TOYS DON'T HAVE A GENDER:

Gender, Play, and Aggression in a Small, Co-operative, Play Based Preschool

By

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Abstract

Bryn Peterson TOYS DON'T HAVE A GENDER: Gender, Play, and Aggression In a Small, Co-operative, Play Based Preschool. Department of Anthropology, April, 2014.

In this thesis I explore the relationship between gender and free-play in a small, cooperative preschool in Niskayuna, New York. While psychologists and sociologists have studied gender in young children, I found that children had been largely overlooked in the field of anthropology. While some anthropologists have historically believed that children do not fully understand their culture and cannot be reliable informants, I believe that there is much we can learn by understanding children's games - which often reflect our culture. Through observing children's free play I was able to analyze gender conforming/nonconforming play, aggression, and the themes of the imaginary games children play. I also analyze the importance of choice in children's free play, and the importance of choice as children experiment with and come to understand their gender identity. By understanding the way that children understand the world we can learn a lot about our own culture.

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Literature Review

A History of Children in Anthropology

In the history of anthropology, children have largely been overlooked. Many anthropologists would disagree. When reflecting on anthropology as a discipline one might think of many different studies involving childhood, however I found that many of the studies which involved children did not focus on children. That is to say, while many studies seemed to be about children at first glance, they frequently focused on adults rather than actual children. Many of the studies I read that appeared to focus on children were actually about parenting styles or preschools – topics which involve children, but are truly focusing on adults. One professor from the Western Michigan University reviewed the 30 most popular introduction to anthropology textbooks, and found that only 2 of those textbooks had chapters that directly referenced children or childhood. (Friedl 2002) Many books referenced either adolescence or infancy in multiple chapters, and multiple books featured pictures of children on the covers but did not include relevant information about children and childhood inside. This reflected several articles which claimed that children were rarely the focus of anthropological studies because anthropologists do not recognize children as social actors, but instead as people who have not yet developed a concrete understanding of their culture, and therefore cannot be reliable informants. (Friedl 2002)

As I was doing research I came across two conflicting viewpoints surrounding children in anthropology. Authors either claimed that anthropologists had been writing about children since the beginning of anthropology, or that the anthropology of childhood was a relatively new field which was still being developed and explored. Although I read

many accounts of children and childhood, few focused on play or gender – and none focused on play *and* gender. Many of the recent texts relied heavily on sociology and developmental psychology sources, as I have done with my research.

Anthropologists were writing about children as early as the 1911, when Franz Boas wrote "Instability of Human Types." (Boas 2008) Other early anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict also wrote about childhood – although I did not gain information for my literature review from any of these sources. As an example of children in the periphery of anthropological studies about childhood, Malinowski writes about various parenting styles in the Tobriand Islands such as fathers caring for infants, or hitting children as punishment – but he does not give any attention to play, and very little attention to gender. (Malinowski 2008) When he does mention gender and children it is exclusively in the context of sexual intercourse, and the only mention of a game is a game in which two young children mimic intercourse. Margaret Mead referred to children as "little adults," who have similar responsibilities as their parents but on a smaller scale. She also wrote about children and sex, but paid no attention to play and the way children interpret the world around them. (Mead 2008)

An example of an ethnography about children is *Preschool in Three Cultures* and *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited.* Again, although the book appears to be about the day to day interactions of preschoolers, it is really about the structure and culture of three different preschools. Throughout the book the authors describe the way the children are playing and interacting with each other, but the analysis mostly includes parents and administrators critiquing the resources and techniques of the other schools, and spends very little time comparing the similarities and differences between the children's play.

Even when the discussion turns to the way children behave or play, the focus is often on the teachers' reaction to a certain behavior, or the toys with which the children have access to or do not have access to, and not about the ways gender influences play behaviors across cultures.

I expected to see more information about play and gender in Professor Karen Brison's articles about gender among kindergarteners in Fiji, but still found little information that was relevant to my research. Professor Brison studied children's opinions about ethnicity and the ways they grouped themselves, but quickly found that children in kindergartens paid little attention to ethnicity and instead grouped themselves by gender. She concludes that when you group children by age group, as we do in the American schooling system, they are more likely to gravitate towards friends of the same gender. (Brison 2009) I found this interesting because most children in the United States attend schools in which children are grouped by age, however in the end it was not extremely relevant to my research because the preschool where I did my observations was not particularly diverse.

One anthropologist, David Lancy, claimed that there have been many anthropologists who study childhood, but that they were largely unappreciative of each other's' work. He does write in depth about childhood, citing numerous studies that feature children. One chapter focuses solely on play, but mostly compares play between cultures and does not mention many differences in play between genders. An example of one scenario about both play and gender is a fairly common imaginary game where young girls pretend to be cooking dinner. Younger siblings become children, and boys play small parts in which they are husbands and mostly comment on the flavor of the

food. Lancy says that this is the most common imaginary play scenario across cultures, and that it is important because it reinforces the stereotypical gender roles. (Lancy 2008) He also mentions what types of games are appropriate for which gender to play in different cultures, however, I chose not to summarize them all because of both the variation by culture in Lancy's chapter on play, and the broad range of play I saw in the preschool.

An Overview of Gender

Whereas sex can usually be determined at birth, gender is learned and cannot really be determined until a child is old enough to express themselves. Many people use the terms gender and sex interchangeably – however sex refers to one's biological sex, while gender refers to the culturally constructed gender role which each person performs. People can perform the gender usually associate with their sex (girls are feminine, boys are masculine) or they can be gender nonconforming, which means they perform the gender not usually associated with their sex. Gender is complex, and can also be a combination of the two genders to different degrees. Some cultures even have a third gender – although in the United States we only have two. It is important to note that gender cannot exist except in contrast to the other gender – masculinity cannot exist except in contrast to femininity. Performing gender does not always mean performing the socially accepted gender roles that society has in place. Performing gender can mean performing the opposite gender's role, or a mix of masculinity and femininity.

One author writes that hegemonic masculinity is currently marked by aggression, limited emotionality, and heterosexuality – and anything that counters these markers is against masculinity and is instead feminine. (Kane 2006) He says that there is no need

for hegemonic femininity because the point of hegemonic masculinity is to legitimate male domination – including domination over less masculine males. Homophobia can be categorized by this author as the rejection of femininity in males. From this perspective, masculinity in boys play should be visible through aggressive games, limited emotional expression, and heterosexuality; while homophobia in boys play should be visible when boys reject other boys who take on girls' roles during play or play girls' games.

Gender is a cultural construct – it is different in every culture, and can change across time. What is typical behavior for one gender in one culture would very likely be different in another culture. In addition, what was acceptable behavior for one gender in one culture could be very different than what was acceptable for that gender 100 years later. Gender norms can also vary across races, and depending on social class. Gender and sexuality are not related, and should not be confused.

Gender Non-conformity

Parents begin gendering their children from the moment they are aware of their sex, and children begin participating in gender conformity or non-conformity by the age of two. (Kane 2006) According to researchers Thomas and Blakemore, "Children who adopt the gender-related behaviors, interests, traits, and activities of the other sex are said to be gender nonconforming." (Thomas et al. 2013) It is generally believed that gender nonconformity may lead homosexuality, although there is very little evidence to back up this hypothesis. Multiple studies cited by Thomas and Blakemore have shown that gay men and lesbian women reported gender nonconforming in childhood with more frequency than heterosexual adults, but these studies have only shown that a correlation is believed to exist by many adults. Adults in a child's life such as teachers, coaches, or

parents may stigmatize gender nonconforming behavior children based on these beliefs. (Thomas et al. 2013) Kane suggests that heterosexual fathers play a central roles in boy's performance of masculinity – which reinforces their own masculinity – while heterosexual mothers and same sex parents are more likely to hold others accountable for their sons' masculinity and whether it fits with culturally accepted forms of masculinity. (Kane 2006) This means that heterosexual fathers often put more pressure on their sons to conform to gender norms, while heterosexual mothers and same sex parents often allow more freedom in gender expression. As most of the helping parents at the preschool were mothers or grandmothers I hypothesized that gender of the parents and teachers present in the classroom might have a significant impact on gender expression in the classroom.

Studies have demonstrated that gender nonconformity in childhood is linked to strained relationships with parents and other adults, and strained relationships with peers. Parents may be more tolerant of gender nonconforming behavior early in childhood, for example if their male toddler picks up a doll – but generally parents are happier when their children are playing with toys associated with their gender. Some parents take pride in their daughters preferring male activities (breaking out of the "princess" mold) however many parents had more problems with their sons taking up female activities. (Thomas et al. 2013) Parents also seemed to believe that girls would grow out of their gender nonconformity, while boys' gender nonconformity was expected to follow them into adulthood. Most adults saw masculine women and girls as preferable to feminine boys and men. Research has also shown that once children come to associate certain activities with certain genders they too will consider nonconformity undesirable.

(Thomas et al. 2013) The authors of one study warn that pressuring children to change their gender related behavior can cause stress and psychological problems later in life. (Thomas et al. 2013)

Parents' behavior can have a huge impact on children's behavior – therefore parents' beliefs about gender nonconformity can have lasting consequences on their children. One researcher, Emily Kane, interviewed parents of preschool children to gauge their opinions on gender nonconformity. Kane chose this age group, as did I for my research, because this is the age when children really start to show their understanding of gender. While gendered behavior may occur early in childhood (some parents report gender differences when children are only a few months old) children themselves do not begin to understand gender until they are at least two years old. Many children start preschool between the ages of two and three, meaning that they are beginning to understand gender while at the same time being placed in a new environment which exposes them to many children of the same and opposite gender from whom they can learn both the expected and acceptable behaviors for their gender. Children's understanding of gender may not be concrete during preschool, so it is expected that there will be overlap of boys playing "girls" games and girls playing "boys" games.

Kane interviewed a group of 42 parents about their preschool children's current activities, toys, clothes, behaviors, and gender awareness; as well as the parents' feelings about their children's behaviors. (Kane 2006) She reports that parents usually supported their daughters' gender nonconformity, and many encouraged their daughters to aspire to traditionally male activities. Some parents also encouraged what they considered typical

girl behavior as well, but few parents made negative comments about their daughters' gender performances. In contrast, parents of boys accepted their sons' domestic abilities, nurturing nature and empathy; however, boys were much more likely to receive negative feedback as well. Twenty-three out of thirty-one parents of boys gave negative feedback about their sons' gender performance. Mothers were more likely to encourage gender nonconformity in boys, even going so far as to buy them cooking sets and baby dolls, while fathers were more likely to encourage gender conforming behavior. (Kane 2006) While many parents tolerated gender nonconforming play, fewer parents were accepting of gender nonconforming dress – such as boys preferring skirts or dresses, or having their fingernails polished. Parents did not spontaneously connect gender nonconformity and sexual orientation for daughters, but among parents of sons seven out of twenty seven heterosexual parents of sons said they feared that their sons' gender nonconformity would "lead to" homosexuality. (Kane 2006) It is interesting to note that among two mom and two dad families none of the parents (including both parents of boys and parents of girls) connected gender nonconformity and sexual orientation. This points to a close link between gender performance and perceived sexuality in hegemonic masculinity.

While fathers with sons would often be tolerant of gender nonconforming behavior within limits, they often placed boundaries on times when gender nonconforming behavior was acceptable. For example, fathers might be okay with their sons playing with a play kitchen as long as they did not have friends visiting; they might be okay with their sons playing dress up with skirts and dresses as long as they only did so in the home; or they might be ok with gender nonconforming play as long as it stopped by a certain age (for example, by the time their son entered preschool.) In general parents

were much more aware that their sons might be judged by peers and strangers because of their gender nonconforming behavior, while parents of daughters did not seem to be concerned that their daughters might be judged. (Kane 2006) One difference among parents was that heterosexual fathers tended to worry more about how their son's behavior would reflect back on him as a father (indicating that fathers assumed significant responsibility for their son's expression of masculinity) while heterosexual mothers, gay mothers, and gay fathers all tended to worry more about how others might treat their sons (indicating that these three groups placed more responsibility on others for judging their son than on themselves for shaping their masculinity. (Kane 2006) Kane cites one study that claims that same sex parents may allow more freedom from gender expectations, but she recognizes that these freedoms come with a social price in our homophobic society – a price that most definitely affects boys more than girls. (Kane 2006)

Learning Gender through Books and Media

Children are not born with an understanding of gender and all the complicated behaviors that come with it. Children are born with a sex (male, female, or intersex) and they learn gender as they grow. Gender is acquired from parents, siblings, friends and teachers; but it is also learned through stories, illustrations, movies, television, and advertisements. However, as Jane Sunderland clarifies in *Language, Gender, and Children's Fiction*: "The representation of gender in fiction is not about gender in the sense of what actual men, women, boys and girls tend to be like (in terms of their socially-shaped abilities, attitudes, language use, social practices or whatever). Rather, this is gender in the sense of *ideas* about men, women, boys and girls, as well as about

gender relations, and masculinity and femininity more widely." (Sunderland, 2011, pg 6) That is, the representation of gender in children's fiction is exactly that – a *representation* of gender; it may be intended to teach children different facets of gender (or it may do so unconsciously) but in the end it is still only one facet of gender. Gender is multifaceted and changes over our lifetimes. Qualities that were considered masculine in the past might be considered feminine now, and vice versa. This is especially true because, as Sunderland writes, gendered discourses can be interpreted differently depending on the gender of the author, the gender of the reader, the relationship to the listener, or the way the reader talks around the story (adding lines or asking the child questions). She also says that young children, who have less experience with gender and social situations, may come up with meanings that we adults cannot predict because their lack of knowledge about gender and social situations allows them to create many potential new meanings for one story. (Sunderland, 2011)

However, some findings are less surprising. Sunderland describes one study which found that at all stages of reading, children preferred protagonists who shared their gender. (Sunderland, 2011) In other words, girls liked to read about girls and boys liked to read about boys. This is not surprising, because children are most interested in reading about people that they see to be the most like them. Just as children are drawn to other children of their own gender at school, children are more interested in books where the protagonist shares their gender. Girls are not interested in learning how a boy would behave, instead they are drawn to stories that tell them how girls would behave in different social situations. However, Sunderland also writes that boys not reading about girls may be more than just boys caring about boys – she suggests that boys may not be

interested in "human interest stories about home and school life." (Sunderland, 2011) In other words, she suggests (contrary to the previous study) that boys do not like reading about girls not because of the gender of the characters, but because of the content of the story. She suggests that boys find stories about home life and school (stories that do not typically involve adventure, imaginary or fantasy themes) boring. But what is to say that girls do not also find this content boring – but feel that their only option to read about characters of their own gender is to read boring stories about home and school life. In other words, when presented with boring stories with female characters and exciting stories with male characters, girls must choose whether it is more important to learn about their gender, or imagine possible adventures. Some might even argue that these types of stories teach children that girls and women belong at home while boys and men belong in adventures.

As an extension to Sunderland's theory about boys being bored by stories about home and school life, I propose that boys may dislike reading or listening to stories that have plausible plots. Just as boys are more likely to enjoy imaginary games with plots that could never happen, they may prefer books with impossible plots as well. On the other hand, girls may prefer books with home and school life plots because these are plausible stories, and girls tend to prefer imaginary play with plausible themes.

Sunderland also writes about gendered discourse in context. Although gender may be a factor in children's stories, it may not be *relevant* in all situations. However, she says, gender becomes relevant in certain situations; for example, if a man opens a door for a woman or says "Ladies, first." (Sunderland, 2011) One could argue that in these situations gender does not have to be relevant (in fact, either the man or the woman

could walk through the door first – or at the same time) but gender is *made relevant* when the man brings up the subject of gender. In the context of children's literature, although characters are often illustrated as either male or female in a story, their gender is often unimportant to the plot of the story. However, in stories as in real life there are situations when gender is made relevant. For example, one of the children's books I reviewed was called "My Mom, the Firefighter." The story was told from the perspective of a young boy, whose mom was a firefighter. Now, adults know that men or women can be firefighters, and it does not *need* to be relevant – in fact, if half of the firefighters in the story were female it would not necessarily *be* relevant. However, it is central to the story that the firefighter is not only a woman – but that she is a mom. The other firefighters are all male, and within the context of the story do not have children or families. In this type of situation within children's literature gender is made relevant, even though it does not necessarily need to be so. This sends a message to both girls and boys about the gender of firefighters – and although we may think we understand the implications, young children who have little understanding of gender may interpret the story differently than it is intended. For example, although the story is likely intended to suggest that anyone can be a firefighter – even mothers with families, children might see the female firefighter as an exception, and perhaps less desirable.

Finally, Sunderland addresses potential issues in gender as it is addressed in children's literature (and quite frankly in all literature, media, and other discourses.) She lists the following five caveats: 1) gender differences are not absolute. (Sunderland, 2011) Gender differences may be generalized across groups, but they by no means apply to every individual. 2) Gender varies with culture. (Sunderland, 2011) Behaviors that are

associated with one gender in one culture might be associated with another gender in a different culture – or might be accepted among both genders. 3) Gender identity changes throughout our lives. (Sunderland, 2011) Gender is a learned construct, and therefore changes as we learn and as our culture changes. Behaviors that are associated with one gender in one time (for example working outside the home) could change to be associated with both genders across time – and so our concept of gender must adapt. 4) We perform gender as we think it should be performed, and it is usually context dependent. (Sunderland, 2011) This means that our behavior in public will be different than our behavior in private, although both will reflect what we think are appropriate behaviors for our gender. 5) Gender is a construct and can be in conflict with our biological sex. (Sunderland, 2011) Gender and sex, although often used interchangeably, are two very different things

An Overview of Play

Over the years, researchers from different disciplines have come up with plenty of theories on play. When doing research both for my literature review and in the preschool I had to decide what constitutes play, what qualities should we look for in an activity for it to qualify as play, and does the term "play" mean different things to children and adults, to different children in one group, or across cultures? Play is a subjective concept, and its meaning changes based on context.

Jean Piaget, a developmental psychologist, believed that when children interact with the world, they acquire knowledge that they need to learn and grow. He is often credited with the quote "play is the work of children," by which he meant that play is a meaningful part of every child's education and development. While adults work includes

many things like housework, childcare, and their jobs, children's work includes experimentation, exploration, and discovery through play. This concept is counter to the belief in some cultures that play is a waste of time and should be discouraged.

Piaget believed that there were four stages to children's development, and that children went through these stages of development as they came into contact with objects that forced them to think in new ways. (Piaget, 1962) He said that when children are presented with new concepts they must either assimilate the new concept into a pre-existing schema, or accommodate the new concept by changing the schema to understand the new concept. Piaget divided children's games into five categories: functional (sensory-motor) games, imaginary or fantasy games, passive games – such as listening to stories, constructional games, and collective games. (Piaget, 1962) Piaget had a series of 5 criterion to determine if an activity was play. First, the child must show interest in an activity; second, play is spontaneous; third, play is an activity "for pleasure;" fourth, play lacks organized structure; and fifth, play requires freedom from conflict. (Piaget, 1962) Piaget's five criterion exclude games in which children discuss the themes or characters before beginning the game. Piaget also does not consider that some children consider activities that are not fun to be play. Anyone who has observed children playing realizes that games are rarely free from conflict – children disagree about who can play with what toy or play what role in a game, but the play goes on once the conflict is resolved.

Although I acknowledge Piaget's work as a researcher and theorist, I disagree with most of his categories of play and criterion of play. I also disagree that there are only five types of games that children can play – from my research I noted that children are extremely creative and can turn almost anything into a game. Piaget's criterion for

play are also inadequate for defining the types of play I observed in the preschool. The first criterion is perhaps true – most children will wander off if they become disinterested in an activity, or if the activity is something which is required of them they will classify it as work, not play. Classifying play cannot be the same for all children – some children might consider the same activity play and not work, even if it is required. For example, at the preschool the children were sometimes required to do an activity during the free play period. For some children this was a time to play directly with the teacher, and they enjoyed the activity and considered it play – however for other children who did not want to participate the activity was something they must do before going back to play; therefore the activity was work. I disagree with the last four of Piaget's criterion for play. I believe that classifying play takes as much creativity and flexibility as the children put into their games. Finally, Piaget seems to believe that his stages of development, types of play, and criterion for defining play should apply across all cultures. However, I disagree. While we see play in different forms across all cultures, we cannot necessarily define them all the same way. Play looks very different in a middle class preschool in New York than it does in a very poor preschool in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. Regardless of how play looks in each preschool, I am sure that if you asked children in each preschool if their activities were play they would give very different answers.

Researchers in other disciplines might also disagree with Piaget's theories on development and play. I tend to lean more in favor of Mary Sheridan; a pediatrician who specializes in children's health and development. In the book *Play in Early Childhood Years* Sheridan explores children's development and different types of play. While Piaget argues that play must be fun, Sheridan concludes that children do not always

define play as a fun activity. (Sheridan, 2011) Both tasks that may seem like work, such as choosing to painstakingly recreate a model from blocks or being told by a teacher to play with blocks, could be classified as play, depending on children's freedom of choice and control. Choice is important in children's play because it allows them to learn about the world at their own set pace. Children were also more likely to classify activities that took place on the floor as play, even if they were directed to that activity.

Like Piaget, Sheridan classifies children's development, which she believes can be learned through play. In addition, Sheridan believes that as children develop as individuals they are also developing as members of the community through social and emotional development, cognitive development, language development, and physical development. (Sheridan, 2011) Through play children learn about themselves and the world around them. Imaginary play is a way for children to try out different possibilities within imaginary social situations, and experiment with appropriate emotions and social roles; this is social development. Children also experiment with objects and concepts during cognitive development; in this way they are able to develop problem-solving strategies. Play allows for language development because it helps to expand vocabulary, sentence construction, and communication skills. Physical development involves aerobic activity, and helps promote physical health and fitness. (Sheridan, 2011)

Play Across Cultures

Sheridan also accounts for variations in play across cultures. She says, "Children across all cultures play…developing a repertoire of skills to support play that involves the use of senses, objects, symbolism and pretense, and an understanding of rules." (Sheridan, 2011 pg. 57) However, although play is a cultural universal (even children

with responsibilities such as tending animals or the home find time to play) the ways in which children play varies across cultures. In other words, children in all cultures have the desire to play, but they do so in different ways. Some cultures may discourage play altogether, especially in cultures that consider children as potential workers. (L'ange 2009) However, L'ange, like Sheridan, believes that even in cultures that discourage play, children will find ways to play. Across all cultures play is a way for children (and in some cases adults) to prepare for adult life, practice a physical skill, or to express oneself. (L'ange 2009)

For example, play can be greatly influenced by adult interaction, the value that is placed on play within a culture, and the environment in which the child has opportunities to play. (Sheridan, 2011) Parent interactions are important in determining play because parenting styles are largely cultural, and can have a large impact on the child throughout life. Allowing children to feel safe in exploring their surroundings may lead to higher levels of play. Parents in the United States tend to encourage children to explore the world around them; they emphasize independence and individuality. In contrast, parents in Japan tend to focus on more controlled social interaction (such as caring for a doll) and place more emphasis on dependency and following the rules. (Sheridan 2011) Variations in play materials can also greatly affect the ways children play. For example, Sheridan cites one study among Massai children in Kenya which found that children were likely to play with found objects like bones, stones, sticks, or animal skins. (Sheridan, 2011) While American children will occasionally pick up a stick and declare it a sword, they are much more likely to play with more realistic consumer toys like dolls, pretend kitchens, telephones and other technology.

