

THEMATIC SESSION: THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

AN URBAN SCHOOLYARD AS A PLACE FOR PLAY: ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE ECOLOGY OF A SCHOOLYARD

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is how urban children used a schoolyard as a place for play during recess period. My investigation attempts to understand first and second grade students' use of a schoolyard during recess. However, I did not know what kinds of play activities I was likely to discover in this specific setting. From the schoolyard literature I learned that there were limited generalizations that could be drawn concerning children's activities in the yard, and that similarities among yards were minimal because of their physical layout and the children's own individuality. The present study was undertaken as a contribution to improving schoolyard environments for children's play.

The focus of this study is on how children in a Harlem school use their schoolyard as a place for play during recess period. It investigates the relationship between children's use of the schoolyard for play purposes and what children know about play in this setting. Apart from examining first- and second-grade students' knowledge and current use of their schoolyard, the larger goal of this study is to provide background information to a participatory design project focused on changing the schoolyard.

This study is part of a continuing and general project that was initiated by The Children's Environments Research Group of the City University of New York Graduate Center for The New York City Coalition for Children's Play and Recreation. This participatory project is addressing design and management strategies to improve two schoolyards in Manhattan. Its aim is to study "how these two schoolyards are currently used by children, school staff and the community, and how a participatory design process might be used to redesign these spaces in ways that are practical, creative, and manageable" (Katz & Hart 1989, p.1).

Urban Children and Outdoor Play: There is a dramatic lack of safe play spaces for children living in large cities such as New York. Schoolyards, the prototypical play environment for children in the U.S., are misused, underused or are not built and equipped in ways that make them attractive for children's play (Bruya, 1988). Yet, in many communities they are only available open spaces and must accommodate both the school and the neighborhood for play, leisure, and many other activities. Moreover, they offer

the opportunity for creatively rethinking children's play options in the city.

While there are some studies of children's play and behavior in schoolyards (Beth-Halachmy & Theyer, 1978; Bruya, 1988; Churchman, 1986; Moore, 1974), it appears that there has been no ethnographic research addressing the ecology of a schoolyard as a place for children's play during recess. Recess is a valuable time for children because it allows them a break in the school day. This study looks at the schoolyard as a place where children learn from each other and spend their free time after lunch and a morning of study.

A brief review on the nature of play: In the history of recorded ideas, poets, philosophers, educators and social scientists were the first to define the concept of play and its importance in children's lives. The literature on play focuses largely on how it contributes to the psychological, social and physical development of children. It is also recognized, of course, that children learn and have fun through play activities. Kelly-Byrne (1989, p.6-7) has criticized the psycho-analytic/psycho-dynamic, correlational, pragmatic, experimental, Piagetian and related cognitive approaches to play for ignoring children's play for its own sake. Also, most of this literature has been uncritical and seemingly even unaware of the social, cultural, economic and political context in which children play. While the research on children's play broad, there are fewer studies locating play in a particular physical setting like schoolyards or playgrounds.

An early study by Robin Moore, "Anarchy Zone: Encounters in a Schoolyard" (1974), looked at the impact on children of the improvement of two

schoolyard in California. The children were concerned with violence in their yards. When physical changes were made by adding climbing structures, ponds, and planters to the existing facilities in the yards, "the previously commonplace fighting disappeared, or became ritualized in set-up combat games. More teaching happened outdoors..."(p.370).

Beth-Helachmy and Thayer (1978) studied the use of a schoolyard during recess and addressed the specific patterns of use by different groups of children, differences in activities based on gender and age (grades one through six), and the types of environmental conditions affecting children's play behavior. Using observations alone, they found no significant gender or age differences in the general use of the schoolyard.

The schoolyard as an environment and its role in the improvement of children's play opportunities have been addressed in a special issue of *Children's Environments Quarterly* (1986). Most of the articles in this issue focused on children's activities in the schoolyard. Some looked at children's activities before and after physical changes were made in their schoolyards.

