

Johan Meire  
Childhood & Society Research Centre  
Nieuwelaan 63, 1860 Meise, BELGIUM  
Tel.: ++ 32 2 272 07 53 - E-mail: jmeire@k-s.be

## **Qualitative research on children's play:**

### **A review of recent literature**

This presentation is a review of the recent, English-language (mostly peer reviewed) qualitative research on children's play. It focuses on the place play has in children's experience and giving sense to the world. Thus, it will leave aside the large and important body of research on the effect or outcomes (benefits and possible harmful consequences) of play which however tells us little on why children like to play so much and in particular on why they play so intensively, on why they are so much absorbed by play.

A much more elaborate version of the review will appear in the new edited ICCP book on children's play. Here, I will focus on just some of the recent contributions and trends in the field; I will not consider methodologies, although the recent turn to visual methods (especially photography) as complementing the very diverse observational methods, should certainly be mentioned in this context (Burke, 2005; Kernan, 2005).

In reviewing research on children's play in the field of folklore, Ackerley (2003, 11) notes a "trend away from the consideration of *what* children play, to the investigation of *why* and *how* these folklore traditions are kept alive". The comprehensive collections of children's games "have given way to greater consideration of the conditions under which such play occurs". This is not only true for studies of 'child lore', but for qualitative studies of children's play in general. Recent research has started to give us a more detailed and more nuanced view of 'how' children play – the research on play and gender is a good illustration of this –, while research on children's own experiences and sense-giving complement the longer established instrumental perspective on 'why' children (should) play. This is also related to a somewhat more outspoken attention to the concept of play itself.

### **The elusive concept of play:**

When play is explicitly conceptualised or theorized, it is often remarked that play is extremely elusive: although "we all know what play is when where are in it" (Lindquist, 2001, 13), "in its ambiguity and variability, play slips away from all theoretical tenets" (ibid.). This is also a problem with most classifications of play: that they dissolve, mix or transform when children's actual play is observed (Factor, 2004, 145).

Christopher Harker (2005) points out that "all attempts to give a definition [of play] have so far failed because they always partake of exclusions which are empirically contradicted" (Harker, 2005, 59). Play can be creative and liberating, critical and active; but it can be repetitive, violent, reinforce the status quo or take the form of thinking, wishing or day-dreaming as well. Because of this complexity, Harker suggests modesty in theorizing playing. Only in a specific time-space context and in a particular performance, play acquires a specific form and function.

Even while elaborating on the elusiveness of 'play', Galina Lindquist (2001) identifies "two ontological qualities" which are common to all kinds of play forms. "The first quality is one of variations within rules, which can be subjectively experienced in feelings of freedom

and power. The second quality is that of feigned signification which enables play to falsify experience” (Lindquist, 2001, 21).

‘Variation within rules’ points to the agency which is central to play. “The ability to experience power, albeit in illusory ludic space, is one of the greatest attractions of play” (Lindquist, 2001, 15). Lacking an immediate pragmatic purpose, play – its meaning and lived experience – implies ‘fun’, enjoyment, amusement. Play is enjoyable in itself, even when it is serious. Internally motivated, the pleasure of playing lies in the playing itself. This is true for the most diverse types of play, from spontaneous fantasy play to games with rules. Even in games with fixed rules (playing with marbles or playing football), a lot of fun comes from its indeterminacy *within* the frame of rules.

The second quality Lindquist identifies is ‘feigned signification which enables players to falsify experience’. It gives play its potentiality of offering alternatives for social realities outside the play frame. In order to accomplish this, players have to make clear that they *are* playing: that they are acting in a distinct social frame. For instance, the fighting you see is not really fighting. Play thus entails the creation of a distinct intersubjective space; its purpose lies within this context itself.

However, I would argue that Lindquist’s wording of play as ‘feigned signification’ is too specific to be empirically valid for many actual play activities, like hopscotch, most board games, or playing football. ‘Feigned signification’ is too strongly put in those cases, even if they offer some room for this, as when a child ‘believes’ to be Ronaldinho while playing football. This is because the strongly rule-governed game of football still leaves room for ‘playfulness’. Sutton-Smith (1997) distinguishes play from playfulness and proposes to use the term play only for clearly framed activities. Playfulness by contrast is not an activity but an attitude towards (almost all kinds of) activities in which routines or expectations are manipulated, disrupted, played with.

What I would suggest is that Lindquist’s two ontological qualities, especially the quality of ‘feigned signification’, are qualities to their full extension of *playfulness*. In a more loose interpretation, however, Lindquist’s second ontological quality of play remains valid: all play is a distinct intersubjective space, fleeting as it can be, that implies this message of ‘this is play’. This remains true for simple games like hopscotch, which carry no ‘meaning’ but which are nevertheless ‘meaningful’ only within a play context. Even if the rules of a game are set, and even if the playing does not entail ‘pretending to do X while doing Y’, all play will still be recognizable as such. It will be more fun, however, when it is playful: when it opens up alternative possibilities through role playing, playing with the rules, teasing each other...