Play is also influenced by gender, which is again largely influenced by parent interactions. Sheridan claims that even as early as 12 months a child will show a preference for toys associated with his or her gender – however, she proposes that these gender differences are not biological, but influenced by early parent interactions in which they have already started to learn what behavior is appropriate for their gender. (Sheridan, 2011) Play allows children to further explore their gender by acting out each gender to the extreme. Because the ways in which we express our gender are influenced by our culture, the effect gender has on our play is also influenced by our culture.

Teaching Children How to Play (or, why play is so important)

In their article "Assessing and Scaffolding: Make-believe Play," Leong and Bodrova discuss the importance of teaching children to play. Toddlers learn by mastering simple tasks like dressing themselves, then expand the task to dressing their dolls. Jean Piaget asserts that *all* imaginary play in which a child speaks for a toy (for example, making a doll cry, making a stuffed animal eat) is a form of imitation play. (Piaget, 1962) The child learns different social skills and interactions by observing an adult, copying the actions they observe, and then projecting them onto a toy through play. This becomes important because, as in the example Leong and Bodrova use, if a toddler learns to feed herself with a spoon she will then learn to feed her dolls with a spoon; eventually she will feed the doll "mommy" who feeds her "daughter." (Leong and Bodrova 2012) The game ceases to be about the spoon and the doll, but about the *relationship* a parent and child share. This is far more important than the lesson of the spoon itself.

This type of learning about the environment through imitation and play demonstrates the troubles that children with developmental disorders might have. For example, a child with autism would not immediately realize that they could both pretend to cook with a pot on the stove, and turn the pot over so that it becomes a drum. Children with developmental disorders like autism need to be taught the different forms that play can take place. Leong and Bodrova assert that while explicit play instruction is often limited to children who have development disorders and cannot learn to play through observation, explicit play instruction can be beneficial to all children – especially as television and media affect children's notion of play. (Leong and Bodrova 2012)

One reason that children are not developing the way they used to is that children used to play more in mixed age groups, whereas now they are separated into classrooms of children who are close to the same age. Even after school programs which used to be mixed age groups are giving way to adult led afterschool activities comprised of a single age group. This means that young children are left to play with children who are at the same developmental level, meaning that they will not be pushed into the next developmental level by an older child. While preschool children will still play imaginary games, they cannot develop them to the same extent unless they are guided by a teacher or other adult. Without being guided, children will act out the same scripts every time they play, and won't develop the game past a certain point. For example, if two boys are playing "firefighters" and finish putting out the fire they will stop the game, rather than explore other types of emergencies that a firefighter might respond to. This is largely because they do not have the social context to understand other possible scenarios.

In order to guide play, Leong and Bodrova recommend that the teacher guide the children by asking what characters they might want to play or what type of scenario they might want to play. He or she can then have the children develop the scenario by talking about props, or what types of roles do or do not fit into a scenario. (Leong and Bodrova 2012) For example, a veterinarian and a doctor probably wouldn't work at a hospital together, so one child might decide to be a nurse instead. Leong and Bodrova also recommend that teachers explain different adult behaviors and the sequence of those behaviors, because children will not necessarily learn them from observation alone. They say, "The rules that hold make-believe play together are not arbitrary but are based on the logic of real-life situations. Therefore, not knowing how these life scripts unfold will keep children from practicing self-regulated behaviors by following these rules." (Leong and Bodrova 2012) For example, children might not realize that when they go to a restaurant the adult has to place an order with a waiter, who takes the order to the chef, who makes the food. Children see that the food comes from the kitchen, and may assume that when they get to the restaurant it is already made.

The authors also advocate for children to return to simpler toys, and for teachers to slowly move away from realistic toys. For example, a stick could be a bat, a walking stick, or a tree, while children might only see a walking stick as a walking stick. Leong and Bodrova say that it is better for children to be able to use their imaginations to create their own play world than be defined by highly realistic toys that limit their creativity. Naming the new props allows children to expand their vocabulary and practice new terms. Teachers can participate in the games in minor roles in order to encourage children to continue to develop the game, and introduce new words. For example, the

teacher might call a restaurant and place an order to go – which would require a whole new set of background knowledge. (Leong and Bodrova 2012)

Play in the age of Technology

Changes in technology have influenced the way we look at play. The increased availability and convenience of computers and television – specifically games and programs directed towards children – forces us to reevaluate our previous definitions and classifications of play. Is passive entertainment (such as watching television or attending a sports game) play? Many people would say no. However, if a person (child or adult) takes part in an interactive entertainment experience such as a video or computer game, most people would consider this to be play. L'abate says that the distinction comes down to attitude. Play is an activity, but playfulness is an attitude – and when a person (child or adult) does an activity with a playful attitude it can be interpreted as play. One of L'abate's examples is that for him, shopping is an activity one does because it must be done – but for his wife (who approaches shopping with a playful attitude) shopping is a pleasurable activity. (L'abate 2009) The same could be true for children. Activities that children consider to be play can be very different than activities adults consider to be play. For example, Sheridan explained that children were more likely to consider activities that took place on the floor to be play, even if a teacher considered it to be academic. An adult might think that viewing a television show like Dora the Explorer (which has interactive portions where kids are supposed to shout or spin in a circle, etc.) was passive entertainment, whereas children might see it as play because it was interactive. Could reading be play? The children at the preschool where I did my observations seemed to think so. "Story time" as they called it, was fun – but circle time

(basically an extension of story time) was work. During story time each child was allowed to pick out one book for an adult to read out loud – the result was small clusters of children listening to an adult reading them a story of their choosing. On the other hand, during circle time the teacher would choose a story that matched the theme of the week, and children had to be quiet and still while the teacher read to them. Story time was fun because it allowed choice – children could pick their story and move around to hear other children's stories as they chose. Circle time was work because it did not involve choice, and therefore for many children not fun. (This was not the case among all the preschoolers – several of the kids told me that circle time was fun because they got to sing and listen to stories – regardless of whether they got to choose the stories or not.)

Imaginary and Fantasy Play

Studies on free-play and fantasy behavior in preschool aged children have shown that gender differences may not be as important as the variety of materials children may choose from to play. (Sanders, and Harper 1976) In fact, the toys available and the setting available to the children may be more influential on fantasy play than gender or age. For example, while some studies have found that both girls and boys partake in the same amount of imaginary play, boys have been found to participate in more unrealistic fantasy play and are more likely to play outdoors, while girls are more likely to choose realistic themes and play indoors. (Sanders, and Harper 1976) In other words, boys would in general rather play a game in which they were superheroes or dogs – things they would never actually experience – and they would rather play outside, while girls would rather play a game in which they were a mother or a teacher – roles they might one day fill – and would rather play inside. Although Sanders and Harper concluded that their

data was not conclusive, they suspected that the availability of open spaces (such as a playground or playing field) or indoor apparatuses "favoring gross motor activity" might be important factors in boy's fantasy play. (Sanders, and Harper 1976) The differences in boy's fantasy play in classrooms could be in part due to boy's preference for open spaces during fantasy play.

In one study, Sanders and Harper found that boys spent more of their time playing in fantasy play than girls; they also found that older children were more likely to participate in fantasy games. (Sanders, and Harper 1976) Overall, Sanders and Harper found that boys spent more time in solitary fantasy play, while girls spent more time in interactive play. In general, they also found that older children were more likely to participate in more interactive fantasy play than younger children. (Sanders, and Harper 1976) In other words, as children aged they became more likely to take on cooperative roles and participate in games which required communication with other children. Girls were generally more likely to take on cooperative roles found in games such as "house" or "school." (Sanders, and Harper 1976) Other studies showed a correlation between girls' increased likelihood of playing cooperative and interactive games, and problem solving skills.

In another study, researcher R. Keith Sawyer focused on role voicing in fantasy, or socio-dramatic play. Sawyer argues that role playing or fantasy games are complex. Fantasy games lack established rules, and usually develop as the children use their imagination to shape the plot of the game. He also says that role playing is important because it allows children to learn about social roles and the appropriate interactions between these roles. (Sawyer 1996) For example, playing "school" is one way for

children to experiment with the idea that the teacher is in charge, and the students must do what he or she says. While playing "school" children both get to practice appropriate interactions, and play out inappropriate interactions (for example, not following the teacher's instructions.) Dramatic play is also important because it allows children to practice roles that are appropriate with a specific situation. (Sawyer 1996) For example, it would be appropriate for a fireman to be in the fire station, or even outside fighting a fire – but it would be inappropriate for a fireman to be a student in the classroom. Role playing and fantasy games allow children to experiment with these roles so that they understand appropriate roles and appropriate interactions, along with strengthening communication skills and cognition.

According to Sawyer there are three types of role voicing, or ways children can portray an imaginary character. In the first type, direct voicing, children take on their imaginary role. In the second type, indirect voicing, children use an object such as an action figure or a doll to enact their imaginary role. In the third type, collective voicing, a group of children work together to portray a single character. (Sawyer 1996) Sawyer says that children usually speak to some extent during fantasy play, whether that be to discuss what will happen next, or to enact the plot itself. He also says that the characters children choose are important because children frequently speak as their play character. Sawyer describes one study in which, "[the researchers] found that only boys engaged in fantasy role enactment, enactment of a character that the child would never encounter or enact later in life: creatures from outer space, Superman, or other super heroes. The girls never engaged in fantasy role enactment; in contrast, they tended to enact domestic roles." (Sawyer 1996)

In order for imaginary play to be successful, children must be able to distinguish between the individual and the enacted role, which can be confusing if the children are switching from imaginary to real interactions. This may be why Sanders and Harper found that imaginary play increased with age. Children often alter their speech when speaking for their characters. Sawyer writes, "for example, a helpless baby may be enacted with a high-pitched, plaintive tone, an evil monster with a deep, slowly enunciated tone." (Sawyer 1996) Sawyer writes that direct voicing, in which children take on roles with their own bodies, can be confusing for children because they are sometimes not able to distinguish between phrases spoken by the child as he or she tries to shape the plot, and phrases spoken by the character as he or she interacts within the game. Indirect voicing is easier to distinguish because children will usually wiggle the toy that is "speaking," and also change their speech – making it easier to distinguish between the real child and imaginary character. Collective voicing can lead to the most confusion and conflict because it involves a group of children all voicing the same scenario. In collective voicing if two children disagree on an aspect of the game they must resolve the conflict before continuing, because if they were to continue on each of their own assumptions of the game it would fall apart. In direct voicing games children could continue to play without resolving conflicts because each child's version of the game will not necessarily effect other children's roles.

In general, Sawyer found that all children in a group will use the same type of role voicing. For example, he never observed a child acting as a mother speaking to a "baby" which was a stuffed animal being voiced by another child. (Sawyer 1996) This does not mean that children playing alone will not play that they are a mother caring for a doll

who is a child. This also does not mean that children never mix types of role voicing, simply that this type of behavior was never observed by Sawyer during the study. Sawyer also found that children did not change their type of role voicing during the middle of an imaginary game. (Sawyer 1996) For example, a group of boys would not play a collective game and suddenly pick up plastic animals and begin voicing the game through the animals. Once the type of imaginary game was established it remained constant through the end of the game.

As part of the study Sawyer defined different possibilities of gendered groups, including a) all male, b) mixed, mostly male (at least two boys and one girl), c) mixed balanced (equal numbers of boys and girls), d) mixed, mostly female (at least two girls and one boy), and e) all female. (Sawyer 1996) By creating this scale he was able to describe the different types of voiced play, and the gender composition of different play groups.

Sawyer found that collective voicing increased with the boyness of the group. (Sawyer 1996) In other words, all male or mostly male groups were more likely to participate in collective voicing games than other groups. He also found that direct voicing was related to the girlness of the group. (Sawyer 1996) In other words, groups primarily made up of girls were more likely to participate in direct voicing play. Neither of these findings mean that girls never participated in collective voicing games, or that boys did not participate in direct voicing games. Sawyer also found that larger groups were more likely to participate in direct voicing games, while smaller groups were more likely to participate in collective voicing games. (Sawyer 1996) This could be because it would be difficult to get all members of a large group to agree on every aspect of the

game, as would be necessary in collective voicing play. In summary, collective voicing was most common in small groups and primarily male groups, while direct voicing was more common in large groups and groups primarily made up of females. (Sawyer 1996) Sawyer also observed that role voicing games almost always included domestic themes, while indirect and collective voicing almost always included fantasy themes. (Sawyer 1996) Sawyer proposes that the continuous negotiation that takes place in collective play causes more conflict, but also allows children to learn conflict resolution skills. By contrast, it is easy for children to ignore other children's suggested modifications to the game in direct voicing. He also suggests that this might be one reason that boys' play seems more competitive (boys' play is largely collective) while girl's play seems more collaborative (girls' play consists largely of direct play) even if the girls are actually arguing. (Sawyer 1996)

The majority of the play I observed was direct voicing, although I did occasionally see indirect voicing when girls spoke for baby dolls while playing house. I only saw collective voicing on very few occasions; the games were almost always played by boys (with one exception) and almost always ended in an argument.

Gender and Aggression

Researchers Ostrov and Keating sought to understand gendered differences between physical and relational aggression. Boys are often stereotypically believed to participate in physical aggression, which is intended to undermine others' physical dominance, while girls are usually stereotyped as participating in relational aggression, which is intended to undermine social acceptance. "Boys'" aggression usually includes physical acts like hitting or kicking, or the verbal threat of physical acts, while "girls'"

aggression could include exclusion, ignoring peers, or gossiping. Ostrov and Keating say that in the past, research has focused on more blatant forms of aggression, which largely ignores subtle aggression like ignoring other children. (Ostrov and Keating 2004)

Ostrov and Keating expected to find that boys would both deliver and receive more physical aggression, while they predicted that girls would enact and receive more relational or indirect aggression during play. (Ostrov and Keating 2004) During observation, the researchers recorded instances of physical aggression (such as hitting, kicking, grabbing, or pushing), verbal aggression (such as threats or name calling), and relational aggression (such as excluding other children or withdrawing friendship) as well as positive interactions like sharing with a peer or helping. Finally, they recorded the total number of playmates, and the sex of each playmate. The researchers also asked the children's teachers to complete the Preschool Social Behavior Teacher Scale/Teacher Form for each child to get an idea of each child's perceived aggressiveness. (Ostrov and Keating 2004)

The data demonstrated that male and female children will use different forms of aggression depending on the gender of their peer. As expected, male children were more aggressive than the girls. Regardless of gender, children directed more aggression towards boys than towards girls, although boys were more physically aggressive than girls, and girls were more relationally aggressive than boys. Regardless of gender, children were more likely to receive physical aggression from boys than from girls. Boys were consistently less verbally aggressive to girls than to boys, and girls were consistently less relationally aggressive with boys than with girls. In most cases the

teacher's ratings of children's aggression was fairly accurate when compared to the data collected by the researchers. (Ostrov and Keating 2004)

Children were typically more aggressive during free-play than they were during structured tasks, however, the types of aggression children used in one setting was usually the same as the type of aggression they would use in another setting. (Ostrov and Keating 2004) For example, if a boy hit other children in the classroom, he would be likely to hit other children on the playground as well, as opposed to ignoring them on the playground. Unexpectedly, girls who used physical aggression were the most likely to be rated as dominant by their teachers. However, these same girls were less likely to be accepted by other girls if they were physically aggressive towards male classmates. (Ostrov and Keating 2004)

Much like the gendered differences in children's play, Ostrov and Keating report that the genders may use different types of aggression to get to different ends. For example, girls are more likely to use direct voicing, and this is suspected to lead to more collaborative play, whereas boy's play is seen to be more aggressive. Girls may use more subtle forms of aggression because they value emotional intimacy more than boys, while boys may use more physical forms of aggression because they value physical dominance.

Gender and Adults

Anette Sandberg and Ingrid Pramling-Samuelsson focused on the impact that the gender of the preschool teacher had on the play atmosphere in preschools. They write of the history of male preschool teachers in Sweden, which primarily began in the 1970's. While men were originally seen as pioneers when they entered the field, they now are seen as "womanly" by some. However, many believe that male preschool teachers, like

female teachers in more advanced grades, have a lot to bring to the table. After considering positive and negative gendered stereotypes about teaching, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson come to the conclusion that, "it is both feminine and masculine to be in charge of care and education of young children." (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005)

The researchers interviewed ten male and ten female preschool teachers who worked at both public and private schools about their own childhood experiences of play, and about play in preschools at the present time. Male and female teachers agreed that today both genders are more likely to play alone, and that girls were more likely to participate in male stereotyped games, although they were more likely to focus on the characters while boys were more likely to focus on their play. (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005)

Male teachers were likely to jump in and play with the children, while female teachers were more likely to hold back and not participate. Female teachers justified this by saying they did not want to have to leave the game and cause it to stop, while male teachers said they wanted to be nearby in case the children needed them. (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005) Male teachers said they found that children needed more direction to play rule based group games like tag or kickball, while female teachers discovered that girls do not play with dolls as much as they used to. Female teachers were more likely to see roughhousing and physical play as disruptive, while male teachers were more likely to see it as normal play. Both genders of teacher said that too much television has resulted in children stopping to play at a younger age, and they both

asserted that media has changed the format of children's play. (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005)

Although the majority of the helping parents in the preschool were mothers or grandmothers, there were two fathers who visited during my time doing observations. I do believe that the strong adult female presence in the classroom may have influenced the types of play I saw, and I definitely believe that the fathers interacted differently with the children than the mothers did.

Based on my research I expected to find that gender, aggression, and play were related in some way, although I was not sure how the relationship between these factors would play out. I anticipated that while gender might influence the themes of children's games, the composition of their play groups, or the costumes they prefer to wear, there would always be exceptions to those rules. I also expected that the culture of the preschool would have an impact on the children's preferred activities and the way they expressed themselves. I sought to understand the culture of one particular preschool, and discover the interrelated factors that influence children's play.

An Introduction to the Schenectady Play Based Preschool

I first became interested in play and gender while I was teaching in a preschool in Moshi, Tanzania on a term abroad. I realized that the games children played were somewhat similar to the games children play in the United States, and I wondered if it was possible that the culture of the preschool shaped the students' play – and by extension shaped the way they expressed their gender. I am interested in the ways gender is expressed differently across cultures, and thought that I could put my Women and Gender Studies minor to use by combining anthropology and gender studies. The result was an anthropological look at gender through children's play, in a play based nursery school.

I was interested in preschool aged children because they are at the age where they are just starting to understand gender. They have been exposed to gender their whole lives, and they are beginning to understand which gendered behaviors are expected of them, but they have not completely made sense of their gender, and they still make a lot of mistakes. I hypothesized that gender might be more fluid for preschool aged children, and their gender expression might be more interesting than older children. By elementary school most children have firm ideas about how their gender is supposed to behave, but in preschool children are still figuring out what gender is.

I also thought that preschool would be an interesting age to observe because preschoolers do not have the vocabulary to express themselves very well. They understand a lot, I think they understand a lot more than most adults give them credit for, but they do not have the language skills to express that. By observing play you can learn what they think and how they feel. For example, a young child whose parents are

divorcing might not have the language skills to explain to a teacher that they feel upset when their parents fight. Children often mimic what they see, and sometimes play out scenarios to practice specific behavior or cope with something they have experienced – so if a teach observes a child acting out a quarrel between the "mom" and "dad" in the house corner she might be able to deduce that the child is having trouble coping with their parents fighting. The same is true of gender and play. Children will copy behaviors they see, but also experiment with new ways of expressing themselves. Play is usually a safe way for children to try out new skills and behaviors, and practice expressing themselves.

I was also interested in observing preschool children because I felt that they had largely been left out of anthropological literature in the past. Various studies do mention children, but mostly infants and adolescents, and rarely the age groups in between. The few studies that did reference children mostly focused on parenting styles, child rearing techniques, teacher's opinions about education, etc. While I found a several references to play and children, I found few references to gender and children – and no references to gender, play, and children. I saw this as a potential gap in previous anthropological research. Researchers in other fields including developmental psychology and sociology have focused on preschool children and play or gender, but few had focused on play *and* gender, and none used anthropological methods. I thought that studying play and gender from an anthropological perspective could give new insights into the way children form their gender identity.

The type of preschool I visited was important to me because I was largely interested in gender and play. I wanted to find a preschool where children had the

freedom to express themselves how they chose, and where they could make their own choices about how to play, what to play with, and who to play with. I also wanted to find a preschool where play was an important part of the curriculum, and where the parents and teachers valued play. I was lucky to find a preschool that matched this criteria close to Union College.

I obtained permission to observe classes at the Schenectady Play Based Preschool (SPBP), in Schenectady, New York. The curriculum at SPBP is largely play centered, and focuses on learning new information in context. Additionally, the nursery school is structured on free choice, and the parents and teacher encouraged the children to make their own choices about who to play with, how to play, and how to express themselves. I hoped that this format, as opposed to a more structured preschool format, would mean that children were making more of their own choices about how to express their gender rather than being guided by parents and teachers on the type of behavior that was appropriate for their gender.

I chose to do my observations at SPBP mainly because of the play based curriculum, which I hoped would allow me to spend more of my time at the preschool observing play and interactions between children. I was not interested in observing the children's behavior during formal instruction because those are times when children are usually conditioned to behave in specific ways. During formal instruction teachers expect students to be quiet, polite, and respectful – and although there are definitely behavioral differences between the genders in this context, I was more interested in the free play and free choice portions of the school day.

