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ORIGINAL PAPER

A Recess Evaluation with the Players: Taking Steps Toward Participatory Action Research

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Abstract This playground study conceptualizes recess as a time and space that belongs to students; their inclusion in this evaluation is a notable difference from other recess/playground research. The goal was to help elementary school students make the changes they felt were needed on their playground. After conducting structured observations and student and recess aide focus groups, a report was presented to all stakeholders, and recess changes were made. We seek to show how the process of being inclusive during the evaluation was not only valuable for determining problem definition and potential interventions, but was also necessary to determine the best methods for solutions, move toward second-order change, and to create a space to facilitate children's participation and empowerment.

Keywords Recess study · Children · Elementary school · Community psychology research methods · Collaborative action research

Introduction

Based on her personal observations and reading the results of a recent school climate report, the principal of Ruby Bridges[1] Elementary School identified student behavior at recess as a problem. She requested that a professor and her undergraduate students in community psychology organize games at recess to foster pro-social student behavior. Because of this request, the Community Psychology Research and Action Team (CPRAT)[2] began to consider how to collaborate on the project in ways that would be consistent with an inclusive approach in which problem definition and solution were defined by multiple people instead of only one adult (i.e., the principal). After a literature review of the relevant playground studies, it became startlingly clear that although the playground was considered one of the spaces in which children have the most freedoms and authority during the school day, they were rarely involved in helping to define problems as they occur, or understand or improve the playground. We considered this to be problematic given evidence that the inclusion of multiple stakeholders often leads to more sustainable and grounded interventions (Juras et al. 1997).

Therefore, there are two major areas of exploration relevant to this investigation: one is children's play and the second is the process of moving toward participatory action research as a type of collaborative inquiry. After a brief literature review of both areas, we will present the case study and the results that ensued. The goal of this examination was to facilitate students in making the changes they felt were needed, and to contribute to the literatures covering both play and participatory action research. Specifically, we examine how children understand their own play and how they can determine problem definition and

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[1] All proper names have been changed.

[2] CPRAT was a university group that originated from a community psychology seminar. In any given year, members included one professor, one to two master's students, and 6–10 undergraduate students. The collaboration with Ruby Bridges was its main occupation for 4 years.

solutions, even within institutional structures where they are not necessarily viewed as capable collaborators by all.

Literature Review

The literature covering play is extensive, dating back to some of the foundational writings on child psychology (Piaget 1962). Consequently, children's play has been well studied by psychologists, especially as it relates to other aspects of children's cognitive, social, and psychological development (Asher and Coie 1990; Bruner et al. 1976; Hart 1993; Piaget 1962). In general, these studies focus on the significant relation between children's play and their psychosocial development.

Some studies, however, have shifted the understanding of the function of play from a discourse of development to the exploration of empowering ways that play grants children control over their own decision-making skills. Both Sutton-Smith and Thorne, for example, have attempted to approach their research on play with the assumption that children are active agents in both shaping their daily experience and their forms of play (Sutton-Smith 1997; Thorne 1993). This analysis of play underpins the campaign called "Rescuing Recess," which was initiated by a network of the National Parent Teacher Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Education Association. The goal is to protect recess against too much regulation (Cowan 2007). The campaign seeks to preserve the value that recess provides for developing children's social competencies.

Identifying play as an opportunity for children to be actors was integral to determining many questions for CPRAT as we approached the present study. In the course of this review, however, CPRAT also chose to focus on methodology because there is some discordance with Sutton-Smith and Thorne's play research. Indeed, even though these studies are focusing on the agency of children in their play, they do not ask children to help articulate or explain their processes of play (for an exception, see Waller 2006).

That the process of understanding play should neglect to include the children's perspective is anathema to the very reasons that play is important. Realizing children's agency in play is an integral part of legitimating play as an empowering process; play time during the school day marks one of the few spaces where children have more control over what they do and how they do it. Through the present study, therefore, CPRAT applied methodologies that would prioritize the central importance of children's agency, while also considering the context of the school culture, as well as the setting's social construction of childhood. In this recess inquiry, acknowledging and encouraging children's agency implied seeking out and amplifying their voices throughout the research process—from determining problem definition to formulating practical recommendations for leadership development, all within the hierarchical institutional school setting in which children usually have little say.

In addition to the literature on play, a second body of relevant research for designing our methodology is concerned with collaborative studies in educational settings. Collaboration can take many forms, from providing information back to the community to supporting community members in conducting their own research (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2003; Jason et al. 2004). Several studies have attempted to synthesize the integral role of action in community psychology with the need for consultation in educational settings (Juras et al. 1997; Prilleltensky et al. 1997). These studies often begin with an explanation of collaboration as a process that is inclusive of stakeholders in each setting.

In studies of children at play, the children are stakeholders, but they tend to be studied rather as the subject of a critical process of socialization.[3] The analyses of social interactions do not present the children as actors and stakeholders but rather as early members of various social categories (Corsaro and Eder 1990; Haas Dyson 1997; Lewis and Phillips 1998; Pellegrini et al. 2002; Smith and Inder 1993). The plethora of studies on social group interactions among children, as well as the fact that children's perceptions are often missing from the play literature, indicates that institutional power dynamics should be taken into account when considering children as stakeholders.

These studies of play often serve as the basis for recess intervention studies. The issue that arises is that problem definition is narrowly determined and usually lies at the individual or relational level of analysis because of who studies play (i.e., adult outsiders) and how it is studied (e.g., observing). This problem definition has led to a profusion of recess interventions that are designed to fix individual problem children through character education, rule teaching, modeling appropriate behavior, and other related methods (cf. Lewis et al. 2000; Nabors et al. 2001; O'Connell et al. 1999). It is important to recognize that different conceptualizations of problems are more likely to arise as stakeholder participation in the research endeavor increases; different problem definitions may also lead to different interventions.