Any concept of play should include something of the fun or attraction that is so central in the experience of play. Playing is only really experienced as play when it is absorbing. Play could be regarded as an intersubjective space in which fun is central; this relation to fun distinguishes play from other distinct intersubjective spaces which have much in common with play, like performing a ritual or playing music together.

This intersubjective space of play is social, material, and/or imaginary. It consists of relations (of inclusion and exclusion) with other people; with places and objects such as toys, play equipment or the play environment itself; and with the imaginary, such as in fantasy play and play that relates to future roles or hopes.

I would argue that the fun in play comes from the intersubjectivity experienced within this space itself and that it has three main and interrelated sources: it comes from the feeling of control or challenge, from sharing or (more generally) being part of the social, material and imaginary environment, and/or from bodily sensations. The last source is very much neglected in play research; the first two are reflecting the two core themes that Willam Corsaro (2005, 134) identifies in children’s peer cultures. One theme is that children make

persistent attempts to gain *control* over their lives; the other is that they always attempt to *share* this control with each other.

The ways in which to experience ‘control’ or agency in play are extremely diverse; it is felt in all kinds of skills, even as basic as climbing or jumping, in the meeting of challenges, competing in verbal discussions, the joys of winning a game or getting away with taking risks,... In more elaborated forms, the fun of play lies in making whole material or imaginary worlds. It is important to note that the power experienced in play can be completely imaginary, such as in toddlers’ ‘superheroes’ play.

The sharing of the intersubjective space of play – being engaged together in the same activity – is a hugely important element of the fun of playing. This is true for play activities as diverse as hopscotch, playing football, building a hut, chase-and-kiss, board games, drop the handkerchief... This enjoying doing things together is often facilitated by sharing routines which provide scripts for (common) excitement or emotional security. Safeguarding the enjoyment of doing things together also implies the protection of the intersubjective space occupied in play.

The ‘as-if’ quality of much play is so appealing and typical of playfulness because it interweaves aspects of control and sharing: its fun lies in the combination of (sometimes literally) making the ‘as if’ world, and thus taking fully control of it, and sharing the interaction in this world (the complicity of acting in a special intersubjective space). Often, the ‘as if’ character of play is more or less implicit. For instance, chase games have no elaborated script which attaches meanings to the roles of ‘chasing and being chased’, but the play only works by assuming that ‘being caught’ is dangerous and the chasers are threatening – even though everyone knows this is not the case (‘after all, it’s just a game’).

Apart from feelings of control and from sharing with others or relating to the play environment, the bodily experiences during play form a third main source of fun in play. This aspect has been largely neglected in conventional play research. This is an important lacuna: while many forms of play do not involve important bodily sensations, the embodied character of countless other play activities is too important to ignore. Emotions and the heightened affect typical of the feeling of having ‘a good game’ are again intensely embodied and crucial to much play (Harker, 2005).

## **Playing in context**

Remarkably little research focuses explicitly on what play actually means to children; usually this is ‘hidden’, or integrated, in research on ‘gender’ in play, play as set in school playgrounds etc. Doubtlessly this has to do with the fact that play is so strongly interwoven with children’s everyday lives *an sich*.

An important contribution to the developing study of the meaning of play could be provided by folklore studies on children’s play, which have recently been integrated somewhat more in the mainstream childhood studies. Child lore studies have often been criticized for focusing too much on children’s cultures as separate from adult culture and for neglecting relationships with adults. Child lore itself can be considered as a relatively closed peer-to-peer space: it is “owned and controlled by children themselves and is unrelated to adult directed and organised games that may occur in the playground” (Ackerley, 2003, 3).

Despite of this, its themes very much reflect children’s relations to the adult world, and child lore studies begin to document just that. For instance, playground rhymes have a firm grounding in history and some of them have changed remarkably little over the generations; yet they also adapt very easily to the changing world. Elements from popular culture, especially movies and television serials, popular music, and commercial brands and advertising are incorporated easily in ‘traditional’ rhymes and songs (see Ackerley, 2002).

But as Janice Ackerley shows (2002, 5) even news items like the food and mouth scare in Britain are reflected in new versions of old songs (“Mary had a little lamb / Its feet were covered in blisters / Now its burning in the paddock / With all its brothers and sisters”).