I also liked the Schenectady Play Based Preschool because there is a strong element of free choice incorporated into the school day. The children know that it is their choice to play with any toys in the classroom or on the playground, and that they may play with anyone they choose. The teacher and parents were of course aware of safety issues or conflict between children and would step in when necessary, but for the most part children were free to play however they chose. This meant that children were free to play with toys that would not normally be associated with their gender, and that they could express themselves freely in ways that might not be accepted at another preschool.

Finally, I chose the Schenectady Play Based Preschool because parents are constantly present in the classroom, meaning they were available to offer insight into their children's behavior, or anecdotes that were helpful to my research. It seemed to me that the environment was more conducive to observers because the children were used to having adults in an out of the classroom, and the parents were more comfortable having someone observe their children if they were in the room and could see exactly what I was doing in the classroom. This relationship went both ways; I was always available to answer questions or summarize my observations, and the parents were often helpful in pointing out interesting interactions.

According to the school's website, "a cooperative nursery school is a school in which parents have the unique opportunity to participate in their child's first experience with school. Through their involvement in the classroom, parents ease the children's transition from home to a classroom environment while seeing for themselves how their children learn and grow and interact with others." In the case of the Schenectady Play Based Preschool this meant that two adults (usually mom, dad, or grandparent) would

sign up to help in the classroom. With around 30 families attending the preschool, this meant that each family would send an adult to help out 2+ times a month. SPBP has one main teacher who teaches the formal lessons and leads activities, while parents act as assistant or co-teachers on a rotating basis. The children of the helping parents would also help on the day that their parent or grandparent was present in the classroom, which gave them a sense of responsibility. Both the head teacher and the helping parents were equally respectful of children's choices and the ways they chose to express themselves.

The Schenectady Play Based Preschool includes classes for two age groups. The class for younger children meets two days a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and is comprised of mostly 3 year olds, although there were a few 2-almost-3 year olds. The class for older children meets three days a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and is made up of mostly 4 and 5 year olds, although there were a few 3-almost-4 year olds. The daily schedule for each class was similar, although there was slightly more structure in the 3-day class as the children prepared for the transition to kindergarten.

The head teacher arrived each morning around 8:00 to begin preparing the classroom for the day. I tried to arrive between 8:30 and 8:45 each day to give myself time to chat with the teacher, ask any questions, and offer to help preparing the classroom. The helping parents and children arrived around 8:50 and the children got to do their special jobs (opening the sand table and getting the easel ready.) The doors opened to the rest of the children at 9:00, and most of the children were dropped off by 9:10. Between 9:00 and 10:00 the children were allowed to play freely. Within a few safety rules, children were allowed to play any game, with anything or anyone that they chose. Some examples of safety rules would be one person one the slide at a time, only

two people on the monkey bars at a time, no hitting/kicking/etc. Around 10:00 the teacher would put on a recording of "It's a Small World" and the children would start to clean up toys around the classroom. Once the toys were clean the children would all help to wipe down the table, then line up to wash their hands. The helping children washed their hands first, then got to choose their seats and mark their place with a name tag. They then passed out plates and cups for snack. The helping parents brought and served snack every day, and the children all sat together around the table to eat. After snack the helping parents took the children to use the bathroom, and the children settled down in the reading corner to wait for the other children to be ready. The teacher and helping parents sat with the children, and each child was allowed to pick out a book to read. I usually took notes up until this point, and then took a break to read with the children while everyone else finished eating and cleaned up snack. After all the children were ready we would read together for a few more minutes, then put books away and begin the formal teaching portion of the day. The formal lesson usually included a book on the theme of the week, often a song, and sometimes exercises like matching colors or shapes. After the formal lesson the children would all get their coats from the hallway and we would head outside to the playground. The children again had the opportunity to choose any activity and any person to play with. After a short time on the playground everyone would walk back to the preschool where the parents would be waiting to pick their children up at the end of the day.

Because I was interacting with very young children I had to alter my methods to ensure I was getting accurate information, abiding by rules agreed upon by myself and the teacher, and not scaring the children I interacted with. On my first day visiting the

preschool I talked with the head teacher about what I would be doing and the type of information I would be collecting, and asked her to sign a consent form. I also distributed letters to each of the parents via the children's pockets (like student cubbies, where the teacher can put their artwork and information for the parents to pick up each day) that explained who I was, what I wanted to observe, and gave my contact information. At this time the head teacher notified me that I would not be allowed to use audio recording, video recording, or take pictures of the children unless I had permission from every parent in the preschool. I decided that it would take too much time to obtain permission from every family, and decided to instead rely on my own written records throughout the time I was observing.

Had I been able to collect audio or video recordings of the children at play I would have been able to review the recordings again to transcribe their conversations exactly as they occurred. Instead I carried a notebook with me throughout the day and recorded the interactions I observed and the conversations I heard as quickly and accurately as I could. I moved around the classroom throughout the day in an effort to observe many different games and interactions among many groups of children. Sometimes I played with the children and asked them to teach me or show me the game and then recorded after the child got bored and moved to a new game. Other times I sat nearby where I could watch and hear the game without interfering. I would have liked to be able to play with the children the entire day, but felt it was important to record the themes of the games and dialogue soon after the interaction took place. Some of the children were curious about why I was writing, and if they asked I told them that I had forgotten how to play when I grew up and wanted to learn how again. All of the children

accepted this answer and were usually more willing to play with me or explain their games. All the adults in the preschool knew that I was there to observe play and gender, but I felt that it would be very difficult to explain that to the children. The teacher informed me that they had had student observers at the preschool in the past, and that the children were used to having someone observing and taking notes. If I had instead been working with older children I might have been more inclined to explain why I was there, but since some of the children were as young as two years old and did not themselves understand what gender was I decided to focus on the play aspect when I explained to the children why I was there.

Although observing play was my primary interest, I offered to help as much as I was able in the classroom and ended up spending a lot of time interacting with the children. This helped my research because I was able to get to know each student a little better, and they also got to know me a little more – this was both good and bad because they were more likely to speak to me and answer questions, but they also really liked to try to get my attention which sometimes made it hard to observe one interaction for more than a minute at a time.

On my first day at the preschool I was impressed that there were so many different activities contained in such a small room. I entered through the back door of the classroom, which was housed in the basement of a large temple. In my mind I broke the classroom up into six areas, which each had their own purpose. Immediately inside the door on the left side of the classroom there were two tables which were used for snack and art projects. On the other side of the tables there was a double sided easel where children could paint. The next farthest area on the left side of the classroom was a large

rug; on one side of the rug there was a small slide, and on another there were several climbing toys (monkey bars, and a brightly colored plastic tunnel.) The rest of the rug was left open for free play and structured activities. The final left side area was the teacher's desk and supply area, where I usually left my belongings and hunkered down to record my observations if too many children wanted to play. To the right of the tables was a small kitchen and imaginary play area which included house themed toys, dolls, puppets, and dress up clothes. This area was mostly isolated by strategically positioned play materials (a play stove and puppet theatre made up one wall of the partition, and an outward facing bookcase formed another) with an opening on one side. The next right area included a sink for hand-washing and a small table which was usually used for play dough. The final right side area was another carpet which included the small library section, and shelves of toys including blocks, a dollhouse, small plastic dolls and animals, musical instruments, etc. This area was used for formal lessons in the later part of the school day, and children sat on small pillows to listen to the teacher, who usually stood or sat in a rocking chair. The helping parents and I would sit on the floor with the children, and although we were welcome to grab tiny chairs from around the table, none of us ever did. Shelves around the classroom included puzzles, imaginary play materials, and many other toys. There were also a sand table and water table positioned in the center of the right and left sides, and between the first and second sections. During free play times children were free to roam the classroom and select any toys from any part of the classroom to play with.

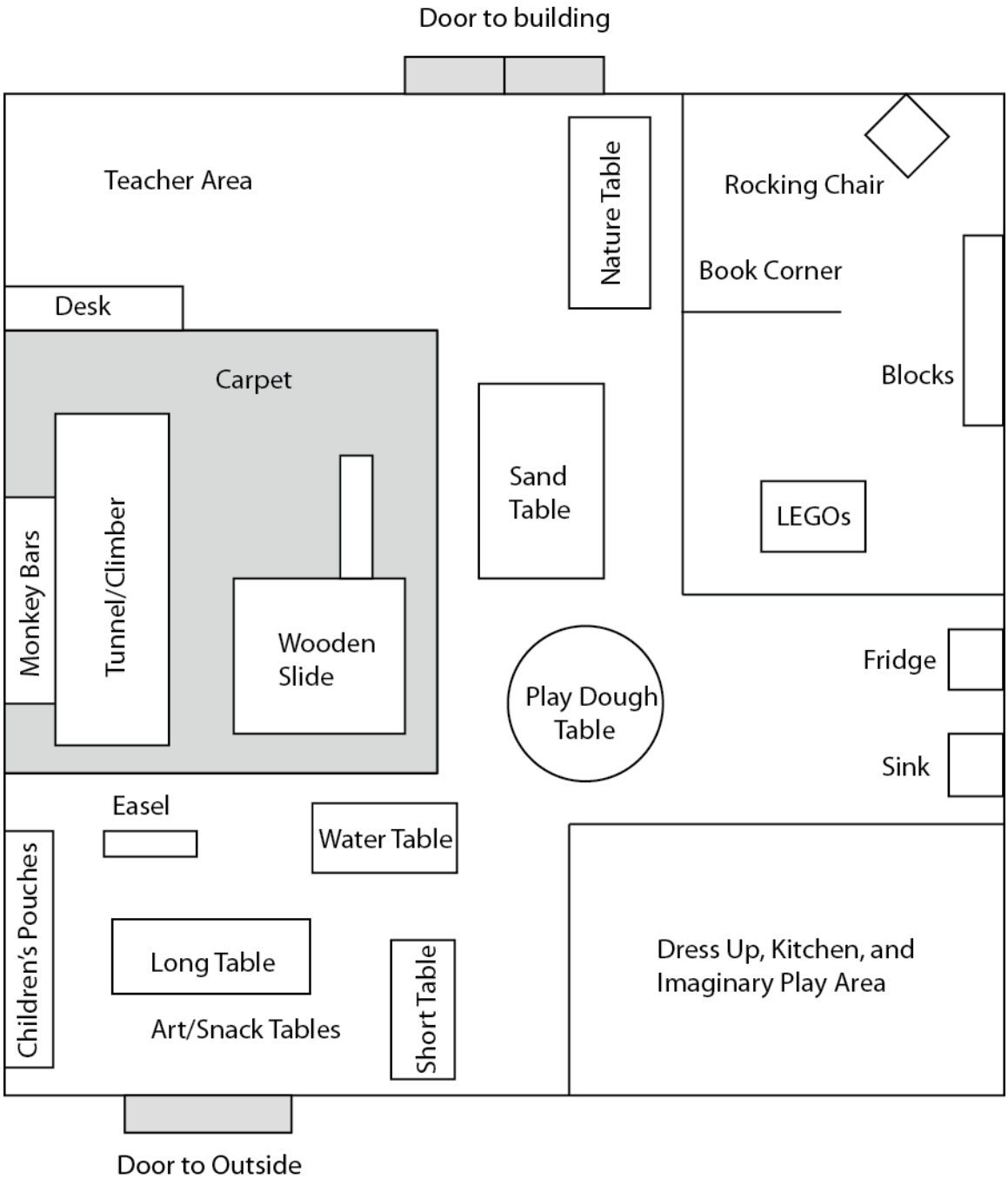


Diagram of the Schenectady Play Based Preschool classroom

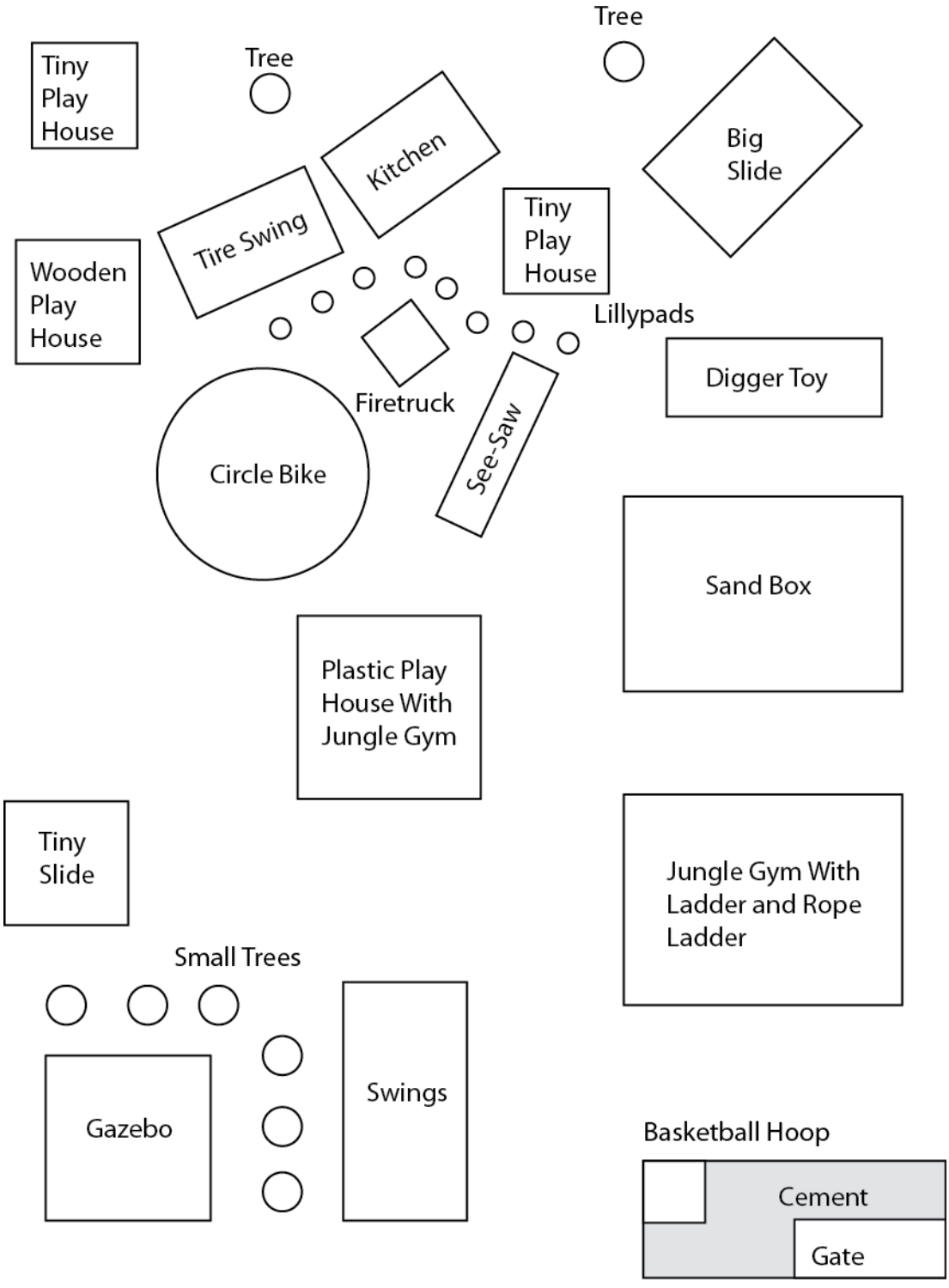


Diagram of Schenectady Play Based Preschool playground

Before my first visit to the preschool Professor Jarrin and I discussed the things I was most interested in observing, versus the behaviors I was most likely to see. I was interested in seeing gender nonconforming behavior in play, but we both agreed that the chances of finding a gender nonconforming child in this small preschool were very small. I was surprised to observe gender nonconformity almost immediately – in fact some of my first notes were about gender nonconformity in imaginary play. I decided to mostly focus on imaginary play, including the themes of the games children were playing, the character choices they made, and they types of costumes they choose. I also decided to look for instances of aggression by each gender to compare how they were similar or different, and how adults responded similarly or differently. After spending some time at the preschool I decided it would also be interesting to analyze the use of space and how different spaces were dominated by each gender, and how each gender utilized spaces or toys differently or similarly.

Gender Conforming/Nonconforming Play

As early as the first day I observed the preschool I was seeing snippets of gender nonconformity in the classroom. Most of these instances took place while the children were playing freely, while one instance happened in conversation as we walked to the playground. Gender non-conforming play was not common in the classroom – it happened infrequently and usually the same few children were experimenting with gender roles through play. However, it happened much more frequently than I expected, simply because it happened at all. I have several theories as to why this was the case.

The children I was observing were young, between 2 and 5 years old. Some of the children, mostly the 2 year olds, were too young to understand gender at all. Of course they had been exposed to gender, but they had no concept of how they were "supposed" to act. There was one very young boy at the preschool who spent almost all his time playing alone – he had not yet progressed into the stages of interactive play with others. He usually played with "boy" toys, for example small trains, cars, or blocks – but I did not associate this with his gender. Rather, I believe he chose these toys mainly because developmentally he was in a stage where he liked to repeat the same movements to fine tune his motor skills; for example, rolling a train back and forth on the carpet, lining up all the cars in a straight line, or stacking blocks vertically. His toy choices may have been subtly influenced by observing the toys that other boys choose, but because I only saw him play collaboratively with another child once I cannot be certain whether his choices were influenced by other children or based on his own preferences alone.

The children that were a little bit older, around 3 years old, were starting to understand gender and sometimes play games with other children – although often they

chose to play alone. These children often played with the same toys as other children of their gender, even if they were playing alone. For example, girls might sit near other girls at the play dough table, even if they were playing alone. However, they also understood that it was completely their choice to play with anything in the room, so they did not restrict themselves to only "boy" or "girl" toys. These children were beginning to understand that girls behave one way and boys behave differently, but the rules were still flexible and I frequently saw crossover.

The children in the three day class were around 4-5 years old, and definitely had a better understanding of gender roles. They were more likely to play collaboratively and play games that required imagination and had a plot – while the younger class would often switch from game to game quickly, and their games rarely had a plot. However, while the children in this class clearly understood gender roles and reinforced them among themselves, they still understood that they had the choice to play however they wanted to, and I do not think they felt restricted to only play with "boy" or "girl" toys.

I think that I also saw more gender nonconforming play because free choice was such an important part of the school day. The children knew that they could play any game with any toys in any part of the classroom they wanted. Boy could play kitchen, or play with dolls, or play dress up just as easily as girls could climb on the monkey bars, or build with Legos, or build a train track. I also think that the adults in the preschool were very accepting of the children's choices, regardless of what they were. The main teacher always reminded children that they could choose anything, and I frequently observed her helping children or making supportive comments about nonconforming behavior. For example, I saw her help one boy to put on a dress several times, and she always seemed

supportive of his desire to play dress up. The parents were also supportive of the children when it was their day to be helping parents. Except when negotiating conflicts, I only saw parents redirect a child's activity choice one time – and the main teacher pulled that adult aside to remind him that the children could chose anything to play. None of the parents even batted an eye when children – whether their child or someone else's son or daughter – chose a gender nonconforming activity. I think it may have helped that most of the helping parents were mothers or grandmothers. According to Kane, mothers tend to allow more freedom in gender expression – so I hypothesized that the gender of the adults present in the classroom might have had an impact on the children's gender expression. (Kane 2006)

In summary, I think the free choice element of the preschool combined with the support from parents led to children feeling more comfortable experimenting with gender expression during free play. Based on my experiences volunteering in other preschools, I do not think this would necessarily be the case in other preschools. Many parents and teachers would not be supportive of gender nonconforming play. Parents and teachers might redirect children towards games or toys that they saw as more appropriate for their gender. However, this was not the case at SPBP; adults encouraged children to further explore the activities they were interested in regardless of whether it was a "girl" or "boy" activity. On occasion I even saw parents encouraging gender nonconforming play; I once overheard a parent say to a boy "Are you sure you want to take that [purple dress] off? You can be a princess whenever you want to!" I also think the selection of toys was broader at SPBP, which may have led to more experimentation. For example, the selection of dress up clothes included gendered costumes like princess dresses, but also

included costumes that children of either gender could wear – doctor and vet costumes, clown costumes, and firefighter costumes. On top of the broad selection, adults encouraged children of both genders to select any costume they chose, whether that was a princess dress or a firefighter costume, or a combination of the two. I think all of these reasons contribute to the instances of gender nonconformity I observed.

Gender Nonconforming Play in the Classroom

Many of the children at the preschool participated in occasional gender nonconforming behavior, but only two frequently participated in gender nonconforming play or behavior. One of the children was a boy in the two day class, and the other was a girl in the three day class.

My first day visiting the preschool was a Thursday, so I was observing the two-day class of younger children. As noted before, one of my first notes on that first day of observations was about one little boy and his gender nonconforming play. I was very surprised to see any nonconforming play – and especially surprised to see it on the first day. I first noticed that he was hanging around the imaginary play area, which housed the play kitchen, dolls, and dress up clothes. Later I saw him take a purple dress over to the teacher and ask for help putting it on. Once he was wearing the dress, however, he did not return to the imaginary play area; instead he went on to play other games with his siblings. Over time I noticed that he spent more time playing alone when he wore the dress, but the other children seemed to accept him regardless of when he was wearing the dress and not. He was a triplet, and had one brother and one sister in the class. On the first day his mother was one of the helping parents, and I talked with her about gender and how it shaped the children's play. She commented that her children had been

exposed to the same things, but the boys and the girls behaved differently. I do agree that their play was sometimes different – the girl tended to play with other girls, but also spent a *lot* of time playing with her brothers. So while I do see how they played differently, I think they also played similarly sometimes – and that also shows play that is breaking out of gender stereotypes. One of the brothers, Mason, chose to play dress up with princess dresses but played other games (not imaginary play games incorporating his costume.) The sister, Zoe, spent some time playing "girl games" (house, princesses) with the girls, but also spent time playing "boy games" with her brothers (firefighter, monkey bars) when other girls were not playing with boys.

Another day I helped Mason put on his favorite purple dress, and then watched as he went to join his siblings – who were both dressed in firefighting clothes. His sister was wearing a fire vest and hat, and carrying a dog and coke bottle; while his brother was wearing a full firefighting suit. Mason went on to play firefighters with his siblings dressed as a princess – a firefighting princess. Mason created his own role where there was not one already. He did not want to just be a firefighter, he wanted to be a princess too – and everyone at the nursery school that day thought that being a firefighting princess was a perfectly acceptable thing to be.