Community members in participatory studies play key roles. Including everyone within the system in the various stages of the research and ensuring roles for everyone is

[3] To this extent, many of these studies also focused on the association between play and social-cognitive development, though not exclusively (Pellegrini 1990).

critical (Juras et al. 1997; Serrano-García 1990). It is important, therefore, to include children in both defining the nature of the problems and formulating the solutions. Although this is vital, few North American social science studies have conceptualized youth (generally, high school aged) as primary stakeholders, and fewer still have engaged children (elementary school and middle school aged) in this role (Checkoway 1998; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2003; but see McIntyre 2000 for an exception). Our European colleagues, however, have been engaging young children in PAR for years now (cf. Clark 2004, 2005; Clark and Moss 2001; Kellett 2004; Kellett et al. 2004). Children's engagement in and of itself is not enough, as some argue that many studies tend to conceptualize youth and children's participation in ways that tokenize their roles or manipulate their involvement (Checkoway 1998; Robinson and Kellett 2005; Sutton 2008; Waller 2006). Instead, research designs should facilitate children having a say in decisions that affect their lives and create a space where they can determine problem definitions.

Having stakeholders define and identify solutions brings with it many benefits, including more people having a say in how the problem is conceptualized (thus likely moving away from a victim-blaming mentality), more commitment to the process and ownership of the intervention (Juras et al. 1997), leadership development (Kelly et al. 2004; Visser 2004), the creation of more sustainable and contextually-relevant interventions (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2003; Hughes 2003; Jason et al. 2004; Juras et al. 1997) and more grounded and valid knowledge production (Warming 2006). Therefore, not only should children be involved in issues that affect their lives, but their roles should also be enduring by playing a part in solutions. These roles facilitate empowerment in that children—a group with very little political voice or power—gain control over some of the resources that affect their lives (Durand and Lykes 2006). Additionally, this kind of participation helps to develop an active and engaged citizenry (Linares Pontón and Vélez Andrade 2007), and democratizes psychology by giving it away (Albee 1970; Fine 2008).

Children—even young children—can participate in research in a number of ways. Some examples include children hiring an adult facilitator to teach them how to conduct a community-wide assessment through interviews (O'Brien and Moules 2007), defining community violence and how it affects them (McIntyre 2000), researching their own play (Waller 2006), and conducting school and community-wide assessments (Linares Pontón and Vélez Andrade 2007). In each of these studies, the children determined the focus of the study through the support of adults. This child-initiated focus brought with it new insights. For example, children who researched their play determined that there were shared favorite places in their play environment. The children's participation also allowed the adult researchers to garner a better understanding of how very young children are involved in sustained shared thinking, or how they work together to solve a problem or clarify a concept (Waller 2006). As another example, children who evaluated their school determined that the paramount issue was garbage in the school (Linares Pontón and Vélez Andrade 2007). They evaluated the problem, determined possible solutions, and were able to initiate a waste and recycling program in their school. In these cases, children developed important skills, increased their critical understanding of their own lives, communities, and schools, and served as change agents through their engaged citizenry.

The worth of collaborative studies in drawing out community psychology values is purposefully illustrated in these studies. In under-resourced communities, cultivating leadership resources and organizing skills from within the constituency is not only useful, but it also begins to challenge the notion of research as a custodial or a one-directional process. Additionally, this kind of participation facilitates second order change because it modifies relationships among people and therefore alters structural dynamics (Boyd and Angelique 2007).

The present examination thus seeks to draw on collaborative community psychology principles for the recess setting—not only to recognize the agency of children in play, but also working with them to assess and improve the institutional setting of recess. Ideally, institutional power dynamics facilitate the adoption of a participatory model. Yet, this is not always the case. It is therefore important to show how studies with some degree of collaboration can begin to create movement toward even greater stakeholder control along this participatory continuum (Serrano-García 1990). Given that most institutional structures, especially educational settings, do not use a participatory model, it is critical to document pivotal moments that create spaces for increased participation and stakeholder control. In doing so, we are creating conditions to facilitate the empowerment of the main stakeholders so that they may transform their environment.

Method

Study Context

One of the most important aspects of the present investigation was the initial invitation by the elementary school principal to help reform the playground. The principal had read a recent climate report about the school (Langhout

et al. 2004) and had made her own observations about recess. The climate report indicated that children's peer relationships were not as positive as they could be, as determined by the children and their teachers. The invitation consisted of the principal asking CPRAT to have undergraduate students lead "noncompetitive games" on the playground as a way to reduce playground conflict and promote pro-social behavior. This invitation prompted a proposal by the CPRAT team to collaborate with the school in fostering the "pro-social behavior" that the principal sought.

Rather than organizing games, CPRAT used this request as a moment of opportunity to propose investigating the problem more in depth and having the children serve as resources for solving some of the playground problems. We had participated in meetings with the principal where we discussed the values of CPRAT, community psychology, her, and the school. One commonality was that we were all interested in student empowerment or, as she had put it, "giving the school back to the kids." We reminded her of this shared interest and endeavor. Once put into this framework, the principal agreed to our proposal to have the children participate in problem definition and solution.

Although the principal agreed regarding the importance of developing a more collaborative research model that included the children as primary stakeholders, the school superintendent did not. The superintendent thought that there was no reason to include the children in the process, but acknowledged that the recess aides should be involved. With some difficulty, the principal was able to persuade the superintendent to allow CPRAT to include the children in the process. CPRAT was not a party in these conversations, but based on what we were told, we believe the superintendent thought the adult recess aides would have more information about recess and playground behavior than the children, and that involving the children as collaborators would be a waste of time and resources. With the superintendent's hesitant agreement, we proceeded, revamping our methods in order to increase the superintendent's (and therefore the principal's) comfort level. We would have preferred to teach students relevant social science methods so that they could be involved in data collection and analysis, but given the institutional context, we believed we needed to be the sole group to collect and analyze data. Yet, we did so while trying to ensure the amplification of children's voices, especially around problem definition, potential solutions, and their roles in the solutions.