Indeed, children constantly appropriate elements from adult life in their play, and this entails not merely ‘internalising’ adult content but reshaping it to be meaningful in children’s own life-worlds. Rhymes, stories, jokes and riddles are often subversive, scatological or sexual in content and shared by children (‘we, children’) as opposed to the ignorant adults (Ackerley, 2003). However, children’s appropriation of adult culture is not always oppositional or subversive. It deals, for instance, with fate or luck in numerous ways. A fixed and shared form of the decisions of fate is present in many games, like in counting out rhymes. More elaborated, and connected with children’s growing up and their status as future adults, are fortune-telling games (Duran & Zierkiewicz, 2004; also see Corsaro, 2005, 209-211). Through combinations of letters or numbers (initials of names, numbers of license plates or birthday dates...), the games predict future events, especially in (romantic) relations. Such games are part of children’s spontaneous culture and are transmitted from one generation to the next.

In studying play’s wider context, quite some research shows that children’s play is not always as innocent as it may seem. Two main potential ‘negative’ or ‘undesired’ aspects of play can be discerned in this respect: play can contribute to social exclusion and inequalities, and its contents can be less innocent than many adults might want.

Play cannot only liberate; as the flipside of ‘sharing’, exclusion is inherent to creating interactive play spaces. Even though it is rarely stressed in itself, exclusion in play is a recurrent theme in ethnographical studies of play which focus on children’s interactions and the development of peer cultures. When play is a social activity, inclusion of co-players implies exclusion of other children: before or outside of play (refusal to enter the play), and sometimes in the course of the play itself. Identity markers like ethnic origin (Moore, 2002) and especially gender are used in inclusion and exclusion. For instance, boys can claim a territory as a ‘boy’s zone’ or label contact with girls as polluting. But even within same-sex play groups, detailed ethnographic research has revealed many forms of hierarchy and status and tactics for inclusion and exclusion (Aydt & Corsaro, 2003; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998; Goodwin, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Whereas exclusion in children’s games often goes unnoticed for adults, bullying, an explicit and aggressive form of exclusion, is a topic of major concern in schools.

Play itself can imply less desired behaviour and can have less desired outcomes. Two adult fears reign: that children are taking ‘too much’ control of the game, often going against adult norms; and that certain games offered to children are morally corrupt or otherwise harmful and thus take control of children’s lives too much. While much concern exists about videogames, in which the game content is not invented by but offered to children by game producers, mainstream qualitative research on children’s play hardly touches upon this topic. Some more attention goes to the not-so-innocent contents of play which is shaped by children themselves. When children determine the contents of the games they play, often these games refer to the wider social world in which children live and will grow up. Dirty talk which opposes or parodies adults and their culture has already been mentioned; but play can be more actively ‘dirty’ as well. As a form of violently taking ‘control’ of the (play) world, it can be attractive because it breaches everyday habits.

Arluke (2002) considers animal abuse as a kind of ‘dirty play’ that is part of adolescent socialisation. No less than ordinary play, dirty play (which adults might find offensive) is connected to children’s social development. Dirty play helps children to interpret “where they stand in the social scheme of things and mastering what adults ordinarily deny to them through having more power” (Arluke, 2002, 407). It is marked off from everyday play

because it has a seriousness that makes it cool. To Arluke's interviewees, it went with intense (positive or negative) emotions, because it had exciting consequences (the animals responded unpredictably when harmed), and because the interactions with the animals had a pseudohuman quality.

Both the concealment of forbidden activities and the breaking of rules in those activities itself give a sense of control. The risk of getting caught is a prime motivation then, rather than abusing animals. Apart from drawing a boundary between 'humans' and 'animals', the sharing of abusive acts (and the secret of it) with friends was also very important, drawing a boundary between 'us' (who know) and 'the others'.

## **Play and categories of children**

While the qualitative play research is scarce when it considers age and culture or ethnicity, a wealth of research deals with gender in children's play.

### **Age**

As a marker of identity and of developmental status, age is an ever-present factor in studies on children's play. Obviously, children of different ages have different play repertoires and play styles. But few studies exist that explicitly compare play in different age groups or that study cross-age playing (including intergenerational play). Even though playing in larger multi-aged groups has doubtlessly diminished during the last decades in western societies, it remains an important way of social and informal learning which is still not studied sufficiently.

In school classes, children usually have the same age, which limits some possibilities for peer interaction and learning in play. In multi-age school systems, children have the same teacher for several years, staying in a heterogeneous group where children can naturally learn from older children by observing and imitating. According to Stone & Lozon (2004), this offers more possibilities for prosocial behaviour (helping, caring, sharing) and for leadership (older children, even those with less leadership qualities, can act as leaders of younger children).

### **Culture and ethnicity**

Research on culture and ethnicity (or 'race' in American studies) covers two complementary questions: how are children from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds playing differently?; and how do children from different cultures or ethnicities interrelate during play? Here too the research remains limited.

Playing and its organisation reflects social and cultural norms. For instance, among the Tunisian and Moroccan children studied by Rossie (2005), gender is reflected in pretend games and the objects that are used therein. Sexual differentiation is reproduced since older girls are taking care of younger children. Once they are about six years old, boys leave the girls' group, thus reinforcing a clear segregation between boys' and girls' play groups. Boys enjoy more freedom and can roam in the neighbourhood more freely than girls, who are restricted by the care for young children and by domestic chores.

