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ABSTRACT

Based on the experiences of a participant observer (weekly playground volunteer) over the course of one school year, this paper recounts the experiences of first through third graders during recess and discusses the importance of outdoor play for providing children an opportunity to speak and act unfettered by adult expectations, thereby promoting a peer culture defining itself in opposition to official school structures. The narrative, viewed as a means of bearing witness to perceived or experienced injustices, follows a diary format and discusses issues related to children's outdoor play, including the types of games children play and their social interactions, concerns about control and liability masquerading as concerns for children's safety, the need to develop environmental values, the meaning of teachers' absence during recess, and restrictions on rough and tumble play. Responses during interviews with a convenience sample of children revealed that the children loved the openness and social dimension of playground activities but did not like being teased or restricted. Children's attempts to resist being disciplined and being controlled are interpreted not as an attempt to escape from oppression, but rather as ways to provide opportunities to remake one self. Benefits of recess for children's sense of agency, self expression, and problem solving are described. The paper emphasizes the need to provide high-quality recess experiences and the role of societal values in creating a restrictive play environment, thereby placing the question of recess within the larger context of questions regarding the purpose of education and the role of adults in children's education. (Contains 32 references.) (KB)

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The rewards and restrictions of recess: Reflections on being a playground volunteer

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association
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The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child

Introduction

This paper is based on my experiences during the 2000-2001 school year as a once-a-week playground volunteer at my daughter's public elementary school in a suburban area of western New York state. As a participant-observer, I sought to understand the situation by spending time on site, taking field notes, talking with the actors (28 primary-age children), reflecting, and trying to make meaning of what I was seeing, hearing, and feeling. Additionally, the paper is grounded in activism: My intent was and is to make sure recess in the U.S. is not abolished, despite the growing influence of those primarily focused on academic skills, standards, and accountability, the *Standardistos* Susan Ohanian (1999) calls them.

As I spent time onsite and reflected on my experiences and reactions, I asked, "What are schools for? What is the role of adults in terms of caring for and teaching children? Why is recess increasingly seen as frivolous? What are the both the rewards as well as the restrictions of recess, from my perspective as well as the children's?" I found that despite the many restrictions on children during recess at this particular site, that there were also numerous rewards linked to children's relative freedom during this time to be who they wanted to be. I conclude with a strong call for advocacy for this often overlooked and increasingly marginalized time during the school day.

The background

Two years ago the principal at my daughter's school was bemoaning the difficulty of finding playground aides at the same time that I was becoming increasingly concerned about the growing number of schools doing away with recess in the search for higher test scores. As most of us are all too aware, "...[there are] plenty of people around the country [who] are willing to sacrifice children's recess period to the voracious skills god" (Ohanian, 1999, p. 13). Being a teacher educator, I sent the principal articles supporting her desire to keep recess intact, and being someone who tries to practice what she preaches, I volunteered to be a recess "helper" for the year. With a relatively flexible work schedule, a love of and experience with young children, and a decent tolerance for cold, I thought I had something to offer. So almost every Monday, from September through early June, I spent approximately an hour and a half watching, interacting with, supervising, consoling, disciplining, and otherwise "aiding" groups of first, second, and third graders during recess. The narrative that follows comprises the notes I took during and after the times I spent on site.

It was a fascinating and instructive experience, time well spent. And although all was not positive from my perspective, as will be addressed later, the experience strengthened my resolve to be a committed advocate for that little piece of free play children are permitted in an increasingly demanding, controlled, and tightly scheduled day. Outside play provides a sense of freedom to explore, to let imaginations loose; it is a largely pressure-free time when unstructured physical activity is a welcome break from life's daily routines ...yet outdoor play in the U.S. has decreased tremendously over the

years. It makes me sad and angry that this is so. Obviously I was not, *am* not a dispassionate, objective observer in this matter, and in the following I will explain why.