Recess at Ruby Bridges School occurred in three phases containing two grades. Third and fifth, kindergarten and second, and first and fourth grades spent their recess periods together. Recess periods each lasted 30 min and usually took place outside, weather permitting. When the entire recess area was open, children had access to a blacktop, two playscapes (one for grades 2–5 and the other for grades K-1, consisting of slides, a climbing apparatus, and other related structures), swings, and a small field area. When there was snow on the ground but not on the blacktop, children stayed on a blacktop area, which contained two basketball courts, and painted versions of a map of the United States, foursquare and hopscotch. In addition, there were basketballs, rubber balls, jump ropes, and chalk, though materials were inconsistently available.[4]

Procedure

We decided to proceed with observations in order to understand the playground setting and then organize focus groups to ensure that the children's voices would be present in the study.

Playground Observations

For 4 weeks, CPRAT researchers went to Bridges school for observations to learn about what recess entailed, and to become familiar with the environment and the children. Observations were structured to cover various days and all three recess periods, in order to begin to appreciate the breadth of experiences across various grade levels. Field notation followed a modified version of a procedure outlined by Leff et al. (2004). Field notes were taken at 5-min intervals by two to three researchers who were stationed on different regions of the playground (for outdoor recess) and the gym (for indoor recess when weather was inclement). The researchers followed a random number table to determine the race, gender, and age of the child to follow during the 5-min observation period for the first set of observations. These observations noted the activities in which the child participated. Observations were circulated and discussed during weekly CPRAT meetings.

Based on the first set of observations, CPRAT conducted a second set of observations. We watched for themes in activities that coincided with the first set of observations, general themes that would significantly affect the success of introducing new activities, and the activities that other researchers have found to be meaningful on playgrounds. These themes included watching for how children exit/enter play spaces, children's proximity and dependency on the recess aides, gender crossing (e.g., a boy playing jump rope with all girls), gender integration (e.g., a group of boys and girls playing together), role playing, telling, and children of different sizes/grades playing together. These

[4] Sometimes, these recess activity materials were simply not available, and sometimes recess aides revoked certain privileges when they deemed that the materials or toys were abused. For instance, sometimes they would not bring out basketballs during certain recess periods when fights occurred the previous day.

various themes were randomized for each recess period, so observers attempted to find three predetermined themes per period, recording each for 5 min. The resultant 220 observation units include specific recess activities, equipment used, and interactions among students.

During both phases of observations, the line between observer and elementary school student remained flexible. Children would consistently question the observers' presence on their playground. CPRAT gave responses that ranged from, "trying to understand recess" to "watching what happens at recess" to "making recess more fun." When the explanation consisted of "making recess more fun," the children often asked observers to play with them. Sometimes there was little choice but to become involved. The children would physically demand to be noticed, tugging and jumping on observers in order to capture their attention. Questions regarding who the observer was often helped to inform us of the expectations. If observers were not teachers, were they parents? The presence of notebooks was additionally curious. When asked, observers would read their notations to the students to receive feedback, and also check to make sure an overly prescriptive tone was avoided.

Thus throughout the process of observation, the line between the observer and observed was consistently blurred. Although an explicit participant observer role was not undertaken by CPRAT, the fact of having watchful adults on an under-resourced playground immediately initiated certain changes. Especially when the safety of students was of concern, the observers did not feel a rigid division was necessary and always put the safety of the children first.

Focus Groups

After the observation phases, we asked the recess aides and the principal to compile a list of students in grades two through five as potential focus groups participants. The main criterion was for a breadth of experience to be represented from each grade level and for the principal and recess aides to come to consensus about the children on the list. In other words, we asked the principal and recess aides to identify children who were leaders on the playground, children who stayed along the perimeter and did not tend to interact with others, children who were likely to get into trouble, children who followed others, etc. We asked them to think of all different kinds of ways that children engage the playground and to choose children who had a range of experiences. This method of sampling is consistent with sampling for theory construction (Charmaz 1995), in that we sampled some extreme cases and some normative cases (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This sampling technique also made it more likely for us to hear from children who might not otherwise be asked about recess, thus increasing the scope of children who were able to participate. Consent forms were sent home for these students.

One notable aspect of this project was that several parents called the CPRAT professor or principal to talk about the research. The following field note summarizes the general parent response:

> I told the principal that a parent had called me and wanted more information about the groups including how her child was chosen and the [focus group] questions [e.g., we want to ask your child about her perceptions of recess and what would make recess better because we think kids have a lot to say about recess]. After I answered the questions, she said that it was a great idea to ask children and that they really should be involved in changes made during recess. The parent hoped that we would do things that would be permanent and constructive. She said that both of her daughters are bored at recess. The principal told me that the other parents who had contacted her also were really positive and were excited about the project. (RDL field note 4/2/04)

Once consent forms were returned and the groups solidified, we arranged focus group sessions during normal recess and lunch times.

Based on the observations and literature, a list of questions was formulated to be as general as possible and to cover all aspects of recess, including indoor and outdoor activities, as well as facilities. The interview protocol was first shown to the recess aides and principal and was modified based on their input. Questions were designed to allow children to formulate the problem definition (i.e., "Can you tell me what happens on the playground? Why does that happen?") and solution (i.e., "What can be done about that?"). Focus groups consisted of three to five children per group and were homogenous by grade level and gender in order to ensure that children would feel comfortable sharing their experiences. One researcher facilitated the focus groups. Overall, there were 8 focus groups, and a total of 30 children participated. The superintendent did not allow the audio taping of the focus groups, so two other researchers took notes to preserve verbal and physical responses. Both verbal and physical responses were recorded to try to capture both referential (the words used) and indexical (the meanings attached to the words) meaning (Briggs 1986). After focus groups, the three researchers (focus group facilitator and two recorders) met within 24 h (though usually just after the focus group) to go over notes and fill in as many gaps as possible.

Because we could not record the children's focus groups, the notation is a bit more complex than usual. Double quotes (") signify a verbatim dictation. Single quotes (') indicate a paraphrased statement. Hash marks (//)

show an interruption. All capital letters (CAPS) demonstrate a raised voice. Parenthetical notation is used when two people are talking at the same time. Square brackets ([) are an elaboration designed to make the meaning of the verbatim or paraphrased words more clear. Finally, a curly bracket ({) illustrates body language or verbal tone.