Play is valued differently among different cultures. Sometimes the adult attitude towards playing children can be one of indifference (see Rossie, 2005); in western societies, playing with children is seen as an important part of education and of being a (good) parent in general. Farver and Lee-Sin (2000) studied how Korean-American mothers support their children's playing behaviours. They found that more acculturated mothers encourage creativity and play among their children and spend more time playing with their children. Their children engage more in fantasy play and are described by their teachers as more 'difficult' (or less docile). The Korean tradition of Confucianism does not encourage playing

together, as rules of hierarchy and formality dominate relationships, also within the family (also see Bai, 2005). Farver and Lee-Shin's study shows how acculturation is a difficult process, because it causes much educational uncertainties among the parents, and their children are seen as difficult to handle. It is hard to combine Korean and American values.

Like gender (see Aydt & Corsaro, 2003), ethnic identity becomes a less prominent marker of identity and hence of exclusion and inclusion when it is but one of the many identities children ascribe to other children. In a multi-ethnic summer camp, more flexible and instable conceptions of 'race' (or ethnic identity) emerge than in a dominantly 'white' summer camp, in which (an other) race is a clear marker to identify in- and out-groups. Overall, 'being white' was invisible as a racial category, and there was the presupposition that children of the same colour would share the same culture (Moore, 2002).

Blatchford et al. (2003) found no evidence for strong ethnic segregation in school playground games among 7- to 8-year old British children: in games, the degree of ethnic mixing seems to be comparable to the proportions of children from different ethnic groups. Games like football turn out to be spontaneous and effective facilitators for intercultural contact among children, especially boys (Blatchford et al., 2003, 502). "It is possible that informal child-organized activities, like football, may do more than externally and adult-imposed schemes to facilitate real integration" (ibid.) – a suggestion which deserves further examination.

## **Gender**

Do boys and girls play differently? And how do children deal with boy-girl differences and cross-sex interactions? A large amount of qualitative research, including some of the best studies in the field, deal with gender.

## **Play repertoires, playing styles and gendered settings**

Research in school playgrounds has shown that, at least in that particular setting, boys and girls have quite different play repertoires (Blatchford et al., 2003; Pellegrini et al., 2004). Ball games, and rough and tumble play are typical boys' games, whereas girls are involved more in sedentary play, jump skipping and verbal play.

These different repertoires are not as 'natural' and fixed as they seem. For instance, rope skipping was often done by boys, who focused especially on skills and tricks, but the game was largely abandoned by them when team sports became popular. It were the girls who preserved the game, changing its nature and expanding it to a rhyme-based game.

Some play activities are not specifically gendered, for instance playing tag, building a hut, cycling, roller-skating (see Karsten, 2003, 469), counting-our rhymes (Ackerley, 2003), water games (Baylina Ferré et al., 2006), chasing, catching and seeking, and racing (Blatchford et al., 2003, 491). Both girls and boys are involved in rhymes that challenge adult standards, explore taboo subjects and adult themes; such rhymes sometimes mock the opposite gender as well.

Boys and girls have different styles of playing, with boys being more physical, active, competitive and involved in rough and tumble games, and girls participating more in sedentary games and in socialising activities, and being more cooperative. However, some authors question the lack of competition in girls' games; I will return to this further on.

An interesting finding of the detailed observations by Blatchford et al. (2003) was that the observed boys, aged 7 to 8, engaged in fantasy play more often than girls did. However, for boys, fantasy play was often a site for rough and tumble play and physical activity, inspired as it was by action computer games, films and TV cartoons. Especially the boys who were not keen on athletic activities like ball and racing games, still found a physical activity by

frequently engaging in this fantasy play. Among girls fantasy play was more sedentary and involving themes of family or animals.

Another interesting finding was that “for boys, the activity was the primary focus that brought them together, whereas girls seem more likely to come together to socialize, independent of a game that might support their interaction” (Blatchford et al., 2003, 500). For instance, when allowed to play football, almost all boys would join the game, brought together by this mutual interest. When not allowed to play football, boys would tend to split into smaller groups to play a variety of games. Girls, on the other hand, would not play one single game for the duration of the breaktime, would rarely play as a whole group, and would frequently interrupt their play for conversation.

In school playgrounds, boys often dominate most of the (play) space and use large areas for games like football, whereas girls tend to occupy walled areas and seating areas which give them a sense of privacy (Thomson, 2005, 74). School playgrounds seem to be appealing more to boys than to girls. Blatchford et al., (2003) found that during recess times, “boys engaged in more social, and girls in more parallel and solitary, behaviour” (2003, 498). In Amsterdam public playgrounds boys outnumber girls, all the more so when they grow older, and especially among Moroccan and Turkish girls. Interestingly, “playgrounds with very few play objects or playgrounds in bad condition are not considered attractive by girls” (Karsten, 2003, 465).