The other child who participated in gender nonconforming behavior was a girl in the older class; Evelyn. I noticed early on that Evelyn spent more time playing in the boy dominated areas of the classroom – with the blocks, on the climbers, and on the monkey bars – and that the boys generally accepted her playing with them when they would not allow other girls to join in their games. One day when we were walking to the playground I was walking with Evelyn and another little girl when the second girl

stepped on Evelyn's shoe. The second girl said "Oops, I stepped on his shoe." To which I replied, "Its ok, she knows that it was an accident." The second girl said "Oh, I forgot she wasn't a boy," and I started to explain that usually for girls we use the pronoun she. Evelyn spoke up before I got very far and said, "Its ok, I want to be a boy so you can call me a he." I had assumed that the second girl had just been confused about pronoun usage, but I wondered whether Evelyn had expressed this wish to other children in the nursery school. I apologized for using the wrong pronouns and said I would use the pronouns he and him from now on, to which Evelyn responded, "I want to be a boy, just not right now. Right now I want to be a horse, so you can call me she."

I think there are a lot of possible things going on in this exchange. When I spoke with Mrs. Jones she said that sometimes children get confused about pronouns, but I do not think that was the case in this instance. Evelyn seemed confident in her desire to be a boy, and was clear about her wish to use male pronouns. Mrs. Jones also commented that she had two older brothers, and that she might want to be a boy because many of her friends are boys and she felt she would fit in better if she was a boy. It is also possible that she understood gender but did not understand that gender was not something that you could just change day to day like you change clothes – one day you wear pink, one day you wear blue. However, I think that it is equally possible that Evelyn really did want to be a boy and felt that she was trapped in the wrong body for her gender. Considering the above possibilities the exchange is funny and silly – she wants to be a boy, but not today because today she is a horse. But considering the possibility that she identifies as transgender, this is a profound conversation for a five year old to have. I would not expect children this young to be able to articulate their feelings and understanding of

gender so clearly – but she does so as if there is nothing confusing or complicated about it. I think this is a great example of the culture of this preschool – many parents and teachers probably would not have been supportive of a girl so clearly wanting to be a boy. However, I think there was something special about the environment at this preschool that allowed children to feel so comfortable playing games not normally associated with their gender, or expressing the desire to be a different gender altogether. I think that the acceptance the parents showed towards any choice a child made helped the children learn to be just as accepting towards their peers.

While these were the two big instances of gender nonconformity that stand out in my mind, there were several other times that I noticed play that varied from gender stereotypes. One day Mason put on his princess dress and went off to play by himself for a while. I asked him what he was playing, but he mostly wanted to play by himself so I left him alone. Maybe 10 minutes later Mrs. Jones called me over and pointed out that Mason and his brother were playing with a set of water toys –turtles with different colored, detachable shells – in the water table. I watched from a few feet away for a minute, and noticed that they had separated the "girl" turtles from the "boy" turtles. I came closer and pulled over a chair from the art table to watch them play. I observed the following interaction:

Mason: Put her in jail! (he throws a turtle) Put her in jail too! (he throws another turtle) Put her in jail too! (He throws a third turtle) We only want to the boy turtles, not the girl turtles.

Me: Can I ask you about your turtles?

Boys: Yeah

Me: Which turtles are the girl turtles, and which turtles are the boy turtles?

Aiden: This turtle is a girl (he indicates a turtle with a pink shell)

Me: Is the turtle you are playing with a boy?

Aiden: Yeah

Me: What about that one? (I point to a blue turtle)

Aiden: Yeah

Me: Is the purple turtle a boy or a girl?

Aiden: A girl

Me: What about this one? (I point to the orange turtle that Mason is holding – he does not answer)

Aiden: Boy (I point out each turtle one at a time and ask if it is a boy or girl – all except for the pink and purple turtles are boys)

Me: Why are the pink and purple turtles girls?

Aiden: They squeak! (He pushes soapy water out of the turtle)

Me: This one squeaks too. Is it a girl? (I pick up a yellow turtle)

Aiden: No

Mason: This one won't squeak! (He is holding an orange turtle, and seems upset)

Unfortunately, at that very inopportune moment the music for clean-up time started, and I never got to ask Mason whether he thought the orange turtle could be a girl. I thought this exchange was interesting, because Mason was originally the one throwing the girl turtles in jail and yelling that he did not want to play with the girl turtles, but when I started to ask about the gender of the turtles he did not want to talk about which turtles were girls and why. When I asked, Aiden only identified the pink and purple

turtles as girls, but when I asked if it was because of the color of their shells he said no, it was because they spit out water when you squeeze them. I tried to point out that all the turtles would spit out water if you squeezed them but he was insistent that only the girl turtles did (only the pink and purple turtles.) At this point Mason seemed upset that his orange turtle would not spit out water – which made it seem to me that he might have eventually said that the orange turtle was a girl. Later during my time at the school Mason told me that his favorite colors were purple and orange, and I thought it was interesting that he presumably associated orange with girls, because it was his favorite color. This could explain why he seemed upset when he said the orange turtle could not spit out water like the girl turtles.

I did notice that during free play Mason regularly said things like "girls can't play this game" or "only boys allowed on the monkey bars," however, he also changed his stance pretty quickly if you explained why that was a mean thing to say. Other boys still did not want girls to play if you explained how it was mean, but Mason would invite girls to join the game and apologize once he realized that his words were hurtful. I found this interesting because Mason was one of the boys who I was most likely to find playing dress up or participating in some other type of gender nonconforming play. I wondered why he would be aggressive towards girls when he seemed to enjoy stereotypically "girl" games. My best guess would be that while he understood that at preschool anyone can play any game (justifying his choice to play dress up) he still felt pressured by traditional gender roles and felt that the other boys were not choosing the same games as him. This could have been very confusing for him, if he enjoyed girl games but simultaneously felt that he should denounce girl games in order to fit in with the other boys.

There was a game that the children in the 3-day class played in some variation or another almost every day during free play. Originally only the boys played, and while I tried to observe and understand the game, it was often difficult to keep track of what they were doing. The game was very loud, with lots of boys yelling over each other – and in the beginning it was only boys playing, never any girls. On the first day I observed the boys playing this game it seemed fairly simple. They would climb or jump from the monkey bars into the climber toy and yell "I fell into the garbage can!" Sometimes they would yell that the garbage can had been emptied into the garbage truck, and they were stuck in the garbage truck. This went on for the entire free play period, and I went to observe other play groups because I just could not keep track of all the yelling. I will write about this game in more depth in the chapter on imaginary play, but I was particularly interested in some of the children who choose to break out of gender conformity when they joined into this game.

The "garbage can game" as I called it in my notes, was mostly dominated by two boys, Benjamin and Alexander. Other boys would float in and out of the game, but these two could consistently be found near the monkey bars, yelling about trash cans. These two boys also seemed to feel strongly about traditional gender roles. On one occasion I heard one of the boys tell another girl that girls could not play the garbage can game because girls cannot wear fire helmets. This confused the girl, because only a few days before a pair of firefighters had come to visit the nursery school, and we had seen a female fire fighter who had a fire helmet. Benjamin and Alexander would often tell girls they could not play, and for the most part the girls did not try to play.

One morning I made a note that the boys were playing the garbage can game, and went over to the imaginary play area to talk to one of the girls about the game she was playing. She told me she was cooking for a party, and explained to me how she was baking a cake. A few minutes later she and a few other girls sat down in the imaginary play area to eat. The boys were still yelling and loudly crashing carts near the climbers when a fourth girl burst into the imaginary play area and yelled "There are crocodiles in the garbage cans! I have to rescue the people in the garbage cans!"

Girl 1: I can help too. Come on Aubrey, we have to save somebody!

Girl 4: I'm turning into a princess. If my crown burns I'll get a new one. I'll wear a firefighter hat. Actually, there is no fire, just crocodiles. I'm brave. Get ready! I'm looking for my crown!

Girl 3: They're safe!

Girl 4: We have to save everybody in the whole wide world! Come on, a really bad accident! I'm coming to help! People are falling into the garbage cans with crocodiles in them!

I followed the crime fighting princesses over to the climber, where they rescued many people from the crocodiles. The game was very fluid, with children joining and leaving the game quickly – so it was difficult to keep track of who was in and who was out of the game but I believe that almost all of the children in the class participated in the game at some point during that day. The game continued despite several huge leaps in the plot, including crocodiles in the trashcans, and firefighter princesses.

I think this is a great example both of imaginary play, and of gender nonconformity in play. The original two boys did not want girls to join in on their game,

and even asserted that girls could not be firefighters, and therefore could not join the game. I thought it was interesting that the boys stated that girls could not be firefighters, even after we had met a female firefighter. Their ideas of masculinity were quite firm, and they believed that firefighter was a masculine role that only boys should play. I noticed that these two boys tried to prevent girls from playing other "boy" games both before and after this day. The girls, on the other hand, were much more fluid in the ways they expressed their gender. They did not seem to care that girls "could not" be firefighters, and they were able to blend firefighters and princesses to create an imaginary role that they were happier to assume. The transformation was very quick, from a tea party to crime fighting princesses in only 2 or 3 minutes. And they all seemed to accept it fairly readily, even though it was not a game I had seen them play before. One girl suggested they become princesses who could save the world, and as soon as she called out to another girl they were all ready to become crime-fighting princesses.

I think this is another great example of the element of free choice and the impact it had on the children's gender expression. When given the freedom and opportunity to step outside traditional gender roles, the children were very happy to create new roles for themselves. They were comfortable trying out aspects of "boys'" play, and blending both female and male imaginary play roles to come up with an imaginary role that they were really interested in playing. They did not restrict themselves to the costumes for girls, and they did not let the boys stop them when they said girls could not be firefighters. The girls were genuinely happy to be crime-fighting princesses, as if that was the best thing they could grow up to be.

I do wonder why the boys thought that only boys could be firefighters. I would have thought that they would realize that anyone can be a firefighter, especially after the visit from the firefighters. Somehow, somewhere they have been exposed to an idea that only men can be firefighters, and it really stuck. It could have been through toys, television, or the books we read during circle time. But since I did not spend time intimately with each family or interview the parents about the types of media exposure their children have it is impossible to know exactly what they have seen that convinced them that this was the case. The girls have probably been exposed to the same messages, but for whatever reason they were less likely to listen to those strict gender stereotypes. The girls were willing not only to defy gender stereotypes, but to create an entirely new role that included the things they liked about both imaginary roles – crime stopping, and princesses.

On another occasion I happened to observe gender nonconforming play when I did not even realize it was happening. I was sitting quietly in the imaginary play area watching a game taking place in the slide/climber section of the classroom, while a little girl named Sophia played quietly nearby. I liked Sophia a lot because she would always talk to me and tell me about her games, unlike some of the children who often refused to sit near me or took a while to get used to me. As I watched the game taking place I was vaguely aware that Sophia was playing with a baby doll behind me, but I was not actively taking notes or paying attention to the game she was playing. After a while I redirected my attention to Sophia's game, and began to play along with her so that she would explain her game to me. She told me that she was the daddy, and that mommy went to the grocery store. I was surprised that she was playing daddy instead of playing mommy,

but I was impressed that she had come up with this gender bending plot. After a few minutes of eating play food together and putting stuffed animals down for a nap, Sophia started to put on play jewelry, high heeled play shoes, and picked up a purse. When I asked what was happening in her game she told me that she was the mommy now, and that the baby missed her daddy because he went to the grocery store and never came back.

I was interested that Sophia chose to play the daddy in her game, because I had not seen any of the girls pretend to be a daddy before. Many girls would pretend to be mommies in their imaginary games, and perhaps once or twice I saw boys pretend to be daddies (although usually they just played in the kitchen area and did not declare a name for the role they were playing.) It was also interesting that Sophia's daddy character was actively caring for a baby doll. I do not know anything about Sophia's family – whether her dad frequently stays home with them, but it is entirely possible. Or, it is possible that Sophia just wanted to be a daddy that day, and changed into a more feminine character when she decided to be the mommy. Either way, it was interesting to see the character choices the children will come up with when they are given the freedom to do so.

Gender Conforming Play and Interviews

As the children got more comfortable with me I started to ask them questions one on one – a mini interview to suit the attention span and ability of a three year old. Often I would ask these questions on the walk to or from the playground, or while we were on the playground. Occasionally I would ask during the free play period. The questions either leaned towards *What is your favorite game, and why is that your favorite game?* Or *Are there any games/colors/toys that are just for girls/boys?* Many of the answers to

their favorite games reflected the activities they had done recently in class. The questions about games that are just for girls or just for boys really stumped some of the children, but for the most part they answered that any game or toy is ok for either gender (with a few small exceptions.)

One day I was walking to the playground with one of the boys in the three day class, Ethan. We had the following exchange:

Me: What is your favorite thing to play?

Ethan: Power rangers

Me: Do you play with other boys, or girls?

Ethan: Well, we are not allowed to play at preschool because of the swords

Me: What is your favorite thing to play at preschool?

Ethan: Well, I like board games. And sometimes I like to play dress up or build with pipes.

Me: What do you like to dress up?

Ethan: Well, I like one time I wore a firefighter hat and a back pack and a jacket

Me: Are there some things in the dress up area that are just for girls or just for boys?

Ethan: Well, they're for boys and girls. Like one time I wore a pink cape with a police hat and turned into a hero.

I think this is a great example of the free choice element of the preschool. The children were very likely to mix and match gendered costumes and toys because they did not feel that any of the costumes were only for girls or only for boys. Ethan took the question in stride and agreed that any of the costumes could be for boys or for girls. That

same day I was pushing two girls on the swings when one of the girls said that pink and black go well together.

Me: Do you like any other colors?

Grace: Pink and yellow and black and all the colors.

Me: Are there some colors that are just for girls, or can anybody like any color?

Grace: I think all the colors are for anybody

Like Ethan, Grace took the question in stride. She did not seem like she had even considered that some colors might only be for girls. In contrast, Mason and Aiden had clearly thought that only the pink and purple turtles could be girls, while the other colored turtles were boys. They associated pink and purple as girl colors, and the other colors as boy colors. Grace did not make this distinction, even though she almost always wore pink and was very feminine. Despite favoring pink, she recognized that any color could be for anyone. These two interviews were fairly unique in that the children recognized that there were not games or colors that were for everyone, but this wasn't always the case.

A few minutes later I was pushing a new girl on the swings. I asked:

Me: Are the swings a girl toy or a boy toy, or both?

Girl: Well, both!

Me: Are there any toys on the playground that are just for girls?

Girl: No!

Me: They're all for girls and for boys? Are there any toys that are just for boys?

Girl: Well, my plastic crown is just for girls.

Like the other two children I interviewed, this girl did not seem to think that many of the toys should only be for one gender or the other. The only toy she thought of as a girls' toy was a plastic princess crown, like the type you might find in the dress up area. She could not imagine a boy wearing the dress up crown, but did not volunteer any toys that were just for boys. I cannot be sure, but I think she may have only mentioned her princess crown because she had been wearing it and playing with it all day, and it was probably on her mind. If she had not had the princess crown with her all day I think it would have been interesting to see if she still named the princess crown as a toy that was just for girls. Regardless, she could not think of any other toys in the classroom or on the playground that were just for one gender. Many of the children I asked specified that some activities were only for boys, while only a few specified that some things were only for girls. In fact, many girls answered that some of their favorite activities were only for boys and seemed fairly upset until I reminded them that anyone can like or play any game. The boys, on the other hand, were more likely to respond that their favorite game was just for boys – which could reflect that they felt that they were entitled to play that game because they liked it, while girls did not feel entitled to their favorite game just because they liked it.

Soon after the day that the firefighters visited the preschool, I asked two girls if there were any games that were just for girls, and they answered princesses. I asked them if there were any games that were just for boys and they said firefighters. I asked them if they remembered firefighter Sharon, and they were very confused. In their understanding of the world, only boys could play firefighters, but they had met a female firefighter in real life. Since these girls were in the older class I think they could have be gaining a

more concrete understanding of gender, and were perhaps feeling more pressure to pick games that correlated with their gender. It is true that boys played firefighters more often than girls at preschool, but I saw girls wearing fire hats on several occasions. It also really surprised me that after meeting firefighter Sharon and reading books about female firefighters so many children said that girls could not be firefighters. I wondered if, even despite meeting firefighter Sharon, they saw female firefighters as more of an exception to the rule than a rule on its own.

The same day I asked the youngest girl in the three day class, Aubrey, if there were any games on the playground that were just for girls, and she answered "girlfriends." I asked her if she thought there were any games on the playground that were just for boys and she answered "bikes" and seemed disappointed. It interested me that sometimes children would list activities that they clearly enjoyed as an activity that was only for the other gender. I know that Aubrey absolutely loved playing on the circular bikes – I helped push her on many occasions – but she answered that they were a boy game. I do not know if she saw boys on the bikes and just said the first thing that came to mind, or if perhaps she actually believed that only boys should play on the bikes, and felt disappointed because she did not think she should play with them anymore. I really hope this was not the case, because it was not my intention to make her feel that she could not play on the bikes anymore. After this exchange I reminded her that I had pushed her on the bikes before and that she seemed like she enjoyed it – and that at preschool anybody can pick any game to play. Although I did not keep tally of the number of children using the circle bike, I remember it being at least half boys and half girls, if not slightly more than half girls. Still, Aubrey thought that girls should play

"girlfriends" when they were on the playground – not slide, not tag, not sandbox – but girlfriends.

One day I asked a boy named Logan what his favorite game was, and he said that he really liked the skeleton puzzle. The children had been learning about skeletons for Halloween, so I suspected that he answered skeleton puzzle because that was what he had been doing immediately before I asked him. I asked him why the skeleton puzzle was his favorite, and he said it was because it was big. Not wanting to give up yet, I asked him if it was a boy game or a girl game – and he answered a boy game, which surprised me a little because he had been assembling the puzzle with a mixed gender group. He said that it was a boy game because he liked it, but when I asked him if girls could play too he said yes. He says clearly that he thought this puzzle is for boys because he is a boy and he likes it. He felt entitled to play the skeleton puzzle because of his gender – he liked it and he is a boy, so clearly the skeleton puzzle should be for boys. However, this is not something that I observed across genders. Girls did not say that their favorite activity should be for girls because it is their favorite activity.

On the contrary, girls seemed more likely to describe activities they liked as boy games. Despite feeling free to play however they want at preschool, the girls already have an idea that they are not entitled to some games the same way the boys are. They are already getting a message that while it is ok for them to play those games, the games really belong to the boys. Going back to the firefighter example – we have to think about the messages children are getting. If children (both boys and girls) think that girls cannot or should not play firefighter because that is a boy game, could that mean that girls will be less likely to be real firefighters? If boys feel that they cannot or should not play in

the imaginary kitchen or with dolls, will they be less likely to be caretakers or help with housework? Despite the best intentions to keep all games open to all children, the children were still getting gendered messages that told them some activities were not appropriate for all people – even while I was reminding them that they could be or do anything they wanted.

Gender and Aggression

As I was researching gender and aggression for my literature review, I came across multiple sources that focused mainly on overt forms of aggression usually associated with boys, but few sources that mentioned more subtle forms of aggression that are often associated with girls. The result was that many of the sources I read described boys as a more aggressive gender, without considering that boys and girls might participate equally in aggression, but display that aggression in different ways. I did find a few sources that mentioned more covert forms of aggression, like excluding others from games. Most of these covert forms of aggression had not been studied to the same extent as overt forms of aggression, most likely because they are not as obvious and can be mistaken for regular play behavior. Unfortunately, this is the type of aggression most frequently displayed by girls, which means that girls have largely been left out of research on aggression.

I also fell into the trap of believing that aggression was not a problem among the girls at the Schenectady Play Based Preschool; I even wrote in my notes on one occasion that the girls simply were not aggressive towards each other. It was not until I reread my notes that I realized many of these subtle behaviors might have been intentional aggression. Because they were not as obvious – hitting or kicking, or yelling – I did not notice that children were being aggressive towards each other. But as a reread my notes months later I was able to see patterns in these aggressive behaviors, both overt and covert.

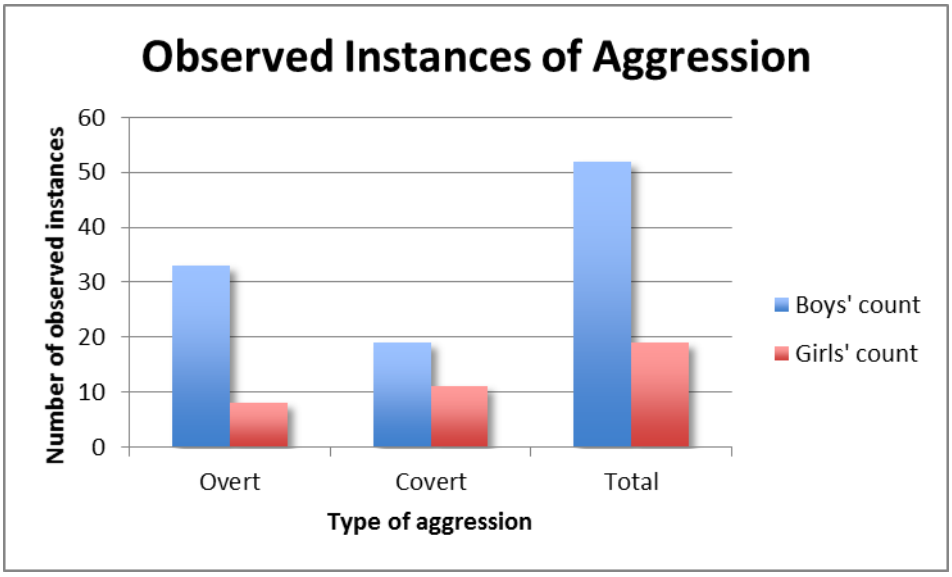
To begin analyzing instances of aggression at the Schenectady Play Based Preschool, I had to define the different types of aggression I witnessed. Based on Ostrov

and Keating's criteria for categorizing aggression, I looked at instances of physical aggression (hitting, kicking, shoving, etc.), verbal aggression (name calling, the threat of violence, etc.) and relational aggression (excluding other children, gossiping, etc.) I decided to group instances of physical aggression and verbal aggression together because they are both overt forms of aggression that are easy to spot. I decided to categorize any more subtle forms of aggression like gossiping, exclusion, or ignoring other children as covert forms of aggression.

Armed with my new criteria I read through all of my notes and tallied instances of aggression into four groups, overt aggression by boys, covert aggression by boys, overt aggression by girls and covert aggression by girls. Each instance of aggression received one tally in one of the categories. If more than one type of aggression was exhibited by the same child I put a tally in both categories. If more than one child exhibited aggressive behavior I made one tally mark for each child in the appropriate category.