Recess provides one of the very few opportunities for children these days to speak and act relatively unfettered by adult expectations (see, e.g., Kieff, 2001). Some have argued for a "third space" (e.g., Bhabba, 1994; Soja, 1996) or "third discourse" where those who are often marginalized can act and speak freely. Sidorkin (1999) contends that "third discourse [polyphony] is clearly and openly in opposition to the first discourse [teacher-dominated monologue]" (cited in Bingham, 2000, p. 431) and as such happens mainly in places like playgrounds and other sites not dominated by teachers. Importantly, "third discourse promotes counter-culture, a peer culture that defines itself in opposition to official school structures". In this space, school is made familiar and students feel a sense of ownership over a part of it. On the playground, "what is most important is not content but chatter, not knowing but *dialogic being"* (Bingham, p. 431; italics mine).

This to me is the most important reason for maintaining recess. Yes, the argument can be made that fresh air and running around are good for children; it even helps them do better academically, some claim (see below). Others make the argument that children can gain so much socially, emotionally, and physically during these times, and that too is no doubt true. In addition, teachers get a break and there is no denying the importance of *that* to children's well being! But there is so much more to it than that. It is that non-adult-like, counter-cultural "stuff" that is so rewarding for children – and so threatening to those who would maintain control at all costs. That is why I did my best to be there for the children, but only intervened if absolutely necessary, or if they requested that I do so. That is why I find it so disturbing that most of the adults monitoring recess at this site rather ruthlessly shut down any play that even hinted at danger or "wildness." I know there are legitimate concerns about kids being hurt and about potential litigation, but can't we let them say, and do, and *be* what they want just for one short half hour a day? Don't they need some sense of power of their world, some opportunity to make meaning of experiences on their own terms, some feeling of agency? In one study (Maxwell, Jarrett, & Roetger, 1999) school children noted that recess was the *only* time of the day when they could make choices, and that to be able to choose made them feel respected. I think here of the third-grade boy who charged up the steps to the playground, threw both arms in the air, and shouted, "freedom!"

What I saw

September 2001

I can hear them before I see them, squeals of delight preceding the group of first graders set free from the confines of the school building. Then I see them: a swirling mass of smiling, laughing, running children coming right toward me and toward that cherished half-hour time period following lunch, recess. [Or, recreation, as it is renamed part way through the year for some unspecified reason. When I look up the definitions of the words – *recess* (n): a cessation of the customary activities of an engagement, occupation, or pursuit, and *recreation* (n): refreshment of one's mind or body after labor through diverting activity; play – both seem important. This time is, ideally, both a time to *get away* from something, as well as time to *move toward* something.] They play 4-

square and basketball, jump rope and twirl Hula Hoops, hurry up and down the field pursuing an elusive soccer ball. But most of all, they play. They play chase often, which at this site had to be formalized as "tag", again for reasons unknown to me. They swing, they toss leaves; they climb, and run, and slide. They chat with friends, comfort a peer who has fallen, and occasionally talk with a nearby adult. They have fun.

October 30, 2000

High in the bright blue sky on this crisp and sunny fall day, a broad-winged hawk wheels silently searching for prey. Down below, here at ground level, it is anything but silent as the overlapping groups of first through fifth graders come out to play. I love to see children outside on a gorgeous day going full throttle with enjoyment!

November 6, 2000

It has been interesting to note the kinds of things children do on the playground, some of them familiar from my long-ago childhood: 4-square, hopscotch, swings, chase, slides, and jump rope. The only thing really new to me is the popularity of soccer, which both girls and boys literally line up to play, and the wonderful tire swings.

It has also been rewarding to note the empathy shown peers. Usually, with no adult intervention, even the "toughest" child is quick to comfort a peer who has been hurt asking, "Are you okay?" or saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry".

I also note that there are loners, pairs, and cliques, the latter two sometimes inviolate, at other times, quite fluid in composition. There is single-gender play (e.g., boys playing football, usually just girls jumping rope or doing dramatic play) and mixed-gender play (e.g., the aforementioned soccer, chase, etc.)

