiguity of play, threads of agreement, common knowledge, shared attitudes, viewpoints, and theories about play and its place in their lives did emerge. Preferred activity at school was often referred to as play-like while non-preferred activity was predictably described as more like work. Still, overlaps did occur and perhaps more often than one would expect. Multiple meanings surfaced. Play was recognized as not the same as work. Yet, play could possibly be work that you *want* to do.

Surprisingly, some of the children commented that play was not always or necessarily pleasurable; that conceivably, you could be playing yet not actually “having fun”. Because of this incongruity – that play was sometimes fun and

sometimes not, that you could be playing yet not be engaged in purely pleasurable behaviour – sports and games emerged as either uncategorizable or as more like work than play.

Throughout the interviews social play was cited as most fulfilling, so much so that some children spoke of how they would invoke their imaginations to transform solitary play into social play. Still, the children did not equate play with sociality; several children talked about playing alone, pretending, swinging, and drawing, for example. And, the border between artful endeavours (which were often engaged in alone) and play was indistinct and permeable. Crafts, drawing, and constructing were identified as playful activities by some. Still the situation, the children's ability to position themselves as agents, emerged as the determining factor in their characterization of a creative activity as play. Children described certain curricular art experiences as somewhat playful contingent upon issues of agency and autonomy, upon whether or not they wanted to participate, and whether or not they could exercise the power to switch up, embellish, and extend the experience, and thus make it their own.

Television, movies, video games, and toys were regarded simply as props for play. There was a certain degree of critical consciousness and spectatorship associated with the children's use of the materials of popular culture; they spoke freely of how they evaluated, reconfigured, reinvented, and transformed them to meet the particular needs of their play, thus shifting the locus of control away from those who had created the cultural images, and into their hands. As agentive social actors the children constructed social, localized, dialogized meanings for play that were conceptually independent, although they were undeniably related, to adult controlled popular culture.

Links between imagination and play were mentioned by all children interviewed. However, imagination and play were not seen as synonymous. Neither was imagination associated exclusively with play. Several children cited benefits to imagining which exist outside the realm of playful activity. Imagination can help solve problems, provide an opportunity to practise life skills, make the mundane (schoolwork, for example) more enjoyable, and be intellectually stimulating. Not all children agreed regarding the benefits or deficits of imagining. And imaginative play was often set aside as different from game playing, sports, or active play. The imagination was identified as essential to pretend play but also seen as useful outside the realm of play situations. Invoking the imagination can move an activity from playfulness along the continuum towards work if it is used to a curricular purpose.

The participants' insightful responses to the interview questions were crafted with a dual track understanding of life in mind – an awareness that daily they dealt

with two separate world views: one unofficial, the other official; one, the culture of childhood, and the other, the culture of adults. A clear sub-text emerged from the participants' recognition of this duality. To a certain yet to be determined extent, the children recognized the struggle for hegemony that Bakhtin (1981) identified as crucial to the process of "ideological becoming" (p. 341). Clearly, the children envisioned play as a centrifugal force in their lives, as an opportunity for creativity and innovation, for gaining control, and for exercising agency. They were mindful of the integral role play discourse takes in the struggle to 'become'.

Children remain in the margins, essentially without voice, because they appear to display a dearth of meaningful frames of reference. The participants in this study have made it clear that for them, play is a legitimate frame of reference, a way to perceive or evaluate the world, a way to communicate ideas. Inherent in play is the power to shift the locus of control from the official to the unofficial, from the iterative to the possible, from the centre to the margins, from adulthood to childhood. Play is, in essence, agentive behavior. When play begins, as Belle and her friends contend, the powers of the earth shift into their hands.

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