After focus groups with the children were concluded, two separate focus groups were conducted with the recess aides (two recess aides per focus group). Questions asked were identical to those asked of the children. Both focus groups were audio taped. These sessions helped researchers learn about the current recess structures and sought to make sure all stakeholders were involved. One of the concerns on the part of the researchers was that the recess aides should not feel imposed upon with respect to the possible recess intervention, considering our roles as external consultants and our primary focus on the inclusion of children's voices. Because they are a permanent part of the playground and recess time, it was similarly important to involve them in identifying the issue as well as formulating an intervention. That said, the primary focus of this study is on the children's experiences and perspectives. All recess aides were paid $15 for their participation in the focus groups.

In addition to the researcher who facilitated the focus groups, another researcher was present to write down the first few words of who said what in order to match voices with people, and to record non-verbal communication. Audio tapes were transcribed within 2 weeks, and notes about non-verbal communication were integrated into the transcripts, again to preserve both referential and indexical meaning.

After all the focus groups were transcribed, the transcripts and playground observations were coded line by line. Two coders who were not observers were trained to go through the documents, coding the various activities. Using 25% of the data, inter-rater reliability—based on Cohen's *kappa*—was 72%, which is acceptable (Burke and Dunlap 2002). The slightly low percentage can be attributed to several factors, many of which related to confusion about similarity and level of detail in the terms used (i.e., Coding to "fight" rather than "fight over jump ropes"). Finally, themes were drawn from codes that related to the activities. In the case of possible solutions to problems, clear recommendations emerged.

Results and Discussion

This section will begin with the results from the observational phase, which helped to define the nature of the recess space. Then, we integrate findings from the observations and focus groups to describe two problem definitions and some possible solutions. Finally, we discuss the effects of the inquiry. The resource deficient environment was a common finding in observations and focus groups. The children's focus group results were key in defining the problems and offering potential solutions. Although some of their suggestions were fantastically unrealistic, they also showed sharp insights into their environment and identified areas where they wanted additional resources.

Observations: How Children Play

Observations helped us to understand the setting (results are summarized in Table 1). An important observable occurrence was that games, once they began, were difficult to join. Basketball is a good example of this phenomenon. Basketball was a large part of recess time for many boys, perhaps because it was one of the only organized games consisting of teams, scores, and relatively rigid rules. It was also positively reinforced by the principal, who announced the names of star basketball players at inter-school games during lunchtime. In many cases, however, children who did not start in the game could not join, as indicated below.

> A white duty aide helps the observation boy [white boy] down from the snow/ice bank. He is handed something from a much smaller white boy and then heads back over to the snow. He stands on the ice and walks across the ice toward a group playing basketball, but then, just as he gets close to them, he walks away from them. This happens twice. He stands on the snow and pushes it down with his foot, packing it even more. He picks up a piece of cardboard, examines it for only a moment, and then throws it into the ice bank. He picks up a small piece of ice and walks over to the boys who are playing basketball and throws his ice ball at the ground. It breaks apart. A Black duty aide asks him a question and he answers. He then follows a much smaller Black boy

Table 1 Play observations

Theme and explanation	Example
Closed systems—once begun, some games are difficult to enter and/or exit	Children who come late to recess cannot enter basketball
Resources—resources influence play	Limited resources and equipment facilitates arguments
Space use—good use of limited space	Basketball and chase occur in the same space at the same time, with no disruption to either game

> who is bouncing a basketball. The observation boy very lightly touches the other boy's back and then he (the observation boy) looks at the duty aide. He continues to look at her and then the duty aide tells the boys to share. The observation boy stands still as the other boy shoots the ball. He then heads back to the ice and then turns and approaches the boy again. (RDL field note 2/27/04)

Instead of joining in, boys who were late to recess hung around the basketball hoops, or walked around the area. They did not ask to join in, and the children who were already playing did not ask these children to play with them. Once the game started, it was essentially a closed game.

One potential problem, however, was that children who stayed around the border of the playground would often pick up snow or ice to throw, sometimes at other children, and often against the blacktop. This was against the rules, and recess aides often reprimanded children who did this, but the behavior did not stop. "What are we supposed to do?" remarked one student about playing with the snow (JR field note 2/23/04). With a crowded blacktop bordered by snow, limited balls, and unable to join in a basketball game, children on the borders were those with nothing to do, often complaining about boredom.

Because the blacktop was a shared space encompassing many activities, another observation of the activities was that students learned to make good use of limited space. For example, children in a make-believe game or a tag game often ran through the basketball games, and usually this was ignored and did not turn into conflict. The following field note makes this point.

> Some girls hang out under the basketball hoop near the northeast corner (where the kids line up after recess). Some boys play basketball using this hoop. Some boys play basketball at the other hoop. Some kids run races from south to north and back again through the middle of the basketball courts and over the map. (RDL general observation 2/27/04)

The smallness of the blacktop was emphasized when there was snow, or when the rest of the playground was off-limits. This highlighted one of the strengths that the children possessed: they were able to negotiate a small space in a way that seemed to work well for most of them.

Finally, we found that in many cases, similarly perceived behavior on our part often signified different meanings in different situations for the students. For instance, chasing was sometimes a part of a tag game and sometimes a role-playing game. Also, at times it was friendly whereas at other times it was antagonistic. The below examples illustrate the dynamic and varied nature of tag:

> A girl is playing tag with two boys. They start to fight. They stop fighting and begin to chase each other back and forth. It turns into a one-on-one game of tag. (ES field note, 3/8/04)

> Two boys are playing with jump ropes. It seems like a pretend game of Resident Evil (Play Station Game). They begin to play tag with the ropes. They chase each other back and forth. (ES field note, 3/8/04)

Overall, our observations regarding play were fourfold. First, many games followed a closed system structure such that children could not enter or exit games after they had begun. Second, resource availability influenced play and arguments. Additionally, we identified a clear strength in that children were cooperative in their use of limited space. Finally, because of the ambiguous nature of some interactions, it was difficult for us to draw conclusions regarding certain interactions. The difficulty in gauging the exact nature of some games indicates the limitations of observational data as a primary mode of data collection when on the playground. Although children later described these activities during the focus groups, it was sometimes difficult for the observer to know which descriptions fit with what activities while observing. This situation called for the deeper insights that focus groups can provide, allowing the observed to articulate their experience.