November 20, 2000

Today I noticed a focus on rules and negotiations in the children's play, typical of this age: "You're it – no tag backs"; "Hey, that's not fair!"; "Why did you change the rules just when it was my turn?"; "Let's go play by ourselves!"

November 27, 2000

Today there seemed to be a number of problems and physical issues: a lost tooth, a loose tooth; a fall, a bump on the head, an urgent need to use the bathroom, an upset stomach, a runny nose. I also saw and at times provided comfort in response to tears of pain, frustration, and embarrassment. The vicissitudes of childhood were writ large today.

December 4, 2000

I had to skip a day today. I miss being on the playground; I miss the kids! I find myself talking about it and them frequently, passionately. I have started thinking about adult hypocrisy, too. If we abolish recess, we may well send the message that we think children are inferior beings. After all, adults are very vocal about their need for breaks from routine, yet we expect children to stay "on task" for the length of the school day! As the kids might say, how unfair is that?

January 8, 2001

First day back after the winter break. It has snowed a lot and the entire landscape looks and feels different, and the play is therefore different. In the snow, kids mostly slide down the hillside and run around wrestling each other and trying to hide their snowballs from adults. Again, it is interesting to see that things have not changed all that much since my childhood. I am pleased that the school principal sends the children outside despite the weather. I hear so often that children in other local schools cannot go out if it is cold,

rainy, muddy, snowy – anything but sunny and warm apparently, which is not typical weather in upstate New York! (See, for example, Raschka, 2003.)

January 22, 2001

Tamiqua*, a heavy-set African American third-grade girl bussed in from the nearby urban school district, swings alone at the far end of the playground. I watch her but am wary of intruding – I have learned the children almost always say, "I'm fine", if I ask if something is wrong. Finally, she comes over and stands by me not saying anything. I say, "Hi. How are you doing?" and she quietly starts to cry. I attempt to comfort her with words asking, "What's the matter? Are you lonely?" while she sniffles. She nods her head, I put my arm around her, and then, fortunately, another girl notices and comes over to ask if Tamiqua wants to play. They go off together.

I say to an aide, "It's tough being a kid", and she replies, "She [Tamiqua] needs to bring her snow pants. She's reminded every day, but only brings them, like, one out of five days. She can't play on the field without them; I'm not really even supposed to let her come out, but I feel bad for her." I did too, and I wondered if race and class were factors here, as the school is almost entirely white and upper middle class.

January 29, 2001

When I arrived today, the first person on the scene, I am excited to see the playground covered with a fresh coat of snow. Everything looks serene with the sun and shadows dappling the ground and only bird tracks marring the pristine white. Five minutes later the ground is a mass of boot prints as the children run, tumble, and slide down human-made and natural snow and ice slopes.

Today I wondered, what are these kids like in a different environment? Is the "natural" leader here also a leader in the classroom, or does the rough and tumble, wide-open nature of recess allow different kids and talents to shine? And what of the loner? It s/he also by her or himself when inside? Are the pairs and cliques sustained inside? Some contend that recess is a great time for teachers to ascertain who are leaders and who are followers, and even who might be at risk of social ostracism. It has been suggested that teacher education programs consider recess as the perfect time and place to observe the child's social behavior and ability to get along with others (Rike & Krueger, 2000) – and most of us who have spent any length of time on the playground would probably agree with this assessment. However, for us to use the time this way means that recess would have to be considered important enough for teachers and prospective teachers to take part in, and that we would have to question the valuing of what we construct as "work" over that which we marginalize as "play". This does not happen at too many schools past the Pre-K level in my experience.

February 5, 2001

It was an interesting day: Because the playground and field were icy, the kids had to stay in a tightly proscribed area (one snowy hill and the blacktop), so there was more fighting, shoving, and so forth, and therefore more adult intervention.

I am becoming increasingly troubled about what sometimes seems to be an over-inflated concern regarding safety that often feels more like *control* to me. I tend to let kids go if they are having fun and not in immediate peril. The other adults (the paid aides) tend to stop any play with the slightest potential for danger, thereby seriously limiting the children's creativity and fun. For example, there was a small icy hill the kids were sliding down. Because it was "too slippery" (isn't that the point?), they were told not to use it.

Also, children sometimes wanted to slide head first or sideways; that too was disallowed – bottoms only! And snowballs, no matter how fluffy the snow, were verboten. The usual explanation given to the children had to do with safety – or, to me, as another adult, liability concerns. I understand these concerns, but I am still troubled.

This situation reminds me of Foucault's notion of the panoptic (1977), the all-seeing eye capable of – or, more importantly, *thought* to be capable of – watching all areas at once, thus insuring compliance and control. This surveillance by an all-powerful adult "gaze" regulates what is arguably the only time during the entire school day the children can truthfully call their own. In a related vein, I am struck by what I see as U. S. school people's extreme concern about lawsuits, much less prevalent during my childhood, and much less obvious in other countries in my experience. (When I visited Ireland, for example, prehistoric ruins perched on the edge of 600-foot cliffs and 1,000-year-old round towers accessed only by a rickety ladder were open to all courageous enough to venture forth.) This concern again reflects the emphasis on control, but also our capitalistic culture's worshipping of the almighty dollar. Sometimes I think cynically that we are not so much concerned with children's safety as we are that their parents, especially in more affluent areas (such as this one), might sue if anything happens to them.

At any rate, I believe the aides' intentions are good, and I am only a once-a-week volunteer, so I do not say anything, but it troubles me.

February 12, 2001

It happened again today: The children were not allowed on the playground, but they were thrilled to be on the field, which was solid ice covered by a thin layer of snow. They quickly and cooperatively made an "ice skating rink" [their words] and an ice slide, and had great fun "skating" and sliding – on feet, backs, knees, stomachs.

After the first and second graders played this way, with no problems, the third graders came out and had about ten minutes of open-ended (and creative) play before a different aide restricted them, eventually moving all the children onto the blacktop. The children, who had been smiling and saying, "this is fun!" about their play on the field, grumbled, but went. I went too, but back to work, fully understanding their dissatisfaction, and needing to go before I lost my temper and said something I might regret.

In this scenario, the adults once again utilized their power to control and regulate. The claim that adults understand what children need allows us to construct and maintain control over children; a judgmental surveillance is thereby justified. Unpredictability and complexity are thus denied, and children are limited to the possibilities that fit our construction of them (Cannella, 1997). I find myself agreeing with Davey who writes, "Even when at play, our children tend to be monitored by adults who seem compelled to quiet their voices and still their bodies" (2000, p. 31).

March 12, 2001

It is a sunny but cold day. Just a little over one week until meteorological spring, but the playground is still covered in snow and ice. In fact, the playground proper is closed, so the children play on the field (sliding down the hill, lobbing covert snowballs, "skating" on the "ice rink" once more) or on the blacktop.

I have started thinking more about *resistance* in this setting: The adults, despite their attempts at control, are not all powerful and the children often resist their attempts at

disciplining, normalizing, and controlling. As has been found before (e.g., Willis, 1981) and reiterated more recently (Butin, 2001; Novinger & O'Brien, 2003), oppressed people with little power, subordinate groups seen as inferior – and school children by and large fit that description – find ways to assert their humanity, to strive for freedom. The resistance I have seen takes the form of circumventing rules by saying, "We *are* playing tag" when they are really running around wildly chasing each other; or by asking the more lenient or less informed aide (me) to weigh in on a questionable rule; or by hiding behind a tree or going to the far end of the field in order to proceed with something "illicit." These and other covert activities provide opportunities, albeit limited, for children to assert themselves and their desire for less control and more freedom.

The goal, as I see it, is not escape from oppression; we are all constructed within and constructive of relations of power. Rather, the goal is the "productive" use of such power relations, with productive understood as providing more opportunities to remake one self (Butin, 2001). Resistance, in this view, allows the individual to become manifested. According to Foucault, the antithesis of domination is not "liberation" per se, but simply the ability to resist, to struggle within relations of power (Butin, pp. 165 & 169). When we talk about relations instead of static positions, there is always the possibility of resistance and freedom for transformation. The point that power relations are unstable is crucial. From this perspective we cannot argue that certain individuals are active and control power while others are passive and controlled by power. Rather, relations of power are prone to change and reversal and even in the most asymmetrical power relations – such as the one that exists between children and adults in school settings – individuals can be understood as acting agents.

As many of us are, Foucault (1994) was interested in the immediate struggles of individuals, the local nature of contests being waged, especially why people struggle and what that says about their understanding of being human. He believed that "subjugated knowledges" (p. 20) should be heard. I agree, and think we must more closely listen to marginalized voices, in this case, the children's regarding recess, then find and utilize the spaces for resistance that exist within power relations. Such "little narratives" of local knowledge (Lyotard, 1984; see also, Foucault), told in public forums, can become a powerful form of protest (Gitlin & Myers, 1993). I see the kind of story telling I am doing here, then, as a means of testifying, or "bearing witness" (Burdell & Swadener, 1999) to injustices perceived or experienced.

April 9, 2001

Last week the playground and field were still covered with snow. This week it is much warmer, with only sad, dirty piles of old snow left where it was plowed high. Miracle of miracles, the playground is open again and the children are thrilled! Once more swings, slides, and tunnels ring with delighted laughter. Flowers are pushing up around the edges of the playground. After a long, cold, snowy winter, spring is finally here.

April 23, 2001

Spring break last week; the children come back to school on a very warm day, delighted to have full access to the playground. The air is perfumed with flowering hyacinths, the ground brightened by yellow daffodils resembling miniature suns to my winter-dulled senses.

Related to this, I have noticed the sad state of the two raised-bed gardens on the playground, and the seeming indifference of children and adults when flowers are trampled by running feet or crushed by flying balls. Also, children sometimes throw their trash on the ground, as there is no trashcan nearby. I think we could do more to capitalize on this time out of doors to help children develop environmental values, a basic respect for and appreciation of nature. After all, outdoor play experiences can enhance learning and shape lifelong attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior toward nature (NAEYC, 1997).

I notice today one of the benefits of mixed-age grouping (Katz, Evangelou & Hartman, 1990) outdoors. When the second graders come out, they often offer to share their extra strength and expertise (though not in those words) by pushing the first graders on the tire swings during the 10 minutes when recess periods for the two groups overlap. Both groups seem to benefit from this arrangement: the younger children get better pushes and more varied socialization, and the older children get to "strut their stuff" and be admired.

I talked with the principal today about my concerns regarding what I saw as the rather harsh discipline approaches used by some aides, and minimal attention to verbal and emotional aggression, the latter concern prompted by several second-grade boys teasing my daughter, a child with special needs. I was also worried about how Ricardo*, a recent immigrant from Mexico just learning English, was treated by one aide. The principal was receptive, said she saw these as ongoing problems, and agreed to talk with the aides. We also discussed her problems in hiring and keeping well-qualified people willing to work (in the lunchroom and outdoors) for just two hours in the middle of the day.

We did *not*, however, discuss why it is that teachers are never present during recess time at this site, or why aides typically make minimum wage – and how addressing these might ameliorate some of the problems faced. We also did not discuss alternative models of utilizing aides, for example where they are hired for the entire day and interact with children both indoors and out, thereby gaining both familiarity with the children and more respect. Nor did we specifically discuss the restrictions on rough and tumble play, which some researchers – and parents – feel is a necessity for boys (e.g., Clements, 2000). Although no immediate changes took place that I could see, I was pleased to be heard and felt a little bit more hopeful about the future of play at this site.

I also used the opportunity to ask if I might interview the children about what they liked and disliked about recess; I know how things seem to me, but I need their insights to flesh out my reflections. Fortunately, permission was granted as long as I maintained confidentiality.

April 30, 2001

Today I began to ask the first, second, and third graders, "What do you like about recess?" and "Is there anything you don't like?" My sample was small and unscientific although perhaps it could be called "purposeful sampling" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) or "convenience sampling". I simply approached children who were not intensely involved in an activity and asked if they would like to tell me how they felt about recess. Almost all said yes, although a few did not. I did not press in the latter case. Some children noticed my notepad and pencil and approached *me* to ask what I was doing. Most of these children then wanted to share their thoughts.

May 14, 2001
What the children told me (with the number of responses for each item)

Who	Likes	Dislikes
1st grade girls	[playing w. friends on] tire swing (3) monkey bars, slides, get to run & play, swings (3)	being bugged by boys/second graders (2) rainy days (when they stay inside) (1) soccer (2) "when people pick on you" (1) "not really" (1)
1st grade boys	swings (2) "everything!" (1) soccer (2)	blacktop (2) jumping rope (1)
2nd grade girls	tire swing (2) slide and swinging (2) playing around/chase (2)	"boys" [giggles] (1 pair) "when I get pushed down during soccer" (1)
2nd grade boys	soccer (2) tire swing/swings (2)	that the same things are always out (1) everybody trying to push (the tire swing) (1) pestering (1) "I hate the whole playground; we need a new one!" (In fact, they are slated to get one, which the kids knew.) (1)
3rd grade girls	tire swing (3) kickball (1) playing different things (2)	limited play options (2) usually only get a short time to play (2)
3rd grade boys	slide, tag, swing (2) playing outside (1) soccer & 4-square (1) kickball (1) "getting in trouble" (1) (said tongue in cheek, I assume)	"not really"(1) "people making fun of me" (1) not playing soccer (1) sitting on the bench (1)

The opinions of the children with whom I spoke largely jibed with my observations. That is, they love the openness and social dimension of swings, soccer, and the like. There seem to be some gender differences in terms of preferred play largely along traditional gender lines. Overall, boys seemed to prefer a little more active play and girls a bit more social play: The boys played football and a rougher game of chase, when allowed; the girls jumped rope and played house/babies. Both genders like the swings, and both are often involved in ad hoc soccer games. As we might expect, the focus of play appears to change with age with younger children engaged in more open-ended play and older children typically preferring games with rules. Although there were some

gender differences seen in terms of dislikes, not surprisingly no one seemed to like getting picked on or teased, and the children did not like being restricted in their play. They told me, for example, "I don't like it when we can't play on the field" and "I wish we could play in the house."

May 21, 2001

I note a concern re the more rule-bound and competitive nature of soccer, as well as a gender piece: A first grade boy tells me, "We played the boys versus the girls and won 9 to 0! And there were more girls!" I wondered how the girls felt, and why the teams were constructed according to gender, and what, if anything, the adults were doing about the situation.

June 4, 2001

Today the first-grade girls win the soccer game, 3-0. They are so excited! And I am happy for them after the public gloating of the boys over their win the last time I was here.

This was my last day on site. It was a fine day to end my brief stint as a volunteer recess aide. Maybe I will do it again next year…

What I felt/What I learned

Volumes have been written about children's play (e.g., Fein & Rivkin, 1986; Frost, 1992; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987; Piaget, 1962). Poems have been composed in praise of play. There is even a United Nations Declaration of the Child's Right to Play (see above). And the child development experts are seemingly unanimous in their belief that play is an essential part of a child's day (Kieff, 2001). Researchers have even shown that a break such as recess, in part because of its multi-dimensionality, enhances children's well-being, and their social-emotional, physical, and even cognitive learning (e.g., Jarrett, Maxwell, & Dickerson, 1998; Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). In summary, free, safe, relatively unrestricted play during recess is an essential requirement for helping children learn and grow.