Because boys visit playgrounds more often and stay there longer than girls do, and because they use larger spaces (playing in larger groups), they obtain a more intimate knowledge of the playground. Girls’ ways of playing (less frequent, for shorter periods, less visible, in small groups...) reinforced their status as a minority group. There were, of course, girls who acquired the status of ‘resident’, and these girls especially were able to challenge ‘traditional’ gender divisions and roles. This status allowed them to control parts of the play space, invite other children to join in games and organise play activities.

### **Gender play: gender segregation, power and borderwork**

How do boys and girls relate during play? Ackerley points out: “If observers concentrate their observations on distinct gender groupings, then results will be different to observations with a focus on interaction between the two groups” (2003, 11).

Boys and girls are often observed to play in distinct same-sex groups. Most gender segregation becomes apparent around the age of 5 and reaches its peak in elementary school. This segregation could have to do with more compatible interests among same-sex peers (Aydin & Corsaro, 2003). If a child wants to play with a child of the opposite sex, its initiative must be accepted, and chances to be rejected by an opposite-sex group are much higher than by a same-sex group.

In over 80% of the scan observations made by Blatchford et al. (2003) in British school playgrounds, the observed children played in a predominantly same-sex play group. No type of game was more likely to be a mixed-sex than a single-sex activity. A surprisingly large amount of gender-related play research is conducted in school playgrounds (Thomson, 2005; Pellegrini et al., 2004; Goodwin, 2001; Evaldsson, 2003; Blatchford et al., 2003; Riley & Jones, 2005; Ackerley, 2003). This should be noticed, since school playgrounds are very specifically gendered settings: gender segregation appears to be much sharper there than in other contexts such as street play in children’s neighbourhoods.

In her extensive conversation analysis research among girls in a multicultural school setting, Majorie Harness Goodwin (2002a, 2002b) shows how power relations, based on forms of exclusion, opposition and bullying are very much present in girls’ same-sex talk and

play. In analyzing jump rope games promoted within a school, Goodwin (2001) found that over time boys acquired more and more skills in this game previously predominantly played by girls, and in doing so, became equal partners in taking decisions and initiating the game. Rather than gender, the relative skill level of participants turned out to be important in determining who has the power to control the game and its rules. First, the girls were experts in jump rope, thus explaining the rules to the boys, controlling the action and displaying their power by refusing boys to join a game (Exclusion is important in jump rope: the more children participate, the longer you have to wait before it is your turn to jump again). Boys gradually gained access to power by gaining skills in the game.

Within the girls' group of jump rope, no clear leader emerged; contrary to the same-sex boys' group, jumping skills did not determine status or roles in the game. However, forms of exclusion did occur, even more frequently than in the boys' group (Goodwin, 2001, 84). Like Goodwin, Ann-Carita Evaldsson (2003) shows how different group configurations and relations profoundly influence play interactions. Her study shows how the display of skills varies according to the skills of the other participants. In the multi-ethnic school in Sweden Evaldsson studied, the game of foursquare was played both by boys and girls. In foursquare games among girls, some girls used slams to throw the ball, a technique requiring force and muscular strength. Their games were competitive, but when playing with less skilled girls the same girls altered their throwing and language styles to downplay the importance of physical skill and strength. Other rules were set ('we do not use slams') and throwing became slower and more gentle. Accordingly, the language, involving more talk and laughter, framed the game as non-serious and non-competitive. 'Throwing like a girl', in other words, does not necessarily indicate a lack of power.

Then again, when playing in cross-sex groups the girls reorganised their play once again, this time playing with gender stereotypes. Much more negotiations of game rules were taking place, and skilled girls were mocking less skilled boys during cross-sex foursquare, challenging the image of boys as physical athletes.

It is interesting to note that both Goodwin and Evaldsson are able to challenge essentialistic notions of femininity because they do not (only) conduct research among middle-class white children, but among children from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This calls for a higher awareness of variation in girls' play and interaction styles. More in general, mixed-sex play is not always or everywhere a rare occurrence. This is, for instance, apparent in Corsaro's work among Italian children (Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998). As Ayt and Corsaro observe (2003, 1309), most studies have only looked at middle-class white children, and their results cannot be generalised to all children.

Cross-sex play happens somewhere in between borderwork (Thorne 1993) that affirms gender segregation, and play that is totally relaxed in terms of cross-gender interaction. There are many examples of 'playing with gender' in less stereotypical ways. Ayt and Corsaro (2003) provide detailed examples of the complex construction of gender in American and Italian preschools. For instance, there were observations of girls' ritual avoidance of boys and reversals of the boys-chase-girls routine and of the boys-invade-girls'-play.

Boys seem to participate in 'girls' games' like skipping or hand-clapping games only when they can assure their own identities of 'men': by invading the space during such a game played by girls, by mocking the playing girls, making the game more masculine (bringing in more competition, toughness...) – or by hiding their participation from other boys. It is widely observed that it is more easy and attractive for girls to participate in boys' games than the other way around. Being (called) a 'tomboy' is more acceptable than being (called) a 'sissy'.

Overall, Ayt and Corsaro's ethnographic observations reveal gender segregation as something that is negotiated in children's peer cultures rather than a phenomenon that is

strictly based on universal biological or cognitive developmental features. Each preschool setting studied had its own peer culture. The more children were familiar with each other, the less gender was the main reason for inclusion or exclusion, and the more individual characteristics would be relevant (Aydin & Corsaro 2003, 1321).

## **Play settings**

Children play on every possible spot, but mostly in the streets and in their neighbourhoods, in parks, in private gardens, or in dedicated play spaces like public playgrounds, school playgrounds, childcare centres and commercial play settings. All of these settings have characteristics of their own which can influence play activities.

### **Where do children like to play?**

Play in the streets and in the public domain takes up more time and is more important to children than adults usually think. Time and again, research has shown that children prefer to play in their neighbourhoods. Play in informal and natural spaces remains very important to children. Several studies by children's geographers and others (see Valentine, 2004, 74-76) have shown that children's preferred play spaces, which allow for flexible ways of playing, are open spaces, waste lands, and all spaces that lend themselves to be appropriated by children. But as Armitage (2004) observes, in spite of this a disproportionate large amount of attention and financial means is invested in public playgrounds, while play opportunities in children's most important and most preferred play space, their own neighbourhood, are neglected.

Rather disturbingly, this trend seems to be reflected in play research as well. Play in the full public space remains largely unstudied, and this is one of the major lacunae in play research. Most research focuses on what Rasmussen (2004) labels 'places for children' (places intended for children and their play), rather than on 'children's places', which only children themselves can point out. The importance of children's places is a theme in research on children's geographies (Rasmussen, 2004; Valentine, 2004) rather than in 'common' play research.

## **The school playground**

The school playground has a profoundly ambiguous status as a setting for children's play. Perhaps it is the principal social arena where games are passed on (Factor, 2004) and perhaps the only school setting in which children interact in their own terms (Ackerley, 2003). School playgrounds are settings par excellence for developing and transmitted peer cultures, often with very local, particular features (Factor, 2004). At the same time, apart from being a rather dull environment most of the time, the school playground is an adult-controlled setting (Thomson, 2005), and this particular institutionalised status has profound effects on children's interaction. Often safety is used as the motivation for restrictions. Children are relatively powerless against adult control. In the first place, they try to (re)territorialize the playground by claiming certain spaces as their own (though their own bodies, objects like clothes...) and making them inaccessible to other children. This can result in conflicts and will usually be at the expense of girls, who tend to territorialize spaces in less permanent and more informal ways.

## **Public and commercial playgrounds**

The typical playground, in which the play space is surrounded by benches for parents, can be seen as a panoptic space (Blackford, 2004). Children know that they can be constantly seen; the parents' gaze is a monitoring force. Blackford focuses on the way this setting affects the monitoring mothers, maintaining that "the panoptic force of the mothers around the

suburban playground becomes a community that gazes at the children only to ultimately gaze at one another, seeing reflected in the children the parenting abilities of one another” (Blackford, 2004, 228). The traditional playground setting contrasts with commercial playgrounds, where mothers socialise with each other instead of watching and talking about their children. Children are less inspected by their parents there, so they can play more freely, inventing their own rules and conducting interactions with other children on their own terms.

Blackford, rejoicing the ‘consumer power’ children have in commercial playgrounds, compares play in these settings to street play in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (2004, 241-244); however she overlooks that then both children and their play were more embedded in the general social life, not only implying informal surveillance from (also unrelated) adults, but also more general and daily interactions with adults, which are totally absent in the commercial play zones. Moreover, commercial play spaces are situated indoors, whereas playing on the streets is a crucial way for children of getting acquainted (cognitively and socially) with their environment.

### **A (discouraging?) social context for free (outdoor) play**

Modern western societies provide a wealth of play provisions and ‘places for children’. Still, this play occurs in a social, cultural and geographical context which also poses major problems to children’s play, especially free outdoor play.

### **Play between risk and challenge**

Concerns about social and traffic safety reduce children’s play opportunities especially in public space (Valentine, 2004). Regarding public playgrounds and play equipment in general, safety concerns are especially important as well. Moreover, moral panics affect adult regulation of children’s play when it is seen as offending, morally corrupt or harmful. Gun play and even playing cops and robbers have been banned from some schools (Factor, 2004, 149). Because playing children can harm other children, especially in a school context games deemed too ‘wild’ can be banned as well, often to the frustration of the children themselves (ibid.). Such concerns are significantly less outspoken in Mediterranean countries, where public playgrounds and public space in general carry less negative connotations than in, especially, the Anglo-American world (Baylina Ferré et al., 2006, 173-174).