The focus groups with the students were central in clarifying some of our observational data, determining how to understand their conceptualization of problems, and thinking about how to proceed with recess changes. The focus groups allowed the inclusion and amplification of the voices of the primary stakeholders (i.e., the children), and were key in understanding how the children described recess time, what they saw as the problems (if anything), and what they would like to see happen. Problem definitions and potential solutions are each taken in turn below. Additionally, these results are summarized in Table 2.

Problem Definition: Resource Unavailability

There were a few instances where resources were available, but the children did not have access to them. This is a theme that emerged from both observations and focus groups. For example, CPRAT learned during observations that jump rope was one of the games that had been cut out previously because students were using the ropes to play tug of war and to tie up "captors" in role-playing games. Recess aides viewed this play as potentially harmful. Because they lost this privilege, the ropes were kept in storage. During the course of observations and focus groups, the principal brought the ropes back out and asked CPRAT members to participate by helping to set up jump rope games. CPRAT members helped turn the long

Table 2 Children's perspectives on recess

Theme	Example	Suggested interventions
Outdoor recess		
Few equipment resources	"I wish they [the school] had some baseballs"	Buy more equipment or fix existing equipment
Few adults at recess	"There should be more [recess] aides"	Hire more recess aides, have children lead games, have children monitor behavior
Fighting	"Some people fight over balls" "People get in fights"	Buy more equipment or fix existing equipment; play fairly
Indoor recess		
Few movies	"I want to tell you the baby movies we've been watching"	Buy more movies; allow other activities
Boring movies	'We don't like *TELETUBBIES*'	Buy more movies; allow other activities

difficult-to-manage ropes, allowing more children to play as lines were formed to jump. We also taught children how to turn the large ropes. Subsequently, sometimes older children helped turn the ropes for the younger children. The resource deficiency in this case was not material, but more staff-related.

Another resource availability example was the movie issue for indoor recess. There was more consensus among the children about the poor video selection than any other aspect of recess. A group of first grade boys summed up the general student feelings (FG6):

> Child 2: "I want to tell you the baby movies we've been watching. *Winnie the Pooh*, we've been watching"//
> Child 3: //"*Winnie the Pooh*, baby cartoons,"//
> Child 2: //"oh God don't tell me"//
> Child 3: //"and one time, we were so close to watching *Teletubbies* everyone except me screamed, 'We don't like *TELETUBBIES*.'"

Even in the focus groups with the recess aides, the poor selection was brought up, as shown in this focus group exchange:

> Researcher: "Um. How about, I think we already touched on this one too in terms of equipment and indoor recess, um"//
> Recess aide 1: //"We're limited." {laughs}
> Recess aide 2 {annoyed, boring tone}: "The movies, you know? I mean, we can only watch *Charlotte's Web* how many times, and the *Mouse and the Motorcycle*, what they are watching now. They just read the book so that was good. But I mean {lowers voice} *Cat and the Hat* and there is *Winnie the Pooh*." {pitiful tone}
> Recess aide 1 {pitiful tone}: "*Corduroy*. We got into trouble!" {laughs}
> Recess aide 2: "Yeah, we did. I didn't realize the copyright laws. I should have thought of that but I didn't, I mean, I would tape, like they love *Full House* {Researcher: "um hum"} um… *Bill Cosby* even *Sponge Bob* and I would tape them, at home, bring it in…the kids…what a difference. They were SO quiet, they would sit there like 'wow this is great' and they ENJOYED it and then (Recess aide 1: "We can't do it no more" {sad}) someone had said whether it was a child, well I'm not sure, a teacher, you know, and with copyright laws we can't do that anymore."
> Recess aide 1: "And we heard it for a couple days. [to Recess Aides] 'Where's your movie? Hey Miss [name of recess aide]! Where's your movie? Hey Miss [name of recess aide]!' And we tell them 'we can't do it.' (Recess aide 2: "We can't do it.") [to Recess Aides] 'Why??!! I'm not watching them upstairs [library movies]. I don't wanna watch them. They old movies!' [to kids] 'We can't do them baby, we have to follow, we have rules too. And we have to follow 'em.'"
> Recess aide 2: "And it's a law. You know? And so we even suggested getting *Full House* videos at Wal-Mart and have the school purchase them so they are in the library in the school you know?" (FG9)

As the aides explained, someone was concerned about copyright issues with the television shows that students had been watching, so the "interesting" or novel movies/programs could no longer be shown during indoor recess.

Problem Definition: Fighting and Rules as an Inadequate Solution

Throughout the focus groups, children recognized behavior such as fighting, hitting and yelling as wrong. Although

they articulated the numerous rules at recess, they still described fighting as a frequent occurrence. The first focus group question, "Can you tell me what happens on the playground?" drew the following responses:

'People fight over stuff like jump ropes.' (FG8)
"People start" 'fighting over the swings and then people get hurt.' "It happened to me; it happened to my brother." (FG7)
"People get hurt." (FG1)
"There's problems with sharing and sometimes people get knocked off the swings." (FG1)
"Some people fight over balls." (FG1)
'There's not fighting when everyone's playing.' (FG1)

Overall, fighting and its consequences were well understood and came up in every focus group. Additionally, children were aware of other children getting hurt as a result of fighting. The need to mediate fights was mentioned more often than anything else by the children as an improvement for outdoor recess. Some examples are:

Researcher: 'When do you like recess?'
Child 3: "When there's no fighting."
Child 4: 'When nobody's afraid.'
…
Child 1: "When we just have fun instead of fighting and doing bad things." (FG3)

and

Researcher: 'What would you like to have happen on the playground and why?'
Child 1: 'I want people to be nice, not pushing on the ground or they might get hurt, woodchips might get on you.'
Child 2: 'I would like to pick up all the garbage around here, 'cause kids throw it at people.'
Child 3: 'I like to see people not fighting for the jump ropes, or pushing each other.' (FG8)

The consequence that was mentioned most often was being sent to the office or to the principal.