Rereading my notes, I was surprised at how many instances of aggression I had recorded without recognizing them as aggressive interactions. In many of the aggressive interactions I recorded no adult stepped in to mediate the interaction. This was especially true of covertly aggressive interactions. This makes me question whether adults did not recognize the interaction as aggressive, as I did as I was observing them, or whether they consciously choose not to intervene. My suspicion is that in many of the situations of covert aggression, adults did not immediately realize that aggression was taking place. I wonder if this could be due to adults being conditioned to accept subtle forms of aggression in our everyday interactions with others.

Although adults did not always step in during covertly aggressive situations, they almost always noticed and mediated overtly aggressive situations. Physical violence, the threat of physical violence, or verbal aggression are all easy to notice – and during most of the instances of physical aggression I recorded an adult stepped in to mediate the situation. In addition, any time a child came to an adult with a claim of aggression it was dealt with seriously by adults, regardless of how minor or serious it appeared.



Similarly to Ostrov and Keating's results, I found that boys exhibited more generally aggressive behavior than girls. I counted 52 total instances of boys' aggression, and 19 instances of girls' aggression. By this count boys exhibited aggressive behavior at almost three times the amount that girls exhibited aggression. Of instances of boys' aggression, 33 instances of aggression were overt while 19 instances were covert. Of instances of girls' aggression 8 were overt while 11 were covert.

It is important to note that I did not record every interaction that took place on every day I attended nursery school. I floated around the preschool, usually drawn to the loudest game or any activity that seemed different than what other children were playing.

I attempted to record interactions as close to verbatim as possible, but probably only recorded a fraction of the interactions that took place on any given day. Although I tried to record notes about girls and boys equally, it is very possible that I recorded boys' aggressive games more frequently than girls'. Perhaps, as Ostrov and Keating's results might suggest, I was more drawn to boys' aggressive games because they were louder with more verbal aggression, while girls were more likely to show subtle and quiet forms of aggression.

I do not believe that I observed enough instances of aggression to make any generalized claims about gender and aggression. I do not think I even have enough data to make any concrete claims about gender and aggression at this specific preschool; if I wanted to make any legitimate claims about gender and aggression I would need to record many more instances of aggression, and have a more organized system of collecting data. I can still, however, analyze the data that I do have while understanding that this data cannot be generalized to a larger population, and would only be accurate at describing this particular preschool during the time I was there. That being said, the data I collected does correlate with the data collected by Ostrov and Keating in 2004.

While boys participated in all types of aggression with more frequency than girls, it is interesting to note that boys' aggression was overt 63% of the time, and covert 36% of the time. Although girls participated in aggressive behavior much less often than boys', their behavior was overtly aggressive 42% of the time and covertly aggressive 57% of the time. Ostrov and Keating found that boys were more likely to participate in aggressive behavior such as physical violence or unveiled verbal violence than they were to participate in aggressive acts like ignoring or excluding others. Although the total

number of girls aggressive acts was almost three times lower than the total number of boys aggressive acts, girls were more likely to participate in covert aggression than boys by about 20%. On the other hand, boys were more likely to participate in overt aggression than girls by about 20%. Although my data is by no means conclusive, I believe the data that I was able to collect correlates with Ostrov and Keating's conclusions.

Aggression in the classroom

To demonstrate how easy it was to miss these aggressive behaviors I would like to share and discuss several examples of both overt and covert aggression by both boys and girls.

On the second day that I attended nursery school I was observing the three day class of older children. The first interactions I recorded that day were aggressive interactions between two boys and a girl on the monkey bars. Although I did not see any physical aggression take place, I saw the girl walk away from the monkey bars and tell an adult that she had been kicked by one of the boys sitting on the monkey bars. This is an overt aggressive behavior from one of the boys towards a girl. Before the adult was able to intervene the boys walked away from the monkey bars with their fingers in their ears, and the girl followed them saying that she wanted to play. After about a minute the girl walked over to me to tell me that the two boys kept saying "Everything is for two." (The rule was only two children on the monkey bars at a time for safety reasons.) I categorized this as a covert display of aggression, because it is more subtle. The boys are attempting to exclude the girl from their games, but are doing so in a way that is subtle enough that no adults realized what they were doing. If they had explicitly said "You

cannot play with us" I would have categorized the interaction as overt aggression. The two boys walked over to the imaginary play area, and the girl followed them and blocked them from leaving by putting a hand on each side of the entrance. She told them that they could not leave, but they ducked under her arms and ran back to the monkey bars. Back on the monkey bars the two boys sit and talk to each other, but do not play actively. One said "It's for two. Climbing is only for two." The other said "Make a sign. Make a sign!" Meanwhile the little girls tried to get the teacher's attention by saying "Excuse me Mrs. Jones. Mrs. Jones. Mrs. Jones! Mrs. Jones?"

When this interaction took place I did not consider it aggressive. Perhaps I noticed that the boys were excluding the girl, but I did not make any notes directly referencing aggression. Or I might have been too focused on what the children were playing, because I had not yet decided to write about aggression. Other than the kick at the beginning, the other adults did not seem to immediately realize that it was aggressive behavior either. Nonetheless I do believe these are examples of aggressive behavior. The two boys are attempting to exclude the girl from their game by kicking, ignoring (plugging their ears and walking away), and telling her that only two can play.

Another example happened a few days later when I was observing the two day class of younger children. Three girls were playing in the space underneath the slide which they had decided was a cave, and one boy was sitting outside.

Girl 1: It's our cave. Get away from our cave!

Boy: Never!

Girl 1: My hide out. Get away. My cave!

Boy: It's my cave. I have a cave over there. This is my cave.

[A parent comes over and starts to try to reason with them when a second boy comes over to the door. One climbs on top of the slide. The adult convinces the girls to let the boys inside, because it's not fair to exclude others.]

Girl 1: Want out! Let me out! Want out! Can you please move a little bit?

Boy 1: No.

Girl 1: Please I want out. Mrs. Jones! Mrs. Jones! Mrs. Jones!

Girl 2: I want to go out. I want to go out. I want to go out. [She climbs through gaps in the walls because the boys will not let her out through the door]

Girl 3: I want get out. Out!

[Only 2 boys left inside the cave.]

This scenario is more obvious than the first. The Girl 1 is participating in overtly aggressive behavior when she says "it's our cave! Get away from our cave!" This is not subtle exclusion, she is very clearly telling him that he may not play their game. Later, after the boys come inside the girls all want to go out of the cave and the boys will not let them. When Girl 1 asks Boy 1 to move and he responds "No" I would say he is showing covert aggression. He has not pushed her out of the way, and he is not verbally threatening her – but he is intentionally ignoring her wishes to leave the game. It is interesting to note that as soon as the girls had all left the cave, the boys lost interest in the game and also went onto other games. It also bothers me somewhat that the boys were able to ignore the girls' wishes to leave the cave, and that no one found that problematic. An adult came over and told the girls they had to let the boys into the cave, but no one came over when the girls were distressed that they wanted *out* of the cave.

While I was at the preschool doing observations (before I realized how many aggressive interactions I had missed) I only observed a few children participating in play that I would have considered aggressive or bullying. There were two boys and one girl that immediately come to mind when I think about aggression at the nursery school. On the day that the children were making apple sauce I overheard one girl telling another that as soon as they were done she had to tell her something that *nobody* else could hear. A few minutes later I saw the two girls crawl underneath the slide, and the first girl said "I never told anybody this, any of my true friends." And then started whispering in the 2nd girl's ear. A girl nearby even plugged her ears so as not to accidentally overhear the secret. This is an example of covert aggression. This girl is excluding others and participating in subtle aggression, but does not openly say "you cannot listen." This is the type of aggression that Keating and Ostrov say is usually associated with girls. Because this kind of aggression is very subtle, it is often overlooked during research. In this instance I recognized the behavior as aggressive (or bullying) as soon as it happened, but it did not appear that any of the other adults were concerned. I thought it was interesting that in this case the girl was telling secrets to another girl who I did not see her playing with frequently, so it was not as if they were best friends and had lots of secrets to exchange. It actually caught my attention in the beginning because I was surprised to hear these two girls talking, and even more surprised when the aggressive girl said she had something important that she could only tell the other girl.

Aggression based on Gender

I noticed over time that there were some groups of children that tended to exclude other children for a variety of different reasons, including their gender. Gender was

sometimes explicitly stated, or sometimes the exclusion was more subtle. One day during the two day class I saw two boys who were siblings playing on the monkey bars together. They would start on opposite sides of the monkey bars and swing together so that their feet touched in the middle, then drop down and crawl into the climber, then circle around to the monkey bars and start again. I recorded some of their dialogue as they played this game.

Aiden: Go out there so you can go after me.

Mason: Why?

Aiden: Go out there.

Mason: See I'm behind you, see? [Aiden climbs on top of the monkey bars] Look what you found! A girl!

Sophia: I'm not a girl, I'm Sophia!

Aiden: Get her! On top! Get her! [Sophia swings on the monkey bars] One two two two. [Aiden tries to push her off the monkey bars, Sophia thinks that he thinks she is stuck. Aiden is really counting himself and his brother, and saying that only two are allowed on the monkey bars.]

Sophia: I'm not stuck

Mason: I'm not stuck up here

Sophia: This is for dancing.

In this case, Mason and Aiden did not want Sophia to play with them because she was a girl. They used overt aggression – saying "Get her! On top! Get her!" and trying to physically push her off the monkey bars – to discourage her from playing with them. From observing Mason and Aiden playing over time it seemed to me that they mostly

liked to play together because they were brothers. It was not that they were only opposed to girls playing with them, because they often did not want other boys to join their games either. But when they did not want other boys to join their game they never made comments about their gender. However, when a girl tried to join their game they almost always referred to her gender as a reason she could not play with them. On several occasions I or another adult talked to these brothers about why it is hurtful to tell girls they cannot play because they are girls, and they seemed to understand and quickly changed their behavior.

Another day I noticed that Mason and Aiden were playing on the monkey bars when their sister Zoe came over to join them. Zoe climbed to the middle of the monkey bars and one of her brothers started yelling "Calico, go get her Calico!" Then her brothers started swinging to the middle of the monkey bars, one on each side of their sister. Zoe looked a little bit scared, so when the boys started yelling at another boy to stay away from the monkey bars I came over to start asking the three siblings about their game. They told me that they were monkeys and that the monkey bars were their monkey home. Once everyone had calmed down again I backed away and watched while they played their game. I noticed that Mason and Aiden would start to yell at girls to discourage them from coming near them, including their sister. After a few minutes Zoe and another girl, Chloe, were trying to join the monkey game. I observed the following exchange:

Mason: I can stay up all day. But you cannot because you're a girl because you're stinky! [Zoe looks upset.]

Chloe: Come on Zoe, we can play up here by ourselves.

Mason: I'm coming down and I'm gonna get you *and* you! [He points to Zoe and Chloe]

Zoe: No you can't! I'm gonna go across.

Mason: You can't because you're a stinky girl

Aiden: You're cuckoo!

Chloe: I'm not cuckoo, I'm Chloe!

At this point I started to worry that the boys were going to start picking on their sister and Chloe again, so I went over to remind them to be nicer and the boys answered "We are being nice, they're a part of our team!" and they all hugged each other. In the end each girl joined a different monkey team and Mason told me that girls were not actually as stinky as he thought. They all chose monkey names, and when the youngest boy in the class (who was often left out because of his age) came to join them they yelled "you're part of our team too, Jackson!"

What started as a minor altercation between siblings became a great, inclusive game between both boys and girls. Mason and Aiden understood that it is not nice to tell girls they cannot play because of their gender, and that it is not nice to call anyone names like stinky or stupid. They participated in these behaviors because they thought they could get away with it, but when I explained why that is hurtful they stopped immediately. I did think it was interesting that even while Mason and Aiden were picking on their sister she never called them names back or insulted them because of their gender. When I spoke to them about how their words were hurtful I specifically used the example of a boy being told he could not play on the monkey bars because he was a boy – a reversal of the same scenario – and it seemed like they really understood. They did not want to be told they could not play, so why would they do the same thing to their

sister? All the same, even at this early age Zoe had learned that even though boys can call you mean names and exclude you because you are a girl, girls do not really do the same thing. I think this is probably true of older children and even adults. The words Mason was using were pretty innocent – stinky, stupid – and could have applied to either gender. In English many insults refer to girls and women – "do not be such a sissy" or "you hit like a girl" – while there are not really any terms that work the same way for men. Although on a lighter scale, Zoe seems to have realized that the insults Mason used on her cannot really be thrown back at him. Luckily for Zoe, Chloe was a girl who never let bullies stand up to her friends – and on this occasion as on others she told Zoe that they could play together so that the other children would leave them alone.

There were also times that gendered aggression became a part of the game. In other words, sometimes Mason and Aiden were aggressive towards girls, but in a way that I understood was supposed to be playful. The play aggression became a part of their game, and was integrated into the plot. For example, in this game that I recorded between Aiden, Mason, Zoe and Chloe. Aiden was stacking blocks by himself in the corner, and Mason was playing by himself on the climber.

Me: What are you building? [Aiden does not respond. He is silent as the blocks all topple on top of him.] Aiden, are you ok?

Aiden: I was building with blocks but I like to scream and fight them.

Me: Do you scream and fight with your brother?

Aiden: Yeah

Me: Does your sister scream and fight?

Aiden: No

Me: What does she do when she wants toys?

Aiden: She goes to bed. [Mason runs up to us]

Mason: Come over and swing with me on the climber! [Aiden runs to the climber and Mason follows, then runs back to the blocks.] I have to build something and then I'll go back there. [He builds a tower that is exactly 3 blocks high, then karate kicks it down and runs back to the monkey bars. Mason is playing with Chloe, making explosion noises and waving toy ladders back and forth.]

Chloe: Fire, fire!

Mason: You can't play with us!

Aiden: Yeah, you can't play!

Mason: Let's get those girls! [They stomp and trip over things, chasing Chloe and Zoe around the classroom.]

Chloe: Zoe, I want to play on the monkey bars!

Zoe: Come on! [They run to the climber, with Mason following]

Chloe: Fire, fire! Stop! [Mason makes explosion noises and repeatedly play hits Chloe.]

This game took place after several days of gently reminding Mason and Aiden that girls could play anything at preschool, just like boys can play anything. On one hand it seems like a good sign that they boys are not actually trying to exclude the girls. However, because they have integrated the aggressive behavior into their game they are still showing aggression towards the two girls. Mason still tells the girls that they cannot play, and then yells "let's get those girls!" before chasing them around the classroom. He does not seem to have any real intention to hurt them, but regardless of intent the game is aggressive. I think that it is these types of behaviors, including aggression that is

integrated playfully into a game that enforce the idea that some games are only for one gender. Chloe and Zoe probably understand that being chased and Mason yelling "let's get those girls" is a part of the game – but regardless of the fact that it is a game they are hearing the message that this game is not for girls. The girls are playing the game, in a way, because they are running away from the boys and being chased. But the lesson they learn from the game is not that everyone is included and can play; rather they are learning that boys control the plot of the game and who can play, and that it is acceptable for boys to chase girls and exclude them from the game.

Meanwhile, some forms of aggression were strikingly similar in the older, three-day class. When boys did not want girls to join in their games they found ways, subtle or aggressive, to discourage them from participating. One morning a child named Ethan told Mrs. Jones that a small group of children playing together kept yelling about pushing each other down the slide and into a pool of lava. Mrs. Jones spoke to them, but they denied playing such a game. I went over to observe their game and see what was really going on. Benjamin and Alexander were playing on the monkey bars when Evelyn came over wearing a firefighter hat. She slid down the slide, and in the process her hat fell off. The boys took this as proof that girls cannot be firefighters, and loudly told her that she could not play. She put the hat back on and climbed up the slide to play anyway. Every time she went down the slide Alexander grabbed the hat off of her head and yelled "I'll save you!" The boys refused to accept that a girl could play firefighters, and refused to accept her into their game.

It was not only boys who did not want girls to join their games; sometimes girls tried to stop boys from joining their games. In the chapter on gender nonconformity I

discussed “the trash can game” and the incident with the crime fighting firefighter princesses who saved the world from the crocodiles. Immediately before the princesses decided to save the world, there was an aggressive interaction between some of the boys from the trash can game, and a few girls that were having a party in the imaginary play area. After noting that several boys were loudly playing their trashcan game near the monkey bars, I sat down in the imaginary play area with a girl that was getting ready for a party. She was baking a cake and setting the table with play food, and I talked with her about who was invited to her party, what she was making, etc. Another girl came over and asked to join the game, and the first girl said of course. Soon two of the loud boys from the trashcan game came over to the puppet stage and started loudly playing near the two girls.

Girl 1: [shakes her head] Boys. Boys!

Boy 3 enters: I do not remember what you guys are pretending to be. [Puts on a firefighter helmet] Someone is stuck and I have to get them free.

Girl 2: No I’m not.

Boy 3: You’re stuck and –

Girl 2: I’m not stuck. I’m eating

Boy 3: You’re eating?

Girl 1: Firemen are not bad so what are you doing?

Boy 3: You’re already safe so do not get stuck again

Girl 1: I can’t not eat

Boy 3: You just eat and then you…what’s this?

Girl 1: A flower.

Boy 3: A pretend flower? Is it for firemen? I'll use it to rescue you!"

Girl 1: I do not want to be rescued. [She coughs]

Boy 3: What are you choking on?

Girl 1: I'm just sick

Boy 3: Then I need to rescue you

Girl 1: This mirror makes me look big

Boy 3: It's because you're five

Girl 1: I'm 4

Boy 3: 5!

Girl 1: 4! [It goes back and forth like this for a while, until I tell them that they can both be four years old at the same time. Boy 3 runs out of the imaginary play area yelling that I am wrong – only one person can be each age at a time. He returns with another boy, who starts pushing a grocery cart around the imaginary play area, knocking things off shelves."

Boy 3: Are you going shopping?

Boy 4: I need eggs

Girl 1: I cannot stand boys [Boy 3 starts picking up and throwing food, crashing the cart into things] I cannot stand boys! You're wrecking my kitchen.

Boy 3: It's not your kitchen

Girl 2: Stop! Stop!

Girl 1: Stop! Dina! Come on. Sit down. We're having a party. [They ignore the boys until they get bored and leave the imaginary play are. Soon after another girl runs into the imaginary play area yelling about crocodiles – and they all dress up to go save the world.]

As in the previous aggressive interaction, the boy repeatedly said that the girl needs to be saved. He ignored the game that she wanted to play and asserted his own version of the game. His game reinforced the "damsel in distress" stereotype and failed to allow girls to play an empowering role. When adults allow these types of games to take place – or rather, allow boys to assert this type of game on girls who want to be a heroine – girls receive the message that they really cannot be heroines. When boys tell girls that they need to be saved they are asserting their own power and diminishing girls' power. This seems innocent enough in a game, but games are a huge part of how children learn and develop. When children are told that they can only play one role, in this case someone that cannot save themselves, they learn to rely on others to rescue them. An ideal game would be to allow the girls to be heroines should they choose, or at least respect their choices if they say they do not need to be saved. In these two examples the girls were not even playing games with a scenario where they might need to be saved. In one game the girl was herself a firefighter, and in the other the girl was trying to have a party. In both games the boy ignored the premise of her game and asserted his own.

In this interaction both Girl 1 and Boy 3 are aggressive towards each other. Girl 1 did not want the boys to join her game, and expressed her exasperation by shaking her head and muttering "Boys! Boys!" While this is not really aggressive behavior, she is, in her own way, quietly excluding the boys from her game. Granted, Boy 3 ignored the entire premise of her game – that she was putting on a party – and instead forcing his idea of a game on her. Girl 1 also seemed confused, because in her understanding of firemen – they do not try to save you if you do not need to be saved. She even says, "Firemen are not bad so what are you doing?" She does not understand why a fireman would burst

into her house and ruin her party, while insisting that she needs to be saved. In her version of the game she and her friend are having a quiet party, but in Boy 3's version of the game she is a damsel that needs to be saved – and she is not taking any of it.

On the other hand, Boy 3 shows a mix of covert and overt aggression. I would say that at first his aggression is covert – he ignores the ongoing game and tried repeatedly to find a reason to rescue Girl 1 despite the fact that she repeatedly asserted that she does not need to be rescued. However, as he got more and more frustrated he starts to yell – at which point his aggression becomes overt. It may not be obvious that the interaction is aggressive because in reading the dialogue you miss the tone of voice the children were using, and the intention behind their actions. Observing the situation first hand it was clear to me that Boy 3 wanted Girl 1 to abandon her own game and be a damsel in distress for his game – and he repeatedly pushed his desire on her until the point that she became exasperated with him. Boy 3 and Boy 4 then knocked things off shelves, threw play food and crashed the shopping cart into shelves around the imaginary play area, making it difficult for the girls to continue their game (or attempting to create an environment that would be more conducive to firefighters rescuing damsels.)

Alexander

About a week into my visits to the nursery school I started to notice one boy, Alexander, who was aggressive towards the teacher, not just towards other students. The first time I noticed his aggression towards the teacher was on the day that the children were making applesauce. Mrs. Jones had set up play stop signs around a table that had the applesauce on it so the children would know not to go too close to the slow cooker, which was very hot. On this day Alexander was mad at Mrs. Jones because she had told

him not to grab – probably a safe precaution given there were knives and hot objects nearby. He walked right past her and intentionally touched the slow cooker, immediately after she had warned him that it was hot and not to touch it; then he denied that it had been hot. While this behavior was less aggressive and more dangerous, I thought it was a good example to set up further stories about this boy. In a way though I think it was aggressive, because he was acting out when he was mad at Mrs. Jones, in direct response to something she had told him. He was not being physically violent or aggressive towards Mrs. Jones (although we could perhaps say that he was being self-destructive by intentionally grabbing a hot pot) and he did not say anything threatening or aggressive to Mrs. Jones. However, he was definitely acting out in a way that I would categorize as passive aggressive or covertly aggressive.

