"Don’t Ruin My Pretend": Kids Sustaining Play Interactions in Out-of-School Settings

Suzanne Eyerman

University of Colorado at Boulder, suzanne.eyerman@gmail.com

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“DON’T RUIN MY PRETEND”: KIDS SUSTAINING
PLAY INTERACTIONS IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SETTINGS
by
SUZANNE EYERMAN
B.A., Monmouth University, 2001

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This thesis entitled:
“Don’t Ruin My Pretend”: Kids Sustaining Play Interactions in Out-of-School Settings
written by Suzanne Eyerman
has been approved for the School of Education

____________________________________________
Susan Jurow, Ph.D. (Committee Chair)

____________________________________________
Ben Kirshner, Ph.D.

____________________________________________
Margaret Eisenhart, Ph.D.

____________________________________________
Elizabeth Dutro, Ph.D.

____________________________________________
Cindy White, Ph.D.

Date: ______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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ABSTRACT

As much as play is researched and discussed by people interested in children and childhood, studies often fail to examine closely the ways that kids accomplish their play. This study sought to answer the question of how children sustain their play interactions. By making use of qualitative methods to collect and analyze data, the play of elementary-age children was studied in the summer camp and school recess settings. In these settings, children were less closely supervised by adults and were freer to make their own decisions about their interactions, in comparison to more structured settings such as school classrooms or organized sports.

Findings from this study revealed that kids worked to sustain their play interactions by creating a participation framework that included one participant being in charge within each interaction. The kid in charge played the role of the boss and managed the play activity. The other kids followed and took on support roles. In addition, findings revealed that unwritten rules around social interactions were important to the ways kids interacted with each other. Play activities were found to be made up of nuanced communication that was evidence of the work kids did to sustain their interactions. By managing their own play activity, kids worked to sustain interactions without the guidance of adults in the moment.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Research Problem

In my observations of elementary-age children’s play during lunch recess, I noticed a recurring sequence of activity within the pretend play of four third-grade boys. One boy, Peter, attempted repeatedly to contribute to the activity by providing direction about what to do next within the pretend play, but another boy, Andy, was able to take on and maintain the role of kid in charge by refusing to follow the direction of Peter. When his contribution was not taken up by the group, Peter chose not to leave the activity and instead remained in the role of supporting character thus sustaining the boys’ pretend play activity.

On that day, the boys spent their entire 20-minute recess period engaged in a sequence of imaginative play. The boys walked, hopped, ran, and fell while they played on the snow-covered soccer field. One of the primary things they pretended during this recess period was that they were cats and dogs walking on “radical soda,” which was a mixture of toxic waste and poison. Andy pointed to the ground and said, “Toxic waste. This can help us mutate,” as he pretended to drink something. “Then I turn into an evil kitten,” narrated Andy, as he crouched low. Andy stood up and held his hands together with his elbows jutting out to the side and acted like he was stalking something. In an attempt to contribute to the pretend play activity, Peter yelled, “Run!” to encourage the other two boys to run away from Andy, the evil kitten. Peter ran away from Andy, looking over his shoulder, and one of the other boys followed him. Andy, however, did not chase Peter, and the fourth boy also did not take up Andy’s contribution. Peter ran away for a few seconds, and then he turned around and ran back to Andy. The other boy who had been running also returned to Andy. Walking four abreast, the boys then crossed the field.
In this case of a child following the lead of another, Peter repeatedly demonstrated that he was willing to give directive power to Andy by continually returning to Andy and following his lead. This is an example of the complex ways children use talk and action to sustain their play and work through breakdowns, or hitches, in their interactions. Unwritten social rules, including rules around deciding who is in charge and how games are selected, guided this interaction and determined various aspects of their play. By working through this small breakdown in their interaction (i.e., a negotiation of who is in charge of the pretend play), the boys were able to sustain their play together.

My study focuses on kids¹ interactions with their peers during play at summer camp and at recess. When kids play with their peers, they are engaged in interactions that are different from the interactions they engage in at other times of the day. For example, most of the school day is focused on activity around adult-created goals (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Paley, 1992; Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). Outside of school, middle-class kids are often engaged in activities designed and organized to cultivate their development in activities valued by their parents (Lareau, 2003). According to Lareau, activities like music lessons, sports teams, and math leagues are intended to prepare children to be middle-class or upper-middle-class individuals who have had a variety of childhood experiences that helped them choose their professions and hone their interests. Play can be a time, on the other hand, when kids are not under direct adult supervision and are free to choose their activities. Play and free-time contexts, such as the ones I documented at summer camp and during school lunch recess, provide a space in which kids interact with each other outside the immediate control of adults. Their interactions during free-time contexts mostly take place within “peer spheres” (Dyson, 1993, p. 3), or spaces

¹ I follow Thorne (1993) and refer to the children playing foursquare as “kids.” As Thorne (1993) writes, children often view the term “child” as an insult, at least in part because it is a word that points out they are young (pp. 8-9). Instead, “kid” is the word they use to refer to themselves and to their peers.
of interaction among kids without the direct involvement of adults. When kids engage in interactions within peer spheres, they are able to practice sustaining their play without the support of adults, and sustaining interactions is important to building and maintaining relationships (Jackson et al., 2003).