In schools, time to play during recess and lunch breaks is often threatened, at least in the United States and Britain (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2002) and Australia (Evans, 2003). Two main reasons seem to underlie this evolution: an increased academic pressure (and the parallel undervaluation of play), and the fear of antisocial behaviour (bullying) during recess. Pellegrini and Blatchford (2002) argue, however, that playtime is a time of cooperative interaction and that aggressive behaviour is only rarely observed.

### **Outdoor play and its multiple affordances**

Despite the historical trends outlined above, there is a widely accepted acknowledgement of the benefits of outdoor play. Being more public, outdoor play provides many opportunities for social learning. As children’s geographers argue, outdoor play “is crucial because it is the primary mechanism through which children become acquainted with their environment” (Valentine, 2004, 74).

One other obvious difference between indoor and outdoor play is that outdoors, especially in the full public space, the weather and the changing seasons are an important factor and an extra affordance (Fjortoft, 2004).

An important review of the literature on outdoor play, focussing on playgrounds, has been made by Peg Lindstrand (2005). Covering the literature between 1980 and 2003, it deals with diverse aspects of outdoor play, such as self and group identity on the playground, social

and cultural influences, inclusion of disabled children, playing and development, planning processes, roles of adults, gender aspects, bullying, and pedagogical processes.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, children from middle class backgrounds, often perceived to have the best play opportunities, are in fact heavily chaperoned and play more in institutionalised play settings, whereas play among children from working class backgrounds and children with lone parents is more independent and public (Valentine, 2004, 80). In her study of two city quarters in Vienna, Daschütz (2006) shows that the social abilities of children are more encouraged when children play in full public space in the inner-city area, as compared to children who play in a public park. In the inner city, children are more often unaccompanied by adults, they use more space and play with other children; in the park, children play more on their own or with adults, and stay there for shorter periods than children in the inner city.

Indeed, child-friendliness of public space in general is crucial to children's outdoor play. It is not sufficient to create places which are safe in terms of traffic. It is also necessary to create places which are attractive to children. Returning to 'places for children', Blinkert (2004, 106) holds a plea for places that are 'functionally unspecific': a place that does not offer ready-made ideas for its use but forces children to invent, produce, improvise. This would produce a rather empty space, looking somewhat neglected and unkempt but providing an interesting surface, water, building materials, small vegetation, and no supervision. Inexpensive and popular with children, these kinds of places have been provided in the city of Freiburg. This type of 'playground' contrasts with traditional playgrounds, which are very expensive but often are used much less by children than could be expected.

## **Lacunae in play research**

Recent trends in children's playing are not evenly researched. Whereas some research exists on the commercialising of children's play and play spaces, the trend towards more playing in the private environments of the home and the private garden remains largely uncovered (although children's own photographs can serve as an access to this area). Playing is very often a thoroughly embodied activity, and this aspect deserves much more attention. Harker (2005) points to the (related) affective aspect of playing, another lacuna in research. Overall, why play is often such an intensive and absorbing activity remains a difficult subject to study.

The role of toys and other objects in playing is less well researched than one could expect. For instance, in research on outdoor play the influence of play material and equipment on peer interactions and physical involvement with the play space remains largely unstudied (Lindstrand, 2005, 106). How do children, in interaction with other children, come to give sense to their material environment and to actively integrate objects in their play?

As mentioned already, playing is studied mostly in distinct contexts like public playgrounds, school playgrounds, day care centres... 'Street play' remains disturbingly out of sight in most research. There is not much information on how and what children play in their neighbourhoods, or on how and why they move from one place to another while playing together. Research on children's geographies (Rasmussen, 2004; Valentine, 2004) is an exception here, and it could be an enormous enrichment to the study of play, pulling 'play' out of its secluded 'children's settings'.

Cross-age play and intergenerational play remain largely uncovered themes. This is related to the focus of research on play in institutionalized settings and peer cultures and the lack of research in neighbourhoods and families.

Finally, there is not yet an integration of research on play and the research on video games and play associated with new media. It seem to be video game researchers rather than other play researchers who are closing this gap.