While I tried to be as objective as possible while I was doing my observations, I noticed early on that there were a few children who were more aggressive than the others. In particular, there were two boys in the older, three-day class who were much louder and more aggressive than the rest of the children in the class. Boy 3, the boy who kept trying to "save" a girl who did not want to be saved, was one of these boys. These two boys mostly played together and frequently played away from other groups of children. I often saw them trying to join other games, but I did not notice other children trying to join their games as often. I think that it is possible that the number of boys' aggressive acts were so high specifically because of these two boys, who were involved in many of the aggressive incidents I recorded for the three day class. As an explanation, I will describe a specific day that I noticed many acts of aggression, and how they were linked to these two boys. This is not to say that other aggressive interactions involving other children

did not occur – or to say that all of the aggressive interactions were the fault of the two boys – but reading over my notes it did stand out to me that these two boys were involved in a significant number of aggressive acts I recorded.

On the morning in question, October 16th, I noticed two boys, Caleb and Jack, playing together quietly apart from the rest of the children. These two boys often played together away from the group, and I usually thought of them as the two most well behaved, quiet boys in the class. They did not usually like when I sat near them to take notes, but from a distance I heard them talking about how the two aggressive boys from above, Alexander and Benjamin, had been annoying them that morning. Within five minutes of getting to school Alexander and Benjamin had started playing the garbage can game together very loudly, which prevented any other children from playing in that part of the preschool. One of the girls, Evelyn, joined the game and pretended to be a cat. At first she meowed and watched, then she tried to jump into the garbage can too, but one of the boys hit her to stop her from playing. Mrs. Jones saw this, and spoke to him about hitting others. Evelyn meowed and said, "Ow, my hand!" in a high pitched play voice. She integrated the violence into the game as if it was a normal interaction.

On this day the children were painting filter paper leaves, and the teacher was bringing them over in small groups to paint during free play time. Benjamin and Alexander were both painting, which left the monkey bars open to Caleb and Jack. Alexander tried to join Caleb and Jack, but rather than play with him the two boys left the monkey bars altogether. Alexander told Mrs. Jones what happened, but she said it was not a big deal. A few minutes later Caleb and Jack returned to the climber and Alexander

ran back over to ask if he could come up. They yelled no, and argued with the boy about whether it was their fort, or his cave.

During free play time the children were also measuring themselves with two units of measurement – with blocks, and with a measuring tape. At the block station one child would stand still while another stacked up blocks as high as the other child was tall. The helping parent asked the group who wanted to measure Alexander, and all the children quickly but subtly found other things to do rather than help to measure him. The helping child eventually started to help stack the blocks to measure him, but he grabbed the blocks from her and measured himself. When he finished he smashed the block pile – kicking and hitting it to the ground

After they were finished measuring, I followed Alexander and Benjamin over to the slide. They were underneath the slide, arguing with a few girls standing outside the slide.

Alexander: This is our house! You can't come in on our chinny chin chin. You cannot blow us down!

Madelyn: You know what? It's not the big bad wolf because Evelyn is.

Benjamin: No one comes in. No one comes in.

Evelyn: I'm not the big bad wolf!

Alexander: Thank you for locking the door.

Mrs. Jones: I need you to come out please. [Suddenly Alexander is acting completely innocent. When she opens the door for Alexander to come out Madelyn and one other boy try to go in.]

Alexander: This is my house! No one comes in. No one comes in. Out, out, out you two. No one comes in!

Mrs. Jones calmly explained that to Benjamin and Alexander that they cannot play under the slide anymore because she has had to talk to them too many times. Madelyn asks if she has to leave and Mrs. Jones says no – because she has kept her hands to herself. As soon as Mrs. Jones turns around Alexander ducks back under the slide and yells "Nothing wrong here!"

After snack the children each used the restroom, and then settled on the carpet in the reading corner. Adults read books that each child chose while the rest of the children finished eating and used the bathroom. On most days I went straight to the reading corner to keep the children occupied while the helping parents and teacher finished with snack. On this day both Benjamin and Alexander sat near me with the books they had picked out. They balanced the books on their head and used them to hit others, and ignored me when I asked them to stop. Eventually the teacher had to take away their books. After reading time was over Alexander asked me where his book went, and I said "I think Mrs. Jones took your book because you were hitting other people with it." He responded, "I was just having fun!" Mrs. Jones called him over and said, "Do you know what books are for? I know you do. Books are for reading. When you balance them on your head they can hit people. That's never ok." Alexander started to get angry and shouted, "But I was just having fun!"

As I have noted before, I spent the day floating around the classroom so it is possible that I missed some interactions while I was observing others. It is also totally possible that on this day I just noticed Alexander's aggression because I was thinking

about him – he had been acting out and he is quite loud, so it was easy to overhear him from across the room. Still, this day represents a fairly average day of aggression during the three day class. I did not witness physical violence very frequently, but when it did happen it usually either turned out to be an accident, or it was in some way involved with Benjamin and Alexander. At the very beginning of the school day one of the boys hit Evelyn when she tried to join their game, and she accepted it as fairly normal. Later that day Alexander hit other children with a book he was holding, and later on the playground another child hit him. Most of the time these were small strikes, but to a 4 year old even a light hit can be pretty major.

More frequently than physical violence, I noticed that many other children would try to avoid playing with Benjamin and Alexander in the first place. Perhaps they thought that if they avoided playing with them they could avoid the violence and exclusion altogether. That being said, there seemed to be about equal amounts of exclusion and avoidance from Benjamin and Alexander and from other children at the preschool. At the start of the day Caleb and Jack were talking about how much they disliked playing with Benjamin and Alexander, and within a few minutes Alexander had already hit Evelyn for trying to participate in their game. When Caleb and Jack were playing on the monkey bars Alexander argued with them about who could play there, and when Alexander and Benjamin were playing under the slide they argued with Evelyn and Madelyn about who could play.

I did notice that unlike the other children, Alexander was showing aggression towards the adults in the classroom in addition to the other children. I noticed that he often challenged authority, and would get angry with me or other adults if they tried to

talk to him about his behavior. For example, when he intentionally touched the hot pot when we were making apple sauce, or the two times he yelled at the teacher on this day: once when he sneaked back under the slide and yelled, "Nothing wrong here!" and once when the teacher took away his book and he yelled, "But I was just having fun!" He also seemed to have a hard time understanding the effect his actions would have on others, and that the rules still applied to him. For example, when balancing the books on his head "for fun" he actually hurt other people – or another time when he thought that he should be allowed to talk over the teacher when she had specifically asked him to be quiet – because he was not speaking to her.

In reviewing my notes about aggression, and specifically my notes about Alexander, I wondered why he was involved in so many more aggressive incidents than the other children in his class. Research, including the research by Ostrov and Keating, backs up the stereotype that boys are more aggressive than girls. But Alexander was more aggressive than most of the other boys in his class. I came to the conclusion that like all forms of violence, Alexander's aggression was linked to a need for power and control. In order to feel in control of himself and various situations at preschool Alexander was aggressive towards other children and adults. Perhaps the other children felt more in control while they were at preschool because they had more free choice and could make decisions about the activities they chose, who they played with, etc.

The next day I saw the three day class, October 18th, was the day that I really started thinking about writing about aggression at the preschool. I had noticed it before, but never thought of it as a major part of the day to day interactions at the preschool. On October 16th I noticed that Alexander's aggression was causing more problems, and I

think that led up to the aggression that took place on October 18th – which was what I considered the most aggressive day I observed.

I usually arrived at the preschool between 8:30 and 8:45 so that I had time to talk to Mrs. Jones, make any notes, or offer to help get the classroom ready for the children. It just so happened that Alexander and his mom arrived early that day too – and when Mrs. Jones asked me to watch Alexander while she spoke with his mother I agreed. Alexander told me we could not play together because I was too big for the monkey bars and slide, so I just worked on my notes while he played nearby. Other children started arriving at school and playing and Benjamin and Alexander started playing on the monkey bars as usual. Both boys had been spoken to by their parents and by Mrs. Jones that morning, but when Caleb and Jack came over to play they started arguing loudly and would not let Caleb and Jack join them on the monkey bars. The helping mom came over to talk to them, and explained that they toys at preschool are for everyone to play with and that you cannot exclude others, at which point Benjamin and Alexander yelled that they were not doing anything wrong. Since the helping mom was speaking to them I went to a different part of the room, still within earshot, and talked to a few girls that were painting. Caleb and Jack followed me to the easel and told me that even though the helping mom had spoken to him, Alexander was being "really mean and really really crazy." I told them that I was sorry they felt that Alexander was being mean, and that if it happened again to tell me or another adult right away so that we could talk to Alexander.

While I was talking to various children about their paintings I saw one firefighter princess and 3 boy firefighters head over to the monkey bars. I heard Benjamin say "Well, girls cannot be firefighters because they do not have firefighter hats" and then saw

Alexander grab the fire helmet off of Amelia's head. She did not protest, but kept playing her game – a princess saving people from a fire. As she rescued people from the fire Alexander yelled "I'm a shark!" and Evelyn yelled "I'm a wolf boy that saves the day all the time." Then Alexander started growling like a wolf, presumably he also became a wolf. The interaction continued:

Amelia: Please stop growling at me. [Alexander keeps growling and snapping his teeth]

Me: If she tells you to stop you have to stop. All you have to do is say "Please stop" and he has to stop. [Alexander keeps growling]

Amelia: I just want – [Alexander walks away as she is trying to speak]

Me: It's ok, you can tell me.

Amelia (to me): I just want you to please stop growling at me! [The helping mom comes over, bringing Alexander with her.]

Helping Mom: Did you hear her? She said to please stop.

So far this was not out of the ordinary. Alexander tried repeatedly to stop others from playing the game they wanted to play. He yelled and argued with Caleb and Jack when they wanted to play on the monkey bars, and he stole one girl's fire hat so that she could not be a firefighter. However, this was pretty normal. He wanted his game to be the only game, and tried to stop other children from playing games the way they wanted to play. Luckily for Amelia, once the Helping Mom spoke to Alexander several of her friends who were also princess crime stoppers came over, and she was able to play with other children who respected her choice of games.

Meanwhile, Benjamin yelled that he did not want to play with Alexander because Alexander was being mean, and kicked the toys that Alexander was playing with. I felt

that I could not handle this situation while trying to take notes so I grabbed the Helping Parent again, but while I was gone Caleb took off his firefighter backpack and used the play fire extinguisher to spray Alexander. (It was a toy, so obviously nothing came out – but he made sound effects and pretended to blast Alexander away.) While the helping mom dealt with the boys I went to listen to the princess crime stoppers, who had turned the library corner into a princess castle. Unfortunately I was only able to listen for a minute.

As I was leaving the princess castle I saw the helping mom carrying Benjamin away from the nature table. Alexander had hit him so hard in the face that Benjamin got a black eye. I did not see the altercation take place, but I gathered from the helping mom that it had been about a game or toy and that it had not been an accident. Usually these two were inseparable but after this Benjamin would not come anywhere near Alexander for the rest of the day. Alexander shouted during snack time and refused to sit next to certain children, or stay in the seat Mrs. Jones assigned to him because he was acting out. During story time he would not pick out a book, and repeatedly grabbed books from me and other children. During circle time he shouted out of turn and interrupted Mrs. Jones, and refused to sit down.

As far as aggression by other children on this day – it happened but was minimal compared to Alexander's outburst. As always, I definitely could have missed some interactions while I was observing others. One girl, Grace, was very bossy to other children during snack time. During the princess crime stopping game one girl wanted to clean up while another wanted to keep playing, but the aggression was completely averted because we decided that the first girl could just clean up her toys and let the other

girls keep playing with their toys. The girls' aggression was for the most part more subtle, and resolved fairly quickly and easily. The boys' aggression, on the other hand, was much more difficult to handle.

I was surprised that Alexander's behavior escalated so quickly, from attempting to exclude others from playing on the monkey bars, to hitting his best friend in the face. Most of the other acts of physical aggression I observed were much less serious, and many of them were arguably accidental. For example, I once saw a girl step on another girl's hand while they were playing near each other on a rope ladder. The girls had been arguing shortly beforehand, but I could not say whether stepping on the second girls' hand was intentional and part of the fight, or accidental. Other similar incidents – hitting someone in the face with a musical instrument, or knocking over someone's block tower – could be accidental and depend largely on context. But hitting someone in the face seems fairly intentional, especially when that hit is hard enough to cause a black eye. I also noticed that Alexander's aggression had been increasing over time. When I first began observing at the preschool he was loud and sometimes tried to control other children's games, but over time he became more aggressive both towards children in his class and adults in the classroom. I would consider the incident with Benjamin to be the culmination of Alexander's aggression. After that day he remained aggressive towards others, but Mrs. Jones and the helping parents usually stepped in much faster, before he could become violent.

I also wondered about a possible link between the games Alexander played, and his level of aggression. Alexander and Benjamin were the first children to make up the garbage can game, and I believe that Alexander came up with the concept, and Benjamin

followed. The game was not passive; it consisted of jumping from on top of a plastic box into the cube, and yelling that they had fallen into the garbage can, or that the trash truck had dumped them into the garbage can and they could not get out, or that the trash truck had left with them inside and that they would be crushed. The game started innocently enough, but over time progressed into a more violent, more aggressive game – especially when other children tried to join. Soon the trash cans were on fire, or filled with alligators – and the people inside the trash cans could not get out on their own, but needed to be rescued by firefighters. As the game expanded I noticed that Alexander was more aggressive towards other children and tried to exclude them from playing – especially the girls. He yelled at them, he stomped on Evelyn's hand, he took girls' fire hats and told them they could not be firefighters. His aggression was directed towards everyone in the classroom, girls and boys – and adults, including the teacher and helping parents.

Although I did not observe him at home and did not interview his parents, I suspect that his aggressive and violent games did not end at school. One day when his dad was the helping parent he told us that he had spent the previous day "people bowling" – which he described as a game where he slid down the hallway and knocked things over. It surprised me that his parents allowed him to play this game, but also clarified why he might have thought this type of game was ok. If his parents did not discourage aggressive or violent games at home it would make sense that he would think those games were ok to play at preschool. Then when adults at preschool discouraged those games, he might feel justified in lashing out towards adults – because the adults at his home do not treat him that way. And again, while I have not observed him at home –

I suspect that this may be why he felt justified to speak to the teacher aggressively, when none of the other children did.

For example, before snack every day Mrs. Jones took a minute to thank the helping friends and their parents for bringing snack and helping set the table. One day Mrs. Jones tried to thank the helping friends several times, but could not because Alexander was still speaking. She asked him to stop talking, and he turned to her and said "I'm not talking to you so that rule doesn't matter." He assumed that regardless of the rule that everyone else follows, that if someone is talking you stop talking, that rule could not possibly apply to him because he was talking to someone else – not Mrs. Jones. When she corrected him and told him that the rule did still apply to him he got upset and sulked in his chair at the snack table. A few days later the same thing happened again. Right before snack Alexander repeatedly talked over Mrs. Jones when she was trying to get everyone's attention. When she gently told him it was her turn to talk he got very angry, standing up from the table and yelling "I'm not talking to you!" as if he should be allowed to talk when she was talking, as long as he was not talking to her. I do not believe that he simply did not understand this rule, because he had understood previously that you could not interrupt or speak over another person.

There were many other times that Alexander was disrespectful of rules and aggressive towards adults. One day around Halloween the children were learning about skeletons and there were several skeleton themed stations around the classroom including a life-sized puzzle, copies of x-rays, and a station where they could draw their own skeleton. Mrs. Jones broke the children up into groups that would stay together, and an adult was assigned to each station to keep the activities moving. I was not assigned to a

station so that I could take notes, but after a few minutes I abandoned my notes to help control one of the stations. Alexander wandered over to Mrs. Jones after the first official switch of stations and said that he had already done all three stations, because he had switched on his own when no one was paying attention. I told Mrs. Jones that I would help keep an eye on him so that she could teach. Mrs. Jones told him that he could either pick the puzzle station or the x-ray station, but he repeatedly said he had already done both stations. I reminded him several times that he had two choices, the puzzle or the x-rays but he would not choose so eventually I told him we were just going to do the puzzle. When we sat down he claimed that he did not know how to do the puzzle, even though he had told me before that he already did the puzzle. As was pretty usual for Alexander, he yelled the entire conversation and was argumentative when I tried to make him follow the rules.

I think it is important to note that most of the adults in the classroom were female; in fact I believe there were only two male helping parents in the entire time I visited the preschool. That being said, I have no evidence to show that Alexander was aggressive towards the adults in the classroom because of their gender. It seemed to me that Alexander was aggressive towards all the children in his class, but especially aggressive towards girls. His aggression towards girls was usually more exclusionary – yelling at them or excluding them from games – and only occasionally violent, for example stepping on Evelyn's hand. His aggression towards boys tended to be more violent – including hitting or kicking – and exclusionary. His aggression towards adults (mainly female adults) was mostly in the form of yelling and arguing, not respecting rules, and ignoring clear instructions. I believe that there probably is a link between Alexander's

feeling that rules should not apply to him, and his aggression towards others. If he feels that rules should not apply to him, he would feel justified in being aggressive towards adults who try to enforce the rules. By extension, if he felt that rules should not apply to him (such as the rule that any child can play any game) he would also feel justified in preventing other children from participating in his games by any means necessary. I also believe that his gender may be linked to his aggression. For example, I believe that Alexander feels entitled to play whatever game he wants because he is a boy. Clearly he thinks that girls should not have that right, because he systematically prevents them from playing some games; for example, repeatedly taking a girls' fire helmet and telling her that girls cannot be firefighters. I also believe that there must be other reasons behind Alexander's aggression – however, I am not a psychologist and cannot make claims about factors outside the classroom that could affect his behavior.

Aggression and Accountability

Aggression was not one of the topics I planned to write about when I started observing at the preschool. In fact, writing about aggression was difficult because I preferred to think of the preschool as a place that would foster creativity and exploration through the options of free choice available to the children, as opposed to a place where children would learn stereotypical gender roles because of games that other children forced them to play. There were times that, despite trying to keep a positive outlook, I worried about the types of people these children would grow up to be. For example, after reading a book called *The Old Woman who wasn't Afraid of Anything*, Alexander said that his favorite part of the book was when the woman was scared. I wondered, if he thinks it is funny that a woman is afraid, how will he act when he is older – will he still

think it is funny when women are afraid? It is easy to think of children as innocent, but the truth is that as early as preschool they are already learning the gendered roles that they "should" play, or that they feel they "must" conform to. If children as young as 3 and 4 feel entitled to certain things because of their gender, we must consider that this may lead to a sense of entitlement later in life. On the other hand, if a child as young as 3 or 4 already feels that there are some things that they cannot do because of their gender, we must consider that this may limit the things they feel capable of doing later in life.

However, despite this realization I did find one note about aggression from my observations that made me feel hopeful. Mrs. Jones treated every allegation from children no matter how large or small as a serious problem. In my time volunteering at other preschools I have seen adults downplay children's accusations of aggression as tattling; this can make the child feel as if their concerns are not legitimate. I would argue that any concern is legitimate no matter how large or small, because a large concern for a child could seem relatively insignificant to an adult. However it is the child's perception that is important, not the adult's. If we teach children at an early age that someone will listen to them and help them if something is wrong, hopefully they will be more likely to ask for help if something more serious is happening. If children learn at an early age that adults will ignore accusations of bullying (when the child considers it a problem) then we can expect that they would assume that adults would ignore other, perhaps more serious accusations in the future.

In addition to validating children's concerns, Mrs. Jones also taught accountability. In response to almost every accusation of aggression Mrs. Jones approached the child accused of aggression and made them be accountable for their

actions. Rather than punishing children with time out or threats of calling their parents, Mrs. Jones talked to both the offending child and the child you reported the incident about what happened, why it was not ok, and asks them to apologize. Mrs. Jones also put an emphasis on respect and personal boundaries, and the fact that you need to respect other people's wishes. That means that if someone tells you to stop it does not matter what you are doing or how much fun you are having – you stop. I felt that Mrs. Jones' method was very successful in resolving conflict, and taught the children accountability and that someone would listen to them if they came forward. She treated behavioral issues as behavioral issues, and resolved them through positive communication. The only times I remember seeing Mrs. Jones "punish" a child were times that she restricted their choice of activities to keep them from violating a safety rule. For example, when she told two boys they could not play under the slide because she had asked them to be more inclusive several times, or another time when she took away a boy's book because he was using it to hit other children. But she and the helping parents never punished children by sending them to time out. I think that this method of resolving conflict, by speaking to children as if they understand their actions (which they do!) and helping them to understand the consequences of those actions is preferable to time out because it helps them to develop a sense of personal responsibility. This may not prevent aggression entirely, but I believe that over time it will help children grow into responsible, empathetic adults.

Themes of Imaginary Games and Use of Space

While I was observing play at the preschool I was very interested in the differences in the imaginary games the children were playing. Some differences were fairly obvious, for example – girls were more likely to play in the realistic toy kitchen corner. Girls usually used this space for cooking realistic toy food or playing with baby dolls. Boys did not use this space as often and when they did the games were often different – for example knocking all the toy food off the shelves and yelling "earthquake!" However, many of the differences in play were not so easy to spot. I started by rereading my notes and making a list of all the places that children played, being as specific as possible. I tallied each time I had recorded a boy or girl playing in each space, and came up with a list of the most popular places to play and how those spaces were divided by gender. Next I reread my notes a second time, making a list of the themes of each imaginary game I recorded children playing. This list was much more specific, and detailed ways in which spaces were used differently in imaginary games. For example, the monkey bars could be a jungle in one imaginary game, or a trash can in another. I tried to be as detailed as possible, and again divided the list by gender to get a feel of which themes were more popular with each gender.