Most of the articles in the *Children's Environments Quarterly* (1986) issue on Schoolyards had a heavy design orientation in assessing how the schoolyard environments block or facilitate children's activities. Children's own perceptions or knowledge of their yard were well described. However, the idiosyncratic conditions in each of the schoolyards studies, particularly their political, economic, cultural and social contexts make it difficult to generalize from these studies. As the number of studies of schoolyard environments increases, it may become possible to discern similarities in their use and general ecology. Such analyses will be of use in developing design guidelines for transforming schoolyards. The present study was undertaken as a contribution to this effort.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

My investigation took place in a neighborhood in East Harlem, a low-income and working class community of predominantly African American families. The schoolyard was adjacent to Public School 185, a community school on 112 Street serving the lower grades, pre-kindergarten through second grade. There were 389 children

enrolled in Public School 185 during 1989-90. In 1988, the student body was 82 percent African American and 18 percent Latin.

The schoolyard is fairly large (198 by 129 feet), and its surface is entirely covered with asphalt. Its equipment consists of two cement blocks, six large planters filled with cement, two climbing bars, and a climbing wall.

METHODOLOGY

The study drew on an ethnographic approach consisting of observations and ethnosemantic interviews. The observations helped to locate and record the children's activities during recess period. The interviews focused on the children's knowledge of their activities in the yard in their own words.

Observations: The observations entailed both general observations of the yard to discern the range of activities that took place there, and child-specific observation to gather more detailed information on particular activities. Behaviors were categorized along the following lines: passive behavior (e. g., sitting); gross motor activities; social interaction; and play using an object. The observations were recorded on a map of the schoolyard, noting the sex of each person observed and whether they were adults or children. Observations lasted for five to fifteen minutes, depending upon the duration of the recess period which was often quite short.

General Observations of Yard: Between October and December of 1989, first and second graders were observed during eight separate recess periods, and their activities were coded on a schoolyard map. For ease in recording, the map was divided into four areas: the planters, the barge, the blocks, and the fence-street areas (See Figure 1). These four areas were observed systematically from right to left or vice versa. Every fourth child's activity and position was recorded on the map.

Child-Specific Observations: Twenty child-specific observations were conducted from January 31 to April 6, 1990. These consisted of detailed observations of the four children who participated in the interviews (to be described below). For these observations, one child was observed during the entire recess period and his or her activities were recorded every two minutes on the schoolyard map.

Interviews: Selection process of participants

After 222 consent forms were sent to the children's parents through the school administration, 118 children in the first and second grades received permission to be interviewed. Since I only wanted four children to participate in the ethnosemantic interviews, I asked the teachers to select nine boys and nine girls (divided equally between first and second grades) from these children in 18 classes to participate in the pilot interview. Out of 118 potential participants, 18 children who had expressed an interest in participating in the project were selected. The children chosen were judged by their teachers to have "good communication skills".

Each of these eighteen students was interviewed separately and asked one question as a pilot, "What do you do in the schoolyard?" The two girls and two boys (one from each grade) who were able to give the most detailed description of their activities in the schoolyard were selected for the ethnosemantic interviews and were individually interviewed on several further occasions after the recess period.

Ethnosemantic Interview: Since the study was exploratory, an ethnosemantic interview was used. This is a linguistic approach used by social scientists to elicit taxonomies of shared knowledge of any cultural group (including children). This method helped to elicit the children's knowledge and use of the yard based on their own experiences and in their own words. The ethnosemantic method consisted of a series of interviews focusing on a particular body of knowledge. I tried to follow the three paths defined by Spradley (1979) which are based on descriptive, structural and contrast questions. These questions helped uncover what the children meant by the various terms they used about play and place, and how these terms were organized by them.

I interviewed the four selected children once a week and did five interviews with each of the first graders and seven interviews with each of the second graders, a total of 24 interviews. Each interview lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes.

Notes on the interview process: Even though the method was time-consuming, it provided in-depth information about the children's activities in their

own words and attempted to discover how they categorized these practices in relation to the schoolyard environment. When I unconsciously tried to impose my cultural biases on the children, they checked this tendency. One potential problem which turned out to be an asset was that as a graduate student from Senegal, I have limited contact with American children. My ignorance about children's play in the United States and my naivete about the world of children in general seemed to make the informants comfortable in teaching me about their activities in the schoolyard during recess. These experiences demonstrate the importance of the whole context of ethnographic research, and the significance of the interpersonal relations between researchers and participants.

The research findings are presented in the following section which is divided into two main parts: (1) children's use of the schoolyard; and (2) children's opinions about the schoolyard. The last section is a discussion of the findings and the general issues and implications raised by this study, and suggests some directions for future research.

FINDINGS

Children's Use of the Schoolyard

This section is based mainly on my observations of the children in the schoolyard during recess. While at first sight it appears chaotic with a mass of children just running and yelling, there are actually numerous discrete behaviors and interactions taking place at any given time. The major activity-categories in the schoolyard were gross motor activities and social interaction.

General Activities Area: Passive activities occurred mainly around the equipment and the fence-street areas while the rest of the yard was used for active play. There was a part of the fence street area which was empty in four randomly selected observations. This area was used, but because the children run very fast across that particular open space no one was found in it during the timed observations.

There were two specific places used for basketball and jump rope. The children played a form of miniature basketball that was setup each day in the "bar-gate" area by the monitor. The girls con-

trolled the jump rope area nearby. However, the environment of the yard is so undifferentiated that apart from these two areas, it is almost impossible to say whether specific places for particular play activities exist in the schoolyard during recess time.

Density: The "bar-gates" and the block areas were where most of the children played during recess, whereas the planters and the "fence-street" areas were used less. The bar-gates area was used for playing basketball and jump rope, and was thus used more commonly than the blocks areas.

Children's Knowledge of Games, Play and Not Play

This section is informed by the children's opinions about their activities and about particular places in the schoolyard during recess. In the course of the ethnosemantic interviews, the children collectively mentioned more than 100 different activities in which they had been involved during recess in the yard. These activities included traditional play activities such as jump rope, as well as play created from television, movies and their fantasies. The children were able to generate the following "folk taxonomy" to categorize their activities on the yard: ball playing, singing, "not play", television and fantasy, running around, climbing, jumping, and playing with their friends. Folk taxonomies "consist of a set of categories organized on the bases of a simple semantic relationship" (Spradley 1979, p.137). I collapse these eight categories of activities into three main domains of analysis: play, not play, and games.

Play: When the children were asked generally about their activities in the yard during recess, the first word that came to their minds was "play." Their statements indicate a sense that recess is a time for play and that the schoolyard is a place for play. The ties to play are reflected in the following statements: "We were playing outside," or "When I get to the yard, I always play." Children also make a clear distinction between what they consider play and not play.

Not Play: The children do not like to come out in the yard and not play. According to the children, their play activities are restricted when they are punished by the teacher or when they have problems with their playmates.

Although they made a clear distinction about what constituted play and not play, they could not divide their activities into "play" and "games" consistently. However, they referred to some of their activities consistently as being games. Games: Games are part of play, but they are not always fun. The children use the term "games" when referring to organized activities or activities based on television shows. These were contrasted to spontaneous activities.

Activities and Gender

Sex-Segregated Activities: The boys talked about activities in which girls are not mentioned or boys are the only participants. Those activities are mostly television show or movie-oriented "games" like "Michael Mayers" (horror movie), "Freddy" (horror movie), "Give Me a Break" (sitcom) and "Ghost Buster" (cartoon). The boys also play organized and traditionally male activities such as "baseball," and "boxing."

In the two girls' accounts, the activities in which boys are excluded include "singing" and "make-up." Girls also engage in dramatic play activities like "Drag the Monkey," "Hot Potato," and "Eagle Muffin" which are not television show related. They seemed to be spontaneous and creative in their socio-dramatic activities which they did not derive from television, but from other sources of cultural influence.