The children's responses were different from the recess aides. When asked what happened during recess, aides in both groups talked about the kinds of games the students played.

Researcher: "In general what do kids do on the playground?"
Aide 1: "A lot of running around. Tag. Jump rope, chalk, basketball." (Aide 2: "Four Square") (looking at Aide 2 and nodding yes) Yeah. Four Square, Playscape. (looking at Aide 2) "Yeah that's about it. Homework." (FG9)

Yet, when asked how the students relate to one another, both groups mention that sometimes, specific students or groups of students do not always get along.

Researcher: "How do you think they [the students] relate to one another?"
Aide 2: "Depends on which group you're talking about. They, they all have their moments. Depends on what went on in their classrooms, or whatever."
…
Researcher: "And when you say they have their moments, can you tell me kinda descriptively what you mean by that?"
…
Aide 2: "Oh, then they start ganging up on people, or saying, you know, trying to get if they're mad at someone then they (Aide 1: "Mmhmm") get someone else (Aide 1: "Yeah")."
Aide 1: "yeah, or they won't speak to so and so (Aide 2: Yeah)
anymore cause"//
Aide 2: //"Go do something to them, or"//
Aide 1: //"Yeah, or they won't speak to so and so anymore cause
(Aide 2: "Yeah") did this, mmhmm."
Aide 2: "Or, they'll pick someone, and say 'You can't play with us today' (Aide 1: "Mmhmm") you know."
Researcher: "And is it usually, the way you're talking about it now, it sounds like it might be one or two kids who are having some kind of issue with one or two kids, so it's not like big groups against one or two kids, or big groups against big groups"//
Aide 2: //"Well, you know it starts off little (Aide 1: "Yeah"), you know, one against one, and then they get others into it."
Aide 1: "Yeah."
Aide 2: "You know, so we try and watch for that." (FG10)

Therefore, acrimonious relationships were considered an issue by students and recess aides, but the issue was more at the forefront for the students.

In the end, student responses about what happened at recess were overwhelmingly focused on negative aspects. Additionally, the children were able to articulate problems and the numerous rules enumerating what not to do, but rarely noted the fun elements of recess or talked about the possibilities for what they were allowed to do. For example, children in almost all focus groups mentioned the following rules: "don't walk up the slides" (FG1), "no running on the playscape" (FG3), "no playing tag on the playscape" (FG3), "don't fight" (FG6), "no hitting, no punching" (FG7), "no pushing" (FG8), "no shoving" (FG2), "no swearing" (FG4), "no bad talk" (FG5), "no talking back to the duty aids, listen about time outs" (FG2), and finally, "no playing on the wrong size playscape" (the larger playscape was for grades 2–5, and the smaller one was for K-1; FG1). In describing what happened at recess, they often admitted that even though things such as running on the playscape were not allowed, and children can get hurt, they did it anyway.

These findings were important because they indicated that interventions designed to teach children rules may not be terribly effective given that they seem to have a thorough understanding of the rules already. Indeed, although there were many rules, and they clearly understood the rules, the rules did not determine the scope of their activities. Therefore, other interventions may be more effective in changing negative playground behaviors.

Possible Solutions: Structural Resource Changes

The children's focus groups also produced numerous ideas for ways to make recess better, and many of these ideas were tied to structural and material issues, such as greater resource availability. Some of these solutions were practical and easy to implement. For example, "Certain girls [who want to] practicing cheerleading" (FG3), "I wish they [the school] had some baseballs" (FG1), 'They [recess aides] start bringing out jump ropes' (FG2), and 'hoola hoops' (FG2). These responses were consistent with the recess aides' perspectives, yet the children's ideas were much more fleshed out in terms of what they would like to do. Recess aides simply said that students should have "more different activities and stuff to do" (FG10). These were requests to which the principal was prepared to respond, but waited for confirmation about children's desires so that the money would not be wasted.

Some resource requests were practical but required some research to determine if they could be legally implemented. For example, when talking about the movies and indoor recess, most children said that they were not opposed to movies, but rather to watching the same movies over and over again. Children thought that 'we could watch movies about' "science, animals" (FG6), or "something new and exciting like new things in the earth, sort of like a new earth" (FG6). These responses were different from the recess aides. Recess Aide 2 (FG10) said that "it's mainly the older ones that don't wanna (Aide 1: "mmhmm, yeah") watch the movies. I think by the time you hit third grade, it's like, you know, {laughs} they don't wanna sit there (Recess aide 1: "Yeah"), you know?" Overall, however, children were not opposed to the ideas of movies in principle and had many ideas about what they deemed to be more appropriate movies.

Although some of the children's ideas were unreasonable (e.g., 'I'd like to have a slide with a ladder that goes from the roof to the trees and all the way to black top' (FG1), and 'I know I KNOW I KNOW. A circus with lions tiger and bears, lions and tigers and bears, OH MY and I want a carnival' (FG5)), most of them would not be difficult, but required more school resources for additional supervision. For example, some children simply said, "there should be more [recess] aides" and asked for more to be hired (FG4). Some children also wanted to play games during indoor recess (FG1):

> Researcher: 'What would you like to see happen during indoor recess?'
> Child 2: 'Games… now we have to watch movies.'
> Child 3: 'Yeah, all kinds of games like Connect Four and Sorry.'
> Child 2: "Candy Man."
> Child 1: "Uno…uno dos tres."
> Child 3: "Jack"
> Researcher: "Jacks?"
> Child 3: "Yeah, jacks."
> Child 2: "And uh, chess."

Other children mentioned "Shoots and Ladders [and] Checkers" (FG3). In general, there were several ideas regarding movies and games that would make indoor recess more interesting, fun, and interactive.