As with my other findings, it is important to note that I did not record every interaction that took place on each day that I attended the preschool. I tried to observe a variety of games on any given day, and I tried to observe the genders equally. I believe that my data for location of children's play is fairly accurate because throughout the morning I tried to stop and tally up how many girls and boys were playing in different parts of the classroom at any random time. However, these numbers will not match the

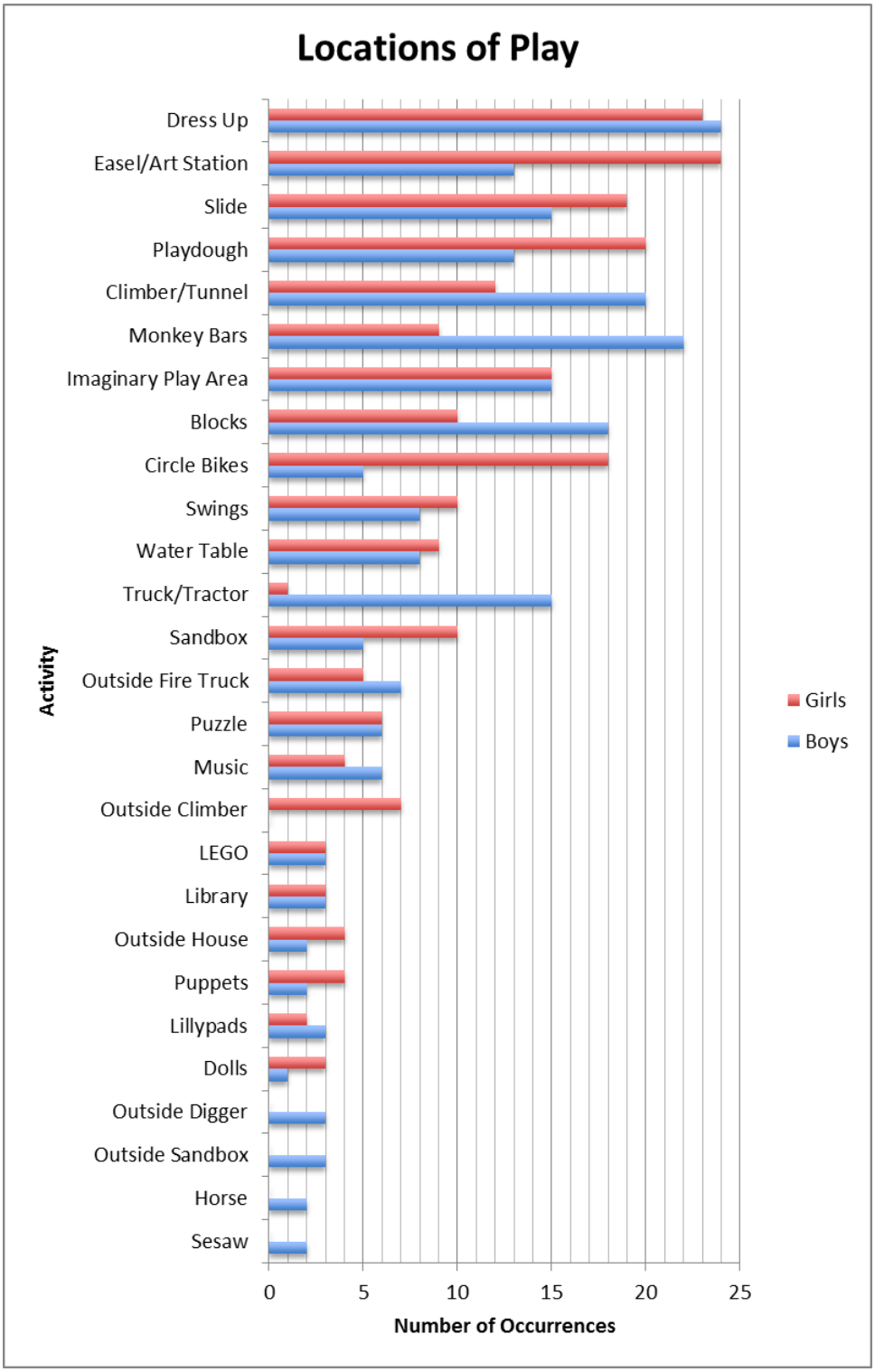
data for the themes of imaginary play exactly because I only tallied instances that I recorded a specific imaginary game taking place. For example, if a child was playing at the play dough table I marked a tally in the location list, but I did not mark a tally in the imaginary themes list unless the child specifically expressed a statement such as "I'm making cookies!" When I asked children what they were making [with play dough] this morning some children would simply answer "play dough" – I did not count this as imaginary play.

Gendered Play by Location

As I expected, the use of different spaces within the preschool did differ by gender. Some areas were used almost explicitly by one gender, while some spaces were used equally by each gender but in different ways. I also found that some imaginary games were more likely to be played by children of one gender while other seemed to be open to both genders. I think it would be interesting to also see which games were open for children of both genders to play *at the same time*, but I did not feel that I had enough data to come to any conclusions about play in mixed gender groups.

During approximately 30 days at the preschool I recorded 445 instances of play by location; 224 were boys and 221 were girls. During that same period I recorded the themes of 343 games; 174 were by boys and 169 were by girls. While this would not be enough data to generalize to a broader population, I do think that I have enough data to discuss the trends in children's play at this specific preschool. In addition, the numbers for girls' and boys' are very close for each group. Because the numbers are so close it is easier to find the most popular games and locations overall, and how they varied by

gender. Roughly equal numbers for each gender also means that the numbers were not skewed towards a specific gender.



Listing instances of play by location is a good way to understand how the genders used spaces around the classroom and playground differently, but they do not reflect the complexity of play in its entirety. For example, dress up was the most popular activity by location with 47 instances of dress up, split almost evenly with 24 boys and 23 girls. However, this number leaves out the different types of dress up that the children played, and how the differences in costume choices were split by gender. These differences are reflected in the table on imaginary play.

Some of the data I collected reflected gender stereotypes about girls and boys; for example – girls were more likely to do art and play with play dough (fairly passive games) while boys were more likely to play more active games like the monkey bars or climber/tunnel. Other data broke gender stereotypes; for example, girls and boys were equally likely to play in the imaginary play area, read, or build with legos. I believe that this could show two things; either our preconceived stereotypes about the games boys or girls enjoy could be wrong, or that when given the chance to play freely children will play games that do not conform to gender stereotypes.

I found it interesting that boys' activities concentrated around a few activities which had high numbers of occurrence. This tells me that boys tended to play the same group of games, with less experimentation in other areas. Girls had a nearly equal number of activities with high numbers, but those numbers were comparatively lower than the boys' activities. This means that the girls experimented more in other areas of the classroom. In other words, boys' play focused on a few main categories with little experimentation while girls' play focused on a few main categories but still left room for experimentation in other areas.

The most popular activities for boys in order (activities with numbers in the double digits) were dress up, easel/art, slide, play dough, climber/tunnel, monkey bars, imaginary play area, blocks, and ride upon truck/tractor. Some of these activities match the gender stereotypes for boys, but others go against those stereotypes. For example, based on common stereotypes about boys and their interests I would expect boys to enjoy playing on the slide, climber, monkey bars, blocks, and the truck/tractor; but I would be surprised to see them show interest in dress up, art, play dough, or the imaginary play area. I think that while acknowledging these stereotypes it is important to note, again, that this data does not reflect the way in which these spaces were being used. For example – based on stereotypes I would expect to find boys playing on the monkey bars, but I might not expect to see them participate in imaginary play on said monkey bars.

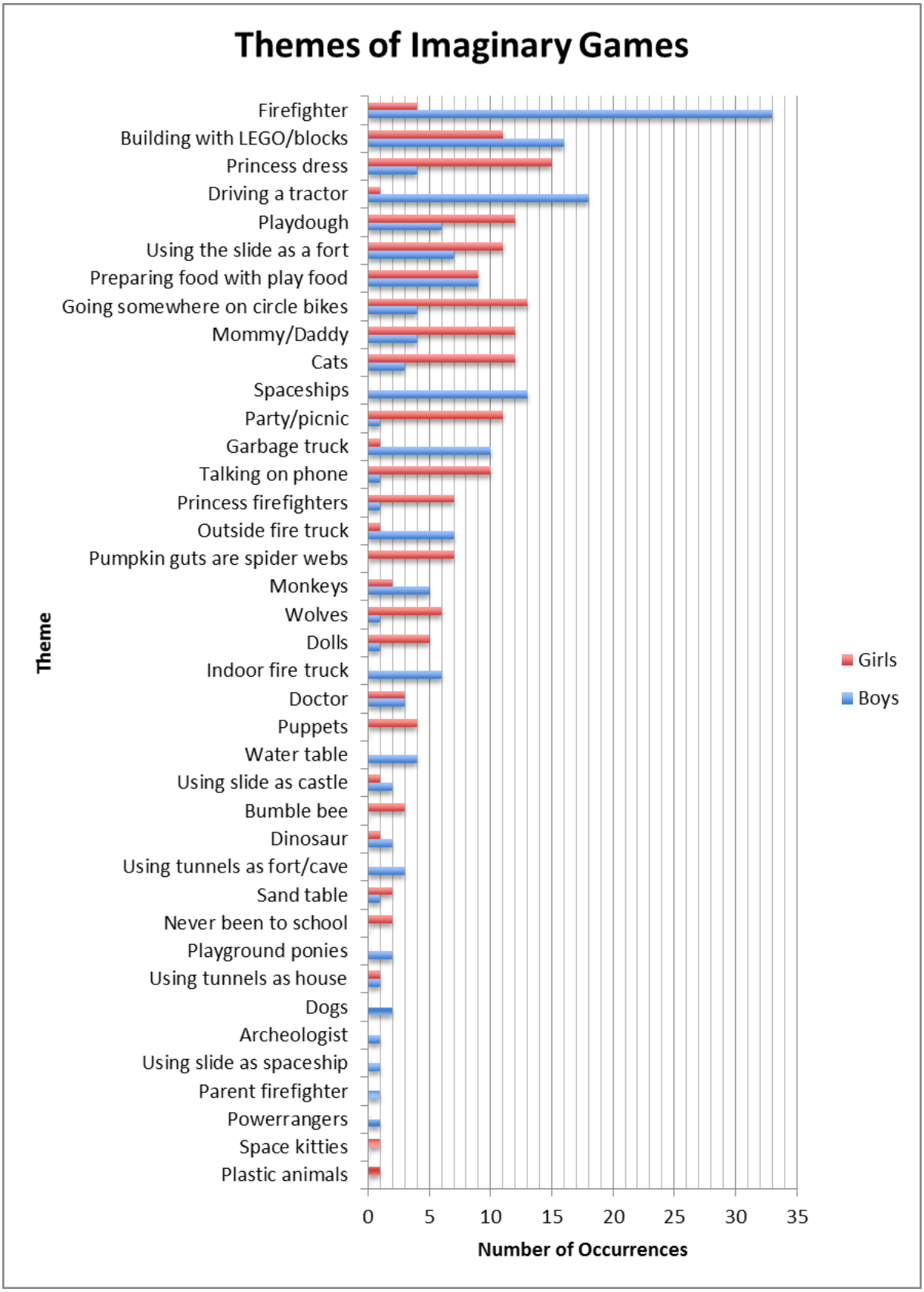
The most popular activities for girls, in order, were dress up, easel/art, slide, play dough, climber/tunnel, imaginary play area, blocks, circle bikes, swings, and the sandbox. There were more two digit numbers for girls' activities, but the numbers were generally lower than boys' activities. Again, some of the activities fit in with gender stereotypes about the types of girls like to play; girls "should" enjoy dress up, art, play dough, imaginary play, and swings. However, girls also enjoyed games like the slide, the climber/tunnel, and building with blocks – but they played these games in ways that were different than the ways in which boys played those same activities. For example, girls often played underneath the slide while boys slid down the slide. Girls liked to pretend the climber/tunnel was a house while boys liked to pretend the climber/tunnel was a garbage truck. It is important to understand not only how the spaces were used, but how the games the children played utilized the spaces differently.

I thought it was interesting that some categories were much more popular with one gender than the other, while some were close to equal. For example, the monkey bars were much more popular among boys (22) than they were among girls (9). While it is possible that girls just were not as interested in playing on the monkey bars, I think this difference could be due in part to the fact that boys frequently chased girls off the monkey bars or told them they could not play there. The same goes for the climber/tunnel. So perhaps the girls were not interested in playing in these locations, or perhaps they were being discouraged from playing by other children, or perhaps they were consciously choosing not to play in these areas because they were avoiding being chased or yelled at by the boys. I do not know the whole reason. On the other hand, it did not seem like the girls were reciprocating this behavior. In the cases that the number of girls was higher than the number of boys in any given activity the number was usually closer than when the boys were the majority, and I found very few cases of girls telling boys they could not play. I would conclude that boys chose their activities more by their own interests, and less because they felt pressured by their peers to not participate in an activity. Even stereotypically "girly" activities like dress up, which you would assume would be dominated by girls, were fairly even by number. If the behavior was reciprocal I would expect to hear girls telling boys that they could not wear princess dresses, but I never heard anyone tell a boy that he could not wear a princess dress – while I frequently heard boys tell girls that they could not wear a firefighter hat. This seems to show that boys had more freedom of choice in their activities than girls, even though the rule was that (presumably) anyone could play whatever game they wanted to play.

I do think it is important to note that some of the categories may be slightly skewed because some children tended to play the same games every single day. For example, the truck/tractor was used 15 times by boys and only once by girls – this is because the same two boys played on the truck/tractor every single morning without any variation. I only remember other children playing on the tractor on two other occasions, once a girl, and once a boy. However, I do not think that this seriously affects my data because I still recorded the number of times children of each gender played in each place – and the same child playing the same game every day should not affect this.

Imaginary Play by Theme

Before reviewing my notes I thought that the themes of children's games might show more insight into the free choice element of the preschool culture. Children might feel pressured to play in a specific space or not play with a specific group of children, but I thought the themes of their games should be pretty independent. I assumed that it would be more difficult (and less likely) for someone to tell a child that their imaginary game is wrong than it would be to tell them "you cannot play over here." That being said, there were some times that I observed children telling others that they could not be a part of an imaginary game – for example, boys telling girls they could not be firefighters and taking the fire helmets off their heads.


Themes of Imaginary Games
Theme
Firefighter
Building with LEGO/blocks
Princess dress
Driving a tractor
Playdough
Using the slide as a fort
Preparing food with play food
Going somewhere on circle bikes
Mommy/Daddy
Cats
Spaceships
Party/picnic
Garbage truck
Talking on phone
Princess firefighters
Outside fire truck
Pumpkin guts are spider webs
Monkeys
Wolves
Dolls
Indoor fire truck
Doctor
Puppets
Water table
Using slide as castle
Bumble bee
Dinosaur
Using tunnels as fort/cave
Sand table
Never been to school
Playground ponies
Using tunnels as house
Dogs
Archeologist
Using slide as spaceship
Parent firefighter
Powerrangers
Space kitties
Plastic animals
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
35
Number of Occurrences
Girls
Boys

After tallying the themes of games and sorting them by gender I found that I had recorded roughly even numbers of boys and girls themes (174 boys, 169 girls – 343 total.) Boys games seemed to focus around 5 themes, with these five themes all having double digit numbers. Of these five groups three had fairly high numbers (33, 16, and 18) with less experimentation in other areas. Boys did have more total themes, but often only had a theme occurring once or being played by one child. The five most popular themes for boys were firefighter, building with Legos/blocks, driving a tractor, spaceships, and the garbage truck game. Boys did experiment with other themes, but not to the same extent as girls. Girls had 9 categories with numbers in the double digits, but those 9 categories still had generally lower numbers than the boys' categories. For girls the most popular theme occurred 15 times, while the boys' most popular theme occurred 33 times. Girls experimented less with other themes, but when they did experiment the game tended to reoccur or be played by more than one child.

Firefighter was the most popular imaginary theme overall during my time at the preschool. For boys playing firefighter was by far the most popular theme with 33 counts of firefighter games, but only 4 counts for girls. I think this may be due to boys telling girls that they are not allowed to play firefighter games, even though they knew that anyone can play any game at preschool. I frequently heard boys tell girls that firefighters is only for boys, even though we met a female firefighter. Boys would also frequently take girls' fire helmets, stripping them of their imaginary identity. Girls did create their own imaginary theme which I labeled princess firefighters, in which they would wear princess dresses but become crime/firefighting princesses. I counted girls playing this game 7 times, which makes a total of 11 firefighter themed games even if all the games

girls played were not strictly firefighting games. This tells me that girls did enjoy the firefighter theme, but might have been limited by boys who felt that they were entitled to the firefighter games while girls were not.

I do not believe that the difference in numbers was always due to exclusion. The second most popular theme was driving a tractor/truck, which occurred 18 times for boys and only once for girls. This game was mostly dominated by two boys, twins, who frequently fought amongst themselves to play on the riding tractor/truck toy. Although they argued between each other, I never recorded that they were aggressive towards other children. (I think that I did observe them being aggressive towards others, but I did not record this behavior.) All the adults in the classroom were very aware of the twins and the way they fought over the tractor, and used a technique of counting down from 10 to take turns. So while I did not record aggression towards other children to prevent them from playing with the tractor, I did observe aggression towards other children that might have prevented them from playing this game. In addition, children might just have been less interested in playing with the tractor because they were aware of how much the twins liked this toy, and did not want to subject themselves to any aggression.

The third most popular theme was building with Legos/blocks, with 16 counts for boys and 11 counts for girls. Although there is still a difference of 5 counts, this is much closer to equal than the two most popular themes. Legos, blocks, and pipes were popular among both genders but I did observe differences in the ways the children used these toys. For example, girls were more likely to build a house or a castle, while boys were frequently building towers or towns. Boys also liked to knock their creations over at the end, while girls would incorporate them into a larger imaginary game, like kitties. I see

the similarity in numbers as a positive thing, because Legos and blocks really should be a gender neutral toy, even though they are often not portrayed as such by the media.

The fourth most popular theme in imaginary play was princess dresses, with 15 counts by girls and 4 counts by boys. Girls tended to incorporate their princess dresses into larger games, not just playing princess. The four counts of princess dresses by boys were all by the same boy. This boy often wore the dress exclusively as a princess dress (not as a single part of a large game) or would wear the dress and then do other activities while wearing the dress. For example, he would wear the dress but then go play on the monkey bars. When girls wore princess dresses it was rarely just a game of princesses – princess dresses became part of crime/firefighting princesses or cat princesses. Girls wore princess dresses while they were being parents, or preparing food. I found it interesting that for girls being a princess was only a part of the imaginary theme, while for the boy it was the only part of the imaginary theme. I found it encouraging that this one boy was very comfortable wearing a princess dress, and that he was accepted by others when he wore the princess dress. Really, I believe that the princess dress should be available and acceptable for children of either gender, just as the fire helmet or doctor costume should be available for either gender. Otherwise it is not really free choice.

The fifth most popular theme at the preschool was a tie between spaceships and going somewhere on the circle bikes on the playground. Spaceships had 13 counts for boys and 0 for girls, and going somewhere on the circle bikes had 4 counts for boys and 13 counts for girls. I thought it was interesting that both of these themes incorporate adventure and exploration, but in very different ways. Boys were interested in a theme which realistically will not happen for most if any of the children at the preschool, while

girls were more interested in a kind of domestic, possible exploration. This supports research in my literary review that claims that boys are more likely to take on imaginary roles which are impossible (things they will never experience – like being a superhero) while girls are more likely to take on imaginary roles that could one day happen to them (things they could potentially experience one day – like being a parent.) Very few people become astronauts; it is possible but unlikely. Many more people go to Disney world, or school, or the zoo. Boys joined in on the trips on the circle bikes, but much less frequently than girls. Girls, on the other hand, never went to space.

Impact of Gendered Toys and Media on Imaginary Play

The purpose of a free choice, play-based school is to give children more freedom in how they express who they are through the choices they make in their games. In an ideal world children would learn that any form of self-expression is acceptable, and that they can play any game they want regardless of their gender or any other factors. Unfortunately, preschool only made up a small part of the children's week. The preschool I observed lasted from 9-12, and was either two or three days per week depending on the age of the children. This means that at best the children were spending 6 to 9 hours a week at preschool, and much more time around other external factors. So while we can hope that the preschool culture had an impact on their behavior, clearly there are other factors at play.

Although I was observing mainly children at play, I did spent quite a bit of time around the parents of the preschoolers, so I was able to observe how they supported or did not support the children's play choices and free choice. The majority of parents were very supportive and allowed children to play whatever they wanted, and encouraged their

choices. This makes sense because parents would theoretically want to choose a preschool that supported their own views. By extension, parents who agreed with the mission of the preschool would be more likely to continue to enforce those same ideals at home through positive reinforcement and constructive discipline. I do remember observing at least one instance of a parent at the preschool trying to redirect a child from an activity she chose, so clearly not every parent of a child at the preschool does support the mission of the preschool. Most other parents either encouraged game choices or at least tolerated them, as long as there were no issues of bullying or dangerous activities. Ideally, if a parent wanted their child to appreciate their right to play whatever they choose they would reinforce the same messages that the children are receiving at school.

Still, children receive messages from advertisements, movies, and television shows that even their parents cannot control. Parents might choose movies or television shows for their children that they consider "safe," but even relatively safe media geared towards children can have hidden messages about appropriate behavior for children of each gender. Movies about princesses emphasize femininity and beauty, but rarely power and leadership. Movies geared more towards boys might include more male characters with strong, brave, or powerful personalities. Even if the plot is innocent enough and simple enough for a young child to understand, they cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality, or understand that even though the characters on the screen behave one way, real people can behave any way they want. The messages build up and become engrained in the children's beliefs.

TV shows are not safe either. Again, even if the plot of the show is innocent and appropriate for young children, children still pick up on subtle information about the

gender of the characters and the behaviors those characters are expressing. And worse, even if the show itself is sending appropriate messages, commercials and advertisements during the show probably are not. Parents can decide which shows and what content is appropriate for their child, but they have no control over the commercials, and no way to predict which ones will be shown. The purpose of commercials and advertisements is to get people to buy a product, or to get children interested in their product and ask their parents to buy it. However, many commercials and advertisements for toys are clearly marketed towards one gender or the other, with the toys themselves also being marketed towards one gender. This is problematic because it teaches children at a very young age that only certain toys are "for them" when in reality, any child should be able to play any game because there are no games that are really only for one gender, only games that are perceived to be for one gender.

A current example of gendered toys and gendered advertising is Legos. Legos are a fairly gender neutral toy, or, they should be. Legos are a simple toy that could appeal to any child. They encourage creativity by allowing children to imagine and build anything they choose, regardless of their gender. Although Lego sets can come with instructions to build models they are essentially simple blocks that can lock together in many different ways, meaning that they are perfect for children to experiment. Legos allow children to imagine and create dramatic plots, they encourage fine motor skills, and could even spark an interest in building and designing early in life – which could translate into an interest in math and science later in life. Younger children can enjoy playing with the blocks and practicing building simple shapes, but as they grow older they can build more realistic

objects. There is nothing about interlocking blocks that should suggest that they are for one gender or another, they should appeal equally to both genders.

However, despite being perfect for children of either gender and a children of a variety of ages, in recent years Lego has created gendered sets of blocks, and their advertising sends a clear message about which Lego sets are "for girls" and "for boys." To see the change in the toy itself and the advertising I went back to images from the 1980's, and compared the advertisements to current ads in magazines and commercials. I compared both the advertisement (who was featured) and the toy. I believe my findings represent a troubling trend in advertisements geared towards children, as well as the gendered toys themselves.