Sex-Integrated Activities: The children described activities that boys and girls played together in the yard. They range from traditional play to games based on television shows. These shared activities were both gross-motor and organized play activities. However, some of these games were controlled by one of the sexes, and these were consistent depending on the game.

In terms of time, "Running around" is the most important activity. All of the children run around the yard along with their other activities. It helps them to cover the whole yard in order to check out and participate in numerous activities in this undifferentiated environment.

Isolated or Individual Activities: A child is rarely alone in his or her activity in the yard. Isolated activities happen when a child stops playing because she or he does not have anybody to play with or when she or he is punished by the teacher. However, the children said that shared

or social activities happen more commonly in the yard than the isolated activities. Their statements corroborated my observations of the schoolyard.

Activities and Grades: The schoolyard was used by both grades at once during recess, and the children played mostly with their classmates. Many similarities exist between the two grades' activities. However, there are greater similarities between the girls or boys of the same grade than between boys and girls of different grades.

Children's Fears and Rules: The children's fears have a negative impact on their activities in the yard. The children talked about frightening experiences in the yard. Among these were: (1) a child brought a knife to school; (2) a friend of one of the participants (a boy) chases the girls, and when he catches them he throws them against the gate; (3) the girls are afraid of getting hurt on the asphalt when they fall or are pushed; (4) the girls and the first grade boys are subject to certain forms of bullying in the yard; and (5) one of the girls was concerned about her clothes getting dirty and her mother hitting her if that happened. Fear cropped up routinely in the course of the interviews. The children were sufficiently aware of the teachers' rules in the yard, but they tried to find ways to resist restrictions on their activities.

Children's Preferences: In the course of discussions, the children were asked what they would like to have in their schoolyard. They wanted a slide, swings, a see-saw, a sand box, basketball courts, monkey bars, a tire swing, and a water fountain. Despite all these proposed additions, they insisted that they liked the open spaces for running and playing.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The P.S. 185 schoolyard environment was very limited in terms of its equipment for play. What equipment there is, is in poor repair. But the children are not stopped by this sad and cold reality. This study demonstrated some of the ways the children have developed to have fun during their short recess time in this limited space. As indicated above, they voiced their dissatisfaction with the existing equipment, however, and suggested some preferences for the physical improvement of the schoolyard.

The children were not just concerned with the physical environment of the schoolyard but with

its activities. The limited space and time for diverse recess activities have a negative impact on the quality of the children's play in the yard. One of the children interviewed said because the recess time was so short, he would participate in activities that he did not like because he had no other options. The children's use of the yard for play is also controlled mostly by their parents' and teachers' rules. The adults present in the yard during recess, mainly teachers, are very passive. As the children noted, the adults only intervene or interact with them when they are fighting. My observations of the adults in the yard corroborate this point. Adult presence is felt only through setting and enforcing rules. It is important for teachers to be made aware of the importance of children's play and of ways to foster it creatively in the schoolyard. Contrary to what many teachers express, the children do seem to want at least occasional adult participation in and organization of activities.

In addition to suffering from these general deprivations, the girls also have to deal with the boys' attitudes toward and actions against them in the yard. The girls refuse to play with the boys when they are 'nasty' to them, but appear to be harassed frequently. More work is needed on the relation between gender, developmental stages and schoolyard activities. Analysis of these relations can inform the redesign and help develop new management strategies for the schoolyard. These relations also, of course, have ramifications far beyond the boundaries of the schoolyard. The yard should be seen as part of the constellation of settings in a child's life. These settings include the classroom, home, and neighborhood among others.

This study has addressed children's knowledge about their schoolyard in order to help the people responsible for masking physical changes in the yard understand how the first and second graders use their yard, and what they would like to see implemented in it. The children want their yard to be improved for play. They have spoken clearly and forcefully on some pressing issues. Given the limited number of decent and safe play environments in the city, and in poor neighborhoods in particular, their voices demand to be taken seriously.

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