With respect to outdoor recess, many children wanted the opportunity to play organized games. They mentioned several possibilities, such as "octopus" (a tag game; FG7), "protect the pigs" (a bowling game; FG1), "dodge ball" (a ball tag game; FG1), "fire catch" (a catch game; FG1), and "pop goes the weasel" (a singing game; FG3). Other games included football, kickball and soccer. One child lamented, "I would like something I could play with…so we can play catch, football" (FG1). What is notable about these games is that they have easy entry and exit, meaning that children who come out late to recess or simply want to join into the game later on can with ease, and those who no longer want to play can simply exit. These games would

help allay some of the recess issues that CPRAT had identified regarding children being unable to join games that were already in motion. Overall, children identified many games that they would like to play at outdoor recess, but could not play because they lacked the material resources and the space.

There was a large field at the school, which was mowed and ready, but rarely used. The children viewed this field as a potential resource, as demonstrated in the following focus group (FG3):

> Researcher: 'What would you like to have on the playground?'
> …
> Child 3: 'A big field.'
> Child 2: 'Yeah, a big field.'
> …
> Child 2: "But the field doesn't belong to the school."
> Child 4: 'I wish we could' "play games out there."
> Child 3: "Like tackle football or kickball, because there's a big baseball field" 'down there.'

The recess aides identified a staff shortage that prevented them from using the space. Additionally, the principal had indicated that the children were not allowed on the field because it was park property and not school property. Using the field was akin to going on a field trip, meaning that all the rules and regulations surrounding field trips would have to be enforced for students to be on the field during school hours. Even though the field was adjacent to the school, a structural issue (i.e., school policy as understood by the principal and lack of adult supervision) prevented this resource from being utilized by the children. Because of the size and layout, the field would facilitate the playing of several organized games in which many children were interested in participating.

The children also had a good sense of their physical environment. In addition to identifying the large field as a space they could make use of, several students also identified fixing one of the basketball hoops, as indicated in this focus group (FG5):

> Researcher: "Anything else that could be done [to make recess better]?"
> Child 1: "Fix the rims and put a hoop up."
> Child 3: "They put up a net on the basketball hoop that's facing towards the playground and um, after school bigger kids come to the school and try to do dunks and then they rip off the net so we don't have a net anymore."
> Child 1: "We can't play any more."
> Researcher: 'You mean the ones with no hoops, not the ones with no nets?'
> Child 1: 'No, I mean the ones with no nets. You can't tell when you make a hoop because nothing moves. You have to be able to see if the net moves to know if you made a basket. If there's no net, you can't tell when it goes through.'

Before final recommendations were given to the principal, CPRAT met with every child in the school to discuss solutions. To summarize, this meant we first observed recess, then asked about one-fourth of the second through fifth graders about their problem definitions and solutions for recess (in the form of, "What happens at recess?" and then, "What could be done about that?"), asked the same questions to recess aides, assembled common solutions, asked all the children if these recommendations were what they had intended, and asked them if they wanted to be involved in the solutions, and if so, how. The final document, therefore, was one that was overwhelming endorsed by the students given that it was comprised almost exclusively of their ideas.

Impact

The effects of this investigation were already evidenced during the course of the collaboration as commonly agreed upon problem aspects of recess dramatically changed. In the year after CPRAT researchers began coming to recess, the number of office referrals from recess dropped significantly, as did suspensions (which were usually given based on recess behavior). Suspension numbers of academic year 2003–2004 were 21, 2004–2005 (the year of this study) were 12, 2005–2006 were 13. This may be misleading, however, as the principal had also begun to host a group of students she believed could benefit from extra counseling on pro-social behaviors. This group consistently stayed in from recess, and this situation may have exaggerated the change in the recess environment.

The mere act of creating a space for children to reflect on recess could have led to changes in recess behavior. It may be that asking children to envision a different recess communicated to them that they could create the change they wanted to see. For example, the principal noted that after the focus groups, older children began spontaneously to organize games for younger children. The older children made announcements at lunch time that anyone who wanted to participate in a particular activity (e.g., dance, cheerlead, learn about cooking, play a role playing game, arts and crafts) should meet at a specified location. Children were taking recess into their own hands to create a better environment for all. Indeed, they did not wait for their recommendations to be implemented. They recognized their power and created positive change.

Another important change was a partial attitudinal shift by some school staff regarding children's roles. Several school staff were pleasantly surprised by the children's conceptualizations of problem definition and solutions. For example, in a staff meeting, one staff member said, "The children really did have a lot to say and [I] was impressed with the entire process" (RDL field note 10/12/04). This modification allowed a space for children to claim an even larger stakeholder role. This role revision permitted children to be seen not only as the problem (which was largely the conceptualization before the study and one that is common in the recess intervention literature), but also as a resource for solutions. For example, one staff member whose attitude did not shift argued, "Students need to be given directions. They are too young to be involved in the decision of how recess is run" (Questionnaire 10/20/04). Yet, based on this broader social and cultural shift regarding the role of children by many staff, a peer mediation program was implemented, which was consistent with the student recommendation that they help monitor playground behavior. We argue that a peer mediation program, where children were serving as resources on the playground, would not have been possible to implement without the revision of student roles by at least some staff. Indeed, teachers agreed to the intervention and recommended students, and recess aides and the school community social worker provided support to the peer mediators.

Based on the report, some of the children's solutions were simple to implement. For example, CPRAT could easily teach children how to turn the jump ropes. Similarly, CPRAT investigated copyright laws and learned that copyright materials could be shown in public educational settings without charge as long as specific rules were followed. These instances in which CPRAT helped to facilitate children's solutions are not meant to glorify the role of CPRAT researchers, but rather to highlight the usefulness of collaborating with multiple stakeholders in identifying the most helpful changes.

Although the process of interchange between the children and CPRAT was an ongoing collaborative effort, there were numerous recess adjustments as a result of the work that likely also reduced recess referrals. Small differences played a part in altering the negative attitudes toward recess. For example, more balls were purchased, thus reducing tensions and fighting around who got to play with the only ball. Also, more playground staff were hired and they were trained in leading games. Indoor recess, a subject of much lament by virtually all the children, was divided into groups so some children could play board games and draw in the cafeteria whereas others could watch a movie. Additionally, the principal looked into the school policy again and learned that the students could, in fact, use the field at recess. When CPRAT agreed to help the recess aides staff the field, the students were granted access to this area. Note that these changes were suggested by the children and are tied to shifts at the structural level. These structural permutations created a different recess climate and promoted different individual behavior.

As longer-term projects such as peer mediation are institutionalized, the role of children also continues to change. For example, in year two of the peer mediation program, children had taken over the responsibility of setting peer mediation policy. Also, peer mediators and recess aides were meeting to collaboratively problem solve playground issues. Additionally, recess aides used the peer mediators as resources, referring other children to them regularly.

Conclusion

Implications for CPRAT's Roles

Several lessons emerged in moving toward participatory action research in this school, especially given that children were the primary stakeholders. Perhaps most importantly, we learned that one of our roles is to begin conversations about values and how values relate to practice. Without our preliminary values conversation with the principal, it would have been difficult to have a discussion about what might be problematic with moving ahead as the principal had initially suggested (i.e., with CPRAT organizing non-competitive games at recess based solely on her problem definition and solution). Because we had already talked about values, we were able to re-engage the discussion and determine how moving ahead as suggested would or would not be consistent with our values, and we were then able to use our common value base as a guidepost for making decisions. This values exchange also increases the likelihood of children's leadership roles being institutionalized because we have had practice with talking about praxis (reflexively examining how values and practices are aligned or not) and making decisions that are explicitly guided by shared values. CPRAT now begins all collaborations with these values deliberations and has increased our transparency about how our values and actions are (in)consistent.

A second important role CPRAT took up was to critically reflect on the literature. In this case, it was the recess intervention literature. Through this examination, we were able to assess the suppositions within much of the recess-based intervention research. The main assumption seemed to be that children were not necessarily able to reflect on their play. Because of this premise, we argue that recess interventions tend to be individually focused and

deficit-based. Actually talking with children about their play brought with it a different and more nuanced perspective that was more ecologically and materially grounded, and structural in its problem definition (i.e., scarcity of resources). This serves as a reminder that, like other stakeholders, young children can provide a host of information about their experiences and design appropriate interventions.

CPRAT also learned that it was important to be flexible and patient. For example, though we would have preferred to teach students how to conduct social science research so that they could design the study and collect the data, it was quite clear that this was not within the comfort zone of the superintendent. CPRAT therefore had to alter our suggestions by offering to design the investigation, collect the data, and compile the report. Even within these confines, though, we believe we were able to operate in ways that maintained the integrity of PAR in that children set the problem definition and determined solutions. This process created an opening so that other kinds of projects that were more participatory in nature could take root in the school, such as peer mediation. This implication is a good reminder that PAR must be implemented in contextually relevant ways and will therefore look different from setting to setting.

Implications for Children's Roles

Changes in children's roles occurred slowly and over years. These results therefore provide empirical support to Serrano-García's (1990) argument that opening a space for stakeholder collaboration can create a re-visioning of the roles of the actors and lead to even greater levels of participation. It is therefore important to remember that participatory action research is a process, not a thing that is achieved (Greenwood et al. 1993). We view this inquiry as a pivotal moment that allowed for more participation within the PAR continuum. Although this research was embedded in a larger institutional hierarchy, the initiation of this process helped in the re-negotiation of the role of children in both research and intervention. These kinds of transitional PAR studies awaken our collective imagination to the idea that another kind of school is possible, and this schooling structure can teach about participation, citizen engagement, collaboration, and empowerment.

This project also demonstrates movement toward second order change because relationship structures are being altered via the roles of children. For example, this inquiry has facilitated higher degrees of empowerment, signified by children's greater control over playground resources. Indeed, the resource deficient environment was often identified in observations and focus groups as a challenge area, further highlighting the significance of this changing environment—that children are able to exercise greater control over scarce resources and garner more resources. This project therefore provides an example of transforming resource allocation through stakeholder involvement while principally reiterating the particular value this has for children in the realm of recess and play. It thus differs from most previous studies of play, which do not invite children's perspectives in articulating their processes of play.

Play is a part of children's lives that carries the potential to help promote their ability to make choices and exercise their agency. In this sense, the playground is the children's sacred space to express this freedom and an intervention should not lead to restrictions on children's abilities to make choices. An invitation to CPRAT to improve recess must therefore be translated as a call to involve the children to articulate the realities and possibilities for improving their space. By collaborating with students, multiple perspectives were included with respect to problem definition, playground assessment, and possible changes. Involving stakeholders in this way also led to changes before formal interventions and projects were implemented because children and recess aides had had time to reflect on the playground. Although this investigation promoted an important attitudinal shift for some, questions remain about the potential for more permanently institutionalized changes.

The children's ability to articulate their experience on the playground affirms their agency in play. Although consistent with the PAR literature, it is still worth noting that children had the greatest insights into their own experiences, as well as solutions for problems. Some of their commentary, however, was surprising as it complicates assumptions about the degree to which recess is their free time. Their focus on rules and consequences in addition to their concerns about fighting highlight the generally negative attitudes the children held toward recess. Yet, it is also important to recognize that in this case, rules were not sufficient to solving the problem. By asking them to suggest ways to improve recess, they were asked to re-vision their recess time in a constructive way. Moreover, their suggestions were structural and included more resources as well as roles for the children to play as game leaders and mediators. Seeing changes made on their bequest and having a role in subsequent solutions further promotes the notion that children have control over recess and play, which facilitates their empowerment via their leadership development and their control over the resources that affect them. The children now largely shape future playground directions. Their stake in making improvements is greater than any of ours, and their direction in making these improvements will lead not only to sustainable changes on the playground, but also a sense of agency and control over a very important part of their lives: recess.

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