Lego Advertisement from the 1980's (Speed)

In the 1980's Lego advertisements emphasized creativity and imagination. The several advertisements I analyzed were very similar, with a brown backdrop and a young child displaying something they had made. The advertisements featured both boys and girls, who were dressed in similar clothing such as denim overalls or jeans and t-shirts, but nothing gendered that would emphasize a child's femininity or masculinity. Girls and boys advertised the same product, and were both seen holding creations such as planes, cars, or simply a hodgepodge of colored blocks. The advertisements I found were mostly for a Universal Building Set, or for a Lego Preschool Set which seemed to be similar to the Universal set but with larger blocks that were easier for younger children to manipulate. The advertisements had simple, gender neutral captions such as: "What it is is beautiful," "Oh the fun of creating something you're this proud of," and "Lego toys build anything, especially pride." Judging from the advertisements of the 1980's Legos really did encourage creativity and imagination. The toy was gender neutral and simple, with multi-colored blocks in bright primary colors that could appeal to anyone. These were the types of Legos that I saw in the preschool classroom – primary colors, simple blocks of varying shapes and sizes that could appeal to either gender.

Lego Advertisement from 2013 ("You've gone downhill," 2013)

The Lego sets and advertising I found in 2013 could not be more different from their gender neutral counterparts from the 1980's. The Lego website has a page of products which lists all the current Lego sets. I was surprised to find that on the main Lego website, there were no plain Lego sets, like the Universal sets in the 1980's advertisements. To find the standard colored blocks I had to navigate to the educational Lego page through a very small link at the bottom of the page. The Lego sets on the main Lego website mostly characters from television shows or movies. The new characters have identities, which I believe leaves less room for imagination and creativity. For example, consumers can buy packs of Legos from the *Lego Movie* which include everything necessary to build different scenes from the movie, such as a ship or Cloud Cuckoo Land, by following instructions. Rather than allowing children to imagine and create anything they want, the standard kits come with instructions to build a scene out of a movie which children are, presumably, familiar with. I worry that children who recreate the scene would reenact the stories they know from the movie, rather than creating their own fantasy plot. Rather than encouraging imagination and creativity I wonder if Lego is actually limiting imagination and creativity by offering a broader and more specific line of toys.

In addition to a change in the types of sets, the toy itself has changed over the years. In the past Legos had lots of small parts that could be assembled to make anything. Lego sets would come with instructions to make a specific object, but would include all the components – not a completed object. The components included wheels, blocks of varying sizes, shapes, and colors, in addition to others. An adult I interviewed said he remembered creating all kinds of things with these components, but that Legos

have changed. In many of the current sets large objects come as a part of the set. For example, instead of building a motorcycle the motorcycle comes in one piece – a toy which cannot be dissembled. There are still some sets that require assembly and come with parts and pieces for you to put together, but it seems that Lego is moving away from small components and towards larger more realistic toys. My worry is that more realistic may actually lead children to be less creative, and use their imagination less.

I also found the Lego sets to be fairly gendered, with some sets clearly geared towards girls, while the majority seemed geared towards boys or, debatably, gender neutral (although I would argue that they are not truly gender neutral.) The Friends set, and the Disney Princesses set were obviously gendered, with pink and purple backgrounds and only female characters. Many of the other sets focused on topics that could appeal to either gender, but were generally made of more "boyish" colors. In addition, most of the other sets had very few if any female characters, which likely deters girls from playing with those sets. When I studied the City sets I saw categories such as police, fire, and coastguard among many others but did not see a single female character, despite the fact that these are all jobs that either a man or woman could perform. During my time at the preschool I observed that children often tried to choose dolls or toys that they perceived to be like themselves, so a lack of female characters could lead girls to feel that those Lego sets were not for them. The few female mini-figures available with the other Lego sets were all sexualized, with curvy bodies painted onto the boxy Lego body, while male Lego characters were left boxy and plain.

Ariel's Magical Kiss Lego Set (Disney)

The girly sets were even worse. The website for the Disney Princesses set included instructions on how to create a fairytale, as if girls could not imagine a fairytale, while the boys' sets did not require any instructions on how to imagine a creative plot. The Princesses included Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Cinderella, Merida from *Brave*, and Rapunzel. The descriptions for the girls' sets are very passive compared to the boys' sets. For example, the description on the firefighting portion of the City set says "Help the firefighter get to the scene fast on his speedy Fire Motorcycle. Then use his fire extinguisher to stop the blaze from getting out of control!" This description encourages action, and reminds children that they can be heroes or save the day. In comparison, the descriptions for the girls' sets include a lot of sitting and enjoying the surrounding environment, or domestic activities like baking and painting. Even the names of the girls' sets are different than the boys' sets. A few examples are "Ariel's Magic Kiss", "Cinderella's Romantic Castle", or "Rapunzel's Creativity Tower" (just a hint, the activities they suggest are not very creative!) The advertisements emphasize romance, and spending time with or "catching" the prince. Remember, these are toys for small

children. Rapunzel's Creativity Tower is a bit of a misnomer, as the recommended activities include, "Painting murals in the attic, looking after Pascale, or baking cookies with Flynn!"

Stephanie's Cool Convertible Lego Set ("Instructions for Lego," 2012)

At least the Disney Princess sets encourage girls to play with imaginary scenes (even though they cannot imagine their own plots or items to build.) The Friends sets reinforce stereotypes about girls and restrict their imagination through sets that would promote action – like firefighters or police. Although the Friends sets include a few sets that could maybe be seen as realistic jobs for girls to aspire to (lifeguard or vet) they emphasize stereotypically girly areas such as juice bar, pet salon, café, or bedroom. These sets further emphasize domestic activities for girls, while the boys sets emphasize adventure and creativity. Not only is Lego failing to include girls in Lego sets that should be gender neutral, the sets that *do* include girls portray stereotypes that are not conducive to creativity and experimentation.

Legos are a perfect example of a toy that should be available and appropriate for either gender, but for some reason is gendered. This led me to wonder if there were any toys that *should* be gendered. I decided no. Toys are meant to be a way for children to learn about their surroundings, to experiment and create things in a safe way. There are not any situations that a preschool aged boy would need to navigate that at preschool girl would not need to navigate. Gendered toys are pointless and harmful because they discourage girls from taking part in those learning experiences, while teaching boys that they are entitled to experiences that girls are not entitled to. And so even if the children do not own these gendered toys, they may see them in a commercial on TV, or play with them at a friend's house and still be exposed to these messages. The point is that no matter how careful parents are children are still being exposed to this information, and I believe we should be worried about the messages children are getting and how early these messages start to make an impact on children.

Imaginary Play with Realistic Toys and Found Materials

When I started observing at the preschool I assumed that most of the imaginary play that took place would happen in the imaginary play corner, where there was a play kitchen and pantry, dolls and puppets, and dress-up clothes. It really surprised me to find this assumption was wrong. There were a significant number of imaginary games that took place in the imaginary play corner, but they all focused on essentially the same themes: cooking or preparing for a party, or being a mommy or daddy. Instead of coming up with original plots the children would play the same game every day with some subtle variations. One day they were baking a cake, another day they were setting the table for a party. And I was surprised how underdeveloped the games were. At the end of a

logical series of events the game dissipated, the children did not work to develop the plot further. For example, if they were having a tea party they set the table and sat down together, but when they were done eating they got up and walked away to find a new game when they could help the hostess clean up or take their baby dolls on a walk. Some of this was probably due to the age of the children, but I think there were other factors including the abundance of realistic toys.

The imaginary play area was the area of the preschool that had the highest concentration of realistic toys. Realistic toys are toys that closely resemble the objects they are supposed to be, such as plastic fruits and vegetables. I was surprised to find that when children were playing with realistic toys they were less creative and developed fewer imaginary games than if they played with basic toys. I remember playing on the playground when I was in kindergarten, picking up food (pebbles) and putting them on a plate (a large leaf) and setting the table (the stump of an old tree) so my friends and I could eat lunch. Our games were not very different from the games the children at the preschool were playing – but we used found materials and imagined that they were something different. I rarely saw children at the preschool doing this same thing. When children played with realistic toys they played imaginary games that closely mimicked what those objects would be used for in real life, and even if I suggested an alternate use for an object they usually went back to the original use after they thought I was not paying attention anymore. I think that realistic toys fill a certain need and can certainly help children learn about their environment, but I suspect that they may stifle children's creativity.

I think that simple toys, like plain Legos (not the new, realistic and specific sets), blocks and play dough may aid children's imagination more than realistic toys. With these simple toys children have to be creative, and the way they use the toy changes as they develop and grow. For example, the youngest child in the preschool used the play dough differently than the children in the older class. The youngest boy rolled the play dough into a ball, or experimented with flattening it into different shapes by using a rolling pin or his hands while the older children would use cookie cutters to make "cookies" or cakes. I once saw a girl create a family of snakes, which she named after her own family, then she used them to play out an imaginary scene. The use of other simple toys, like Legos, also changes with age. Younger children might use Legos to make something simple like a wall or a house, but older children can use the blocks to create more elaborate creations. For example, I observed children using Legos to build a castle, a neighborhood, and the downtown of an imaginary city. In these cases children could play with the toys for what they were – simple blocks or play dough – or they could use their imaginations to create a more elaborate game.

Despite not observing children playing what I would consider true imaginary games very frequently (picking up objects and declaring that they were something different) I suspect that the children at this preschool participated in more imaginary games than I might have observed at another preschool. The range of dress-up clothes was fairly broad, with princess dresses, doctor and vet costumes, various funny costumes like a bee or a clown, and several firefighter costumes. The children frequently played a huge variety of imaginary games that involved dressing up, like princess firefighters or being a doctor. I was surprised that most of the imaginary play took place in areas of the

classroom that did not have the realistic toys. For example, the trashcan game took place on the indoor monkey bars and a small plastic tunnel. The indoor slide was frequently used as a fort or a castle. I even observed the library corner be turned into a place where princess kitties could rest. These are all times that the children at the preschool used an area or a toy in a way that was different from how it was intended to be used. So while I did not observe children picking up objects and declaring that they were something else very often, I do think that the children played a lot of imaginary games – they were just different than I was expecting to see.

Again, I wonder how media and television have affected children's imaginary play. It is possible that as children have had increased exposure to television and movies, their creativity and imaginary play have actually decreased. If children are learning about the world through television instead of through experiences it could change the way they are understanding the world. Watching movies and television shows could limit the types of plots children are exposed to, as opposed to plots they might learn through books, or through observing their parents, siblings, and other children. Children usually observe interactions from others around them and then reenact them in a simplified version during imaginary play. I wondered if, for example, the children in the preschool were so taken with the theme of firefighters because they had seen a movie or read a book that featured firefighters. Firefighters are probably a common theme among preschoolers, but the same could be said for setting the table for a party. There were fewer imaginary plots like space kitties, or firefighter princesses which might have required the children to come up with imaginary plots on their own. I do not know what the children at this

preschool watched at home or read at home, but I would be interested to see how their imaginary play compared to imaginary play in past generations.

Halloween

My last two days at the preschool were the Halloween parties for the two day and three day classes. I imagined that Halloween would be a great time to observe the relationship between children's creativity, and an outside influence – in this case their parents. I believed that Halloween is a time during the year that children get to pretend that they are something different – they dress in costume and they get to choose what they are for the day. However, their parents also influence their costume choices, because two and three year olds cannot buy or make their costumes alone. Children have a choice to be who they want to be within limits, and their costume choices are probably censored and somewhat controlled by the adults around them. I thought that Halloween would be a great time to hear from the children about what they dressed up as, and see how their parents impacted those choices.

The day before each class' Halloween party (two days before the actual party, because class met every other day for each age group) Mrs. Jones gave the children an opportunity to share what they wanted to be for Halloween, if they chose to do so. I recorded what each child said they wanted to be when asked the day before the party, and what they actually dressed up as on the day of their class' Halloween party. I realized that while children had some say in their costume, the decision was also largely up to the parents. The parents might have subtly suggested a costume, leading their children to believe that the choice was all theirs – or they might have just picked a costume for their child without giving them a choice. I do not know how much parents influenced

children's choices, but I thought it was interesting to see what each child dressed up as for Halloween.

In the three day class, the girls said their costumes would be: Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Sleeping Beauty, Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan*, a bee, a mummy, a cupcake girl, "My hero" (a surprise), and three girls said their costume would be a surprise. The boys in the 3 day class said their costumes would be: a minion from *Despicable Me*, a robot, Spiderman, a Ninja Turtle, "a cape and a mask with a book on my shirt" (a superhero), Buzz Lightyear from *Toy Story*, a Power Ranger, and one boy said his costume would be a surprise. I thought it was interesting that more boys reported that they would be dressing up as a specific character than girls. For example, only three girls listed recognizable characters (Ariel, Sleeping Beauty, and Tinkerbell) while five boys listed specific recognizable characters (a minion, Spiderman, a Ninja Turtle, Buzz Lightyear, and a Power Ranger.) I wondered if this could have something to do with a lack of strong female characters in the media the girls were exposed to. Perhaps the girls in this class, who presumably have more chances to choose their interests freely, were not as interested in the princess stereotype as other children. The boys, however, generally chose strong/powerful male characters like Superman and Buzz Lightyear. More girls chose to keep their costume a surprise than boys, so it is possible that the numbers would have been closer to even if the children were all required to respond. I felt that the costumes this group chose were fairly gendered, with a separation between girls who chose mostly princesses (plus the cupcake girl) and boys who mostly chose superheroes. I did not have any indication whether the children chose these costumes on their own or whether their parents influenced their decision. Regardless of whether or not they

influenced the decision they at least approved of their children's decision or the child would have come dressed as something else.

In the two day class the girls said their costumes would be: a fairy, a ladybug, a giraffe, a zebra, Spiderman, "yes", and two girls wanted to be bats. The boys in the two day class said their costumes would be: a police officer, Batman, Ironman, a tiger, a snake, and a cat. I felt that the costumes this group chose were definitely less gendered. The only recognizable characters were male superheroes, but they were not all boys. One girl decided to dress up as Superman! The animals that the boys dressed up as did seem a little more masculine than the girls – a tiger and snake as opposed to a ladybug, giraffe, and zebra. This group also seemed less influenced by television and movies, while the other group seemed to have drawn a lot of their costumes from the media. Unless there are children's shows I have missed in recent years, I think the costumes this class chose were fairly original and drew on the children's personal interests as opposed to something they saw in a movie or on television and understood that they were "supposed" to like it. This could have been due to the age of the children, or could have been an indicator that the parents were more involved in the decision for this group of children. Regardless, I was interested to hear that there would be fewer gendered costumes and this group, including one girl dressing up as a male superhero.

The 3-day Halloween party took place on October 30th, the day before Halloween. I arrived early to help set up, mingle, and take notes. On the day of the Halloween party parents were allowed to stay for half an hour to hear the children talk about their costumes and watch them walk in a parade around the building, so I was able to interact with the parents as well. I was interested to see how the classroom dynamic changed, as

the children wanted to play with their parents or show them things they did not normally get to see. The dynamic was very different, with lots of younger siblings and families, and stations set up like a bean bag toss game. I was also interested to notice that several children played with other students that they did not normally play with because of their costumes. For example, one boy insisted on sitting next to a boy because they were both superheroes, even though I had never once seen them sit together or play together.

For the three day class the girls' costumes were Ariel, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, an angel, Tinkerbell, a bee, a cupcake girl, a witch, a cat, and a mermaid. The boys' costumes were a superhero, Superman, Spiderman, a Power Ranger, Buzz Lightyear, a minion, a Dalmatian, and a robot. The costumes were a mix of homemade costumes, and store bought costumes. The majority of the girls' costumes were very feminine, while the majority of the boys' costumes were very masculine, although there were around the same number of recognizable characters in each gender group. I also noticed that for the most part the colors of the costumes were similar to the colors usually associated with that gender. For example, the girls' costumes featured a lot of light pink and purple while the boy's costumes had a lot of bold red and blue. I was surprised to see so many gendered costumes in this group, and wondered whether the costumes had been the children's choices or something their parents suggested to them. Unfortunately, because the parents were there and the teacher had lots of party activities planned I did not have time to ask any of the children about their costumes outside of the show and tell time. Because the children are so young I have to assume that the parents had some say in their costumes, if only because they made or purchased them. However, it would have been interesting to ask some of the students and parents who made the decisions about

their costumes, especially in terms of the particularly gendered costumes like the princesses and superheroes.

The younger, two day class had their Halloween party on October 31, Halloween. I noted that this class mostly played as usual, while the other class had differed from their usual play to highlight their costumes. The children in this class mostly played on the slide and monkey bars as usual, while only a few children took time to comment on each other's costumes. The morning went the same way, with parents staying to see the children speak about their costumes and then participate in a parade and sing some songs. When everyone had arrived the children sat on the carpet and the teacher called them up to talk about their costumes. The girls' costumes included Spider Man, the Mad Hatter, a Zebra, a Giraffe, a bat, a ladybug, a fairy, and a bee. The boys' costumes included Ironman, Captain America, a firefighter, Mickey Mouse, and two cats.

I noticed immediately that this group of children seemed less interested in Halloween than the children in the older class. The younger children were eager to take their costumes off even before they shared about who they were, and they had less to say about their costumes. I also got a clear impression that some of the children not picked out their own costumes. For example, the one little girl was dressed as the Mad Hatter from *Alice in Wonderland*, and her mom told me that her sibling was dressed as another character from *Alice in Wonderland.* This little girl was particularly grumpy and would not share her costume with the class. However, I also got the impression that some of the children had picked out their costumes on their own, for example, the little girl who dressed up as Spider Man and wore the same muscled costume style that her two brothers were wearing.

As with the first Halloween party, I did not have a chance to ask the parents and children about their costume choices in more depth, although I would have liked to if I had continued to observe in the preschool. I did notice a sharp contrast between the costumes the children wore in the two day versus three day classes. The costumes in the two day class seemed much more innocent, and in some ways more childish than the costumes that the children in the three day class wore. None of the girls wore princess costumes, and in fact most of the girls dressed up as animals, while the two girls that wore recognizable characters chose more masculine characters. More of the boys dressed up as recognizable characters that I would categorize as masculine, but two of the boys still dressed up as cats – a non-gendered animal.

I wonder whether the children wore these costumes because they were less familiar with characters like Disney princesses, or if they did not identify as strongly with their gender yet and felt comfortable still picking costumes that did not strongly correlate with their gender. It could just be that those were the costumes their parents suggested, or that the two day class is not old enough to be watching princess movies yet. I do not know why the costumes for these two groups were so different, but I definitely think it reflects the differences that can occur in one year. I think the costume choices reflect the children's gender expression overall. While neither group of children abided closely to their gender expectations, the younger class seemed to feel more comfortable playing in gender nonconforming ways and were more accepting of gender nonconforming behavior. The older class seemed a little bit less comfortable, and the children seemed to identify a little bit more with their gender. The children in the older class seemed to understand what kinds of games they were expected to play and what kind of gender they

were supposed to perform to conform with others assumptions. The children in the older class wore costumes that asserted their gender identity (frilly princess costumes and muscled superhero costumes) while the children in the younger class were a little more relaxed with the costumes and gravitated more towards animals. However, it does not surprise me that of the two genders in the younger class the boys conformed more to gender expectations and stereotypes than the girls by wearing superhero costumes, firefighter costumes, etc. The literature I examined for my literary review tended to suggest that boys felt more pressure to be gender conforming than girls, even from a young age, and that boys had less leeway than girls when it came to gender nonconforming behavior (for example, girls can get away with being a tomboy but boys have a hard time getting away with acting effeminate.) Given this research it would make sense that boys would choose more masculine costumes while girls were not concerned about the gender stereotypes and their costume choices.

Conclusion

While participating in the day-to-day activities at this small preschool I observed enough play based interactions to fill two notebooks with quotations and descriptions of games. I saw fights and tears and acts of friendship. I heard bullying, but I also saw children standing up for themselves and their classmates, and I saw adults teaching acceptance and responsibility.

I believe that the Schenectady Play Based Preschool has a wonderful and well-intentioned mission. The parents and teachers believe that through free choice and self-directed play children could learn independence and self-motivation. They believed that children could best learn to express themselves through free choice. Children were accepted for simply being themselves and never pushed to do or be something that they did not want to be or do. I feel that this is a wonderful model, and if it worked exactly as it was meant to the world would be full of many open minded, very accepting young children.

Unfortunately despite everyone's best intentions I do not believe that every aspect of the school's mission worked in practice. While at preschool children were told that they could do or be anything and protected from media or other messages that told them otherwise, but when they left the school there was no guarantee that they would continue to receive and absorb this message. It was clear to me that some of the students, especially students in the older class, had started to absorb other messages. I observed children excluding others based on gender and telling them that they could not play games because they were "just for boys." I also saw that boys often felt entitled to their favorite game simply because it was their favorite, while girls rarely felt entitled to

anything. These examples show that even with the best intentions children will still learn harmful messages from outside sources, and will not be truly free to be who they want to be until our American culture accepts all people as they are. It worries me to see children as young as three years old feel that they did not have an equal right to play with their favorite toy or game, but I think that the Schenectady Play Based Preschool has the right idea and is working hard to ensure that all the children who attend have an equal opportunity to develop their own interests and identity regardless of their gender.

I went into the observations at the preschool with an understanding that toys do not have a gender, children do, and there are no games or toys that are "for girls" or "for boys." But while I understand this, I expected that young children would not. I feel that my observations show that even in what I would consider a more liberal and accepting preschool some toys and games are considered "for girls" or "for boys." While parents and teachers tried their best to let the children make their own decisions children still told me that some of their favorite things were only for one gender to play with.

Every child deserves to grow up free to experiment with their interests and develop their own likes and dislikes from an early age. I fear that if children receive messages early on that boys cannot be nurturing or girls cannot be scientists we will continue to live in a world where the genders are unequal. It might seem silly to think that a three year old would already absorb those messages, but I had children telling me that they felt that some games and activities were just for their gender or just for the other gender, and that is a dangerous thing for a three year old to believe because when you limit the things a child can enjoy, you limit what they believe they can be. I think that a real change will occur with help of preschools like the Schenectady Play Based

Preschool, but not until we as a country accept that toys do not have a gender. Until then be wary of the pink and blue aisles at the toy store, and of any toy that is marketed for boys or for girls. Because children should not have to worry about what toys are "for them", they just want to play.

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