In fact, we in ECE tend to believe – or at least espouse the belief – that young children learn *best* through play. Are the children I observed learning when they play? Yes. Not the 3Rs, perhaps (although one could contend when playing hide and seek and counting to ten, they're learning number, I suppose), but they are learning all the things that they need now and will need in the future to understand their worlds. They are learning how to negotiate with peers to organize their play, how to make (and break) rules, how to read others' cues and respond appropriately, how to make and live with choices, how to solve problems, how to use their bodies in multiple ways, how to help and how to receive help, how to *be* who they are. Recess gives children the opportunity to learn about themselves and to be self-expressive in ways that no other setting can provide. Recess can and should help children develop a sense of agency, a sense of self. Ultimately, recess should help children ask and attempt to answer what Bill Ayers (2001) considers the essential question of education: *Who am I the world?*

But despite all the above, the free play time found during recess is being inexorably cut back, even cut out of, U.S. schools in our hapless drive to address academics and accountability (Alexander, 1999; Kieff, 2001; Noddings, 1992; Ohanian, 1999). Given my experience on the playground, I agree with Kieff that, "Instead of silencing the recess bell, administrators should make every effort to provide high-quality

recess experiences for children" (p. 320). I believe that this "extra", like art and music, needs more of our attention. Instead of *marginalizing* recess, we should do our best to *maximize* this important time.

If we begin to think of recess as integral and essential to children's growth, then the adults who are with the children – and we should think deeply about who this should be – might ask, "What kinds of experiences are high-quality? How can we ensure this is a beneficial time for all children, cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally? How can we best address issues pertaining to age, race, class, gender, ability, language, and other dimensions of diversity in this context? What kinds of negative experiences are occurring and how can we thoughtfully address them? How can we capitalize on outdoor experiences in terms of connecting children to the natural world?" Moving into the wider societal context, we might investigate what has been said in response to questions about why work and play are seen as separate in the U.S., with work valued and play devalued (e.g., Karier, 1973). How are these societal values linked to our willingness to cut back and sometimes even do away with recess?

As can be seen by all the adult attempts to circumscribe the children's play in this setting, play is not only a cultural artifact, but also an artifact to be controlled and even suppressed when dominant forms are not exhibited. Further, adults – here and elsewhere – have created play labeled "good" or "appropriate" versus that considered "bad" or "inappropriate." Thus the freedom implied for young children within the construction of play often is an illusion. Gaile Cannella writes, "Although the discourse may be to allow children to explore and make sense of their world, when the play behavior does not suit those who are in control, the voluntary activity is no longer allowed. Adults are really in control" (1997, p. 128).

But to open doors and minds, recess relies on unstructured time, plenty of physical and psychological roaming space, and lack of imposed rules. We will lose our free thinkers, sensitive communicators, and safe outlets for self-expression if we continue to eliminate recess or severely curtain freedom during this time (Michaels, 2000). Early educators need to engage in serious discussion of these and related issues. We must ask ourselves, "How many and what kinds of choices can/should be provided? If restrictions are needed, how many/what kind/to what end? How can we make play areas safe without stifling children's choices, creativity, imagination, need to be powerful?" U.S. schooling was constructed in part to control particular groups, and management is the language of that control. Placing people – in this case, children – in an institutional, factory-like setting where they are to be controlled will almost always result in what are framed as "management problems." Is this what we really want? If not, shouldn't we consider alternatives to the academically focused, fragmented, hierarchically organized model of schooling so common in the U.S.?

Building on the foregoing, we need to ask the big questions: For what purpose or purposes do we educate? What is the role of adults vis-à-vis children's education, including play? Because of the time I spent as a playground volunteer this past year, I now *know* schools need to consider the whole child and his or her development of agency and a positive sense of self. And I now *know* children need adults who are thoughtfully and continually considering both the rewards and the restrictions of recess. The more adults respond attentively and generously to what they consider, the more playgrounds will ring with the laughter of children playing freely, joyfully, with their whole selves.

The more they do so, the more educators can help children answer that most crucial question: Who am I in the world? We must – parents, educators, concerned citizens, even the children themselves – *resist* the trend toward limiting recess and instead be tireless advocates for it: free, open-ended outdoor play is a necessity and the right of every child. Our advocacy for recess is one very important way we can support the "irrepressible possibility of humans" (Booth, 2001).

* This is a pseudonym

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