## References

- Ackerley, J. 2002. Playground rhymes keep up with the times. *Play and Folklore* 42, 4-8.
- Ackerley, J. 2003. Gender differences in the folklore play of children in primary school playgrounds. *Play and Folklore* 44, 2-15.
- Armitage, M. 2004. Hide and seek – where do children spend their time after school? Paper presented at The Second European Conference Child in the City, London, 20-22 October 2004.
- Arluke, A. 2002. Animal abuse as dirty play. *Symbolic Interaction* 25, 405-430.
- Aydt, H. & Corsaro, W. A. 2003. Differences in children's construction of gender across culture. *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, 1306-1325.
- Bai, L. 2005. Children at play: A childhood beyond the Confucian shadow. *Childhood* 12, 9-32.
- Baylina Ferré, M., Ortiz Guitart, A. & Prats Ferret, M. 2006. Children and playgrounds in Mediterranean cities. *Children's Geographies* 4, 173-183.
- Blackford, H. 2004. Playground panopticism. Ring-around-the-children, a pocketful of women. *Childhood* 11, 227-249.
- Blatchford, P., Baines, E. & Pellegrini, A. 2003. The social context of school playground games: Sex and ethnic differences, and changes over time after entry to junior school. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 21, 481-505.
- Blinkert, B. 2004. Quality of the city for children: Chaos and order. *Children, Youth and Environments* 14 (2), 99-112.
- Burke, C. 2005. "Play in focus": Children researching their own spaces and places for play. *Children, Youth and Environments* 15 (1): 27-53.
- Corsaro, W. A. 2005. *The sociology of childhood*. Second edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Daschütz, P. 2006. Spare time in the city: A comparison of activity space and leisure mobility of children and adolescents in a park and an inner-city quarter in Vienna. Paper presented at the Third European Conference Child in the City, Stuttgart, 16-18 October 2006.
- Duran, M. & Zierkiewicz, E. 2004. Fortune-telling games played by Croatian and Polish girls. Paper presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> ICCP World Play Conference, 'Play and Education', Cracow, 15-17 September 2004.
- Evaldsson, A.-C. 2003. Throwing like a girl? Situating gender differences in physicality across game contexts. *Childhood* 10, 475-497.
- Evaldsson, A.-C. & Corsaro, W. A. 1998. Play and games in the peer cultures of preschool and preadolescent children. An interpretative approach. *Childhood* 5, 377-402.
- Factor, J. 2004. Tree stumps, manhole covers and rubbish-tins: The invisible play-lines of a primary school playground. *Childhood* 11, 142-154.
- Farver, J. A. M. & Lee-Shin, Y. 2000. Acculturation and Korean-American children's social and play behaviour. *Social Development* 9, 316-336.
- Fjortoft, I. 2004. Landscape as playscape: The effects of natural environments on children's play and motor development. *Children, Youth and Environments* 14 (2), 21-44.
- Goodwin, M. H. 2001. Organizing participation in cross-sex jump rope: Situating gender differences within longitudinal studies of activities. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 34, 75-106.

- Goodwin, M. H. 2002a. Building power asymmetries in girls' interaction. *Discourse & Society* 13, 715-730.
- Goodwin, M.H. 2002b. Exclusion in girls' peer groups: Ethnographic analysis of language practices on the playground. *Human Development* 45, 392-415.
- Harker, C. 2005. Playing and affective time-spaces. *Children's Geographies* 3, 47-62.
- Karsten, L. 2003. Children's use of public space. The gendered world of the playground. *Childhood* 10, 457-473.
- Kernan, Margaret. 2005. Using digital photography to listen to young children's perspectives of their outdoor play experiences in early childhood education settings. Paper presented at the Childhoods 2005 International Conference, Oslo, 29 June – 3 July 2005.
- Lindquist, G. 2001. Elusive play and its relations to power. *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology* 37, 13-23.
- Lindstrand, P. 2005. Playground and outdoor play – A literature review. Stockholm: Stockholm International Toy Research Centre.
- Moore, V. A. 2002. The collaborative emergence of race in children's play: A case study of two summer camps. *Social Problems* 49, 58-78.
- Pellegrini, A. & Blatchford, P. 2002. The developmental and educational significance of recess in schools. *EarlyReport Newsletter* 29 (1).
- Pellegrini, A. D., Blatchford, P., Kato, K. & Baines, E. 2004. A short-term longitudinal study of children's playground games in primary school: Implications for adjustment to school and social adjustment in the USA and the UK. *Social Development* 13, 107-123.
- Rasmussen, Kim. 2004. Places for children – children's places. *Childhood* 11, 155-173.
- Riley, J. G. & Jones, R. B. 2005. Investigating gender differences in recess play. *PlayRights* XXVI (1): 18-21.
- Rossie, J.-P. 2005. Toys, play, culture and society. An anthropological approach with reference to North Africa and the Sahara. Stockholm: Stockholm International Toy Research Centre.
- Stone, S. J. & Lozon, C. 2004. The cognitive and social values of play in the learning contexts of mixed-aged children. Paper presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> ICCP World Play Conference, 'Play and Education', Cracow, 15-17 September 2004.
- Sutton-Smith, B. 1997. *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Thomson, S. 2005. 'Territorialising' the primary school playground: Deconstructing the geography of playtime. *Children's Geographies* 3, 67-78.
- Thorne, B. 1993. *Gender play. Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Valentine, G. 2004. *Public space and the culture of childhood*. London: Ashgate.