Play has been studied extensively as an important context for kids’ learning and development. If play is useful for development, then we want kids to be able to continue playing: sustaining play is important because play is important (Vygotsky, 1978; Pellegrini, 2009). Within play, kids negotiate the written rules of games and the unwritten rules of social behavior (Goodwin, 2006). In the introductory example, three boys complied with the directions of another boy who acted as the boss of the play interaction. The kids seemed to have been playing by an unwritten rule that calls for one child to be in charge of making decisions within the pretend play interaction. Their interaction was uninterrupted by adults, so the kids had the opportunity to negotiate unwritten social rules outside the direct control of adults. In this study, I examined talk and action within kids’ peer sphere interactions to study kids sustaining their play within the out-of-school environments of camp and recess.

Although kids engage in negotiations of unwritten social rules outside of play, such as within classroom activities, play provides a context in which kids interact for extended time periods within their own “peer spheres” (Dyson, 1993, p. 3) that are somewhat outside the immediate influence of adults. As priorities of American families shift and space for kids’ peer spheres diminishes, kids have fewer occasions to work on what I argue is an important developmental task: learning to sustain interactions by negotiating breakdowns and unwritten rules.
Psychologist Erik Erikson (1959) explained that people work on developmental tasks as they age and develop. Developmental tasks identified by Erikson include infants learning to trust their caregivers, children learning to take initiative, and adolescents gaining autonomy from parents. The idea of developmental tasks has expanded far beyond those Erikson identified to include tasks such as the process of coming-out (Coleman, 1982), supporting the bonds of siblingship (Goetting, 1986), and fostering self-determination by special education students (Sands & Doll, 1996). I propose that learning to sustain interactions is a developmental task that kids work on with each other and are especially free to work on in their peer spheres within the context of play. This developmental task takes place in a hybrid space in which written and unwritten rules interact, and hybrid spaces facilitate changes in understanding that may lead to further learning (Moje, Collazo, Carrillo, & Marx, 2001). Additionally, the task of learning about negotiating unwritten rules may lead to expansive learning because it encourages kids to explore and be creative (Engestrom, 1999).

A sociocultural perspective can provide insight into how kids negotiate – through means including the use and coordination of language and interaction with other people and material objects – breakdowns and unwritten social rules. According to this perspective, learning occurs within kids’ interactions as they construct new understandings. I have chosen to use this perspective because it emphasizes how learning occurs through participation in socially and culturally organized activities. When kids are interacting, they are working on and learning about the developmental task of sustaining play interactions.

The question that guided this study was: How do kids sustain interactions with each other during play? I collected video recorded data of kids playing at YMCA summer day camp and at a charter school’s lunch recess to analyze for this project. I worked to identify breakdowns
within interactions during play by studying kids’ play in detail, making use of a microanalytic approach that closely examines the use of words, gestures, and facial expressions to interpret and understand the goals, ideas, and actions of people within interactions (Goffman, 1981; Erickson, 1992). I used these sub-questions to further guide my data collection and analysis:

° What do kids do when there are breakdowns in their interactions?
° How is intersubjectivity (i.e., coordination of communication) evident in kids’ interactions?
° What are the unwritten rules that shape kids’ negotiations following breakdowns?

I contribute to the current literature by exploring kids’ interactions and adding to current understandings of the social organization of kids’ worlds, or peer spheres. Goodwin (2006) has noted that the “procedures by which children organize and make sense of their activities in a given social context are not themselves analyzed” (p. 23). My study of kids’ interactions during recess offers insight into the ways kids sustain interactions within their play. That is, my study focuses on communication and its effect on how kids organize their play. I propose ways we can conceptualize how kids interact during play that enables better understanding of the work kids do to sustain their interactions.

**Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I drew on a sociocultural theory of learning to examine children’s interactions and learning in an out-of-school setting. Sociocultural theory assumes that learning occurs within interactions with people, objects, and ideas. Communication is an essential part of interactions, and I chose intersubjectivity as a concept that helped me to explain the communication within kids’ interactions. Breakdowns, trouble spots of interactions, are a tool that I used to identify instances when kids worked especially hard to sustain their play. I discuss
these concepts and how they have been articulated within the framework of sociocultural theory in the following section.

**Sociocultural theory.** A sociocultural approach to learning posits that “children’s cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships and sociocultural tools and practices” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 8). I chose to use a sociocultural perspective in this study because of its emphasis on how learning occurs through participation in socially and culturally organized activities. From this view, individual and social influences co-occur and cannot be separated. Within the context of this study, the primary sociocultural tool on which I focus is communication, especially spoken language. Kids use spoken language, and also physical movements such as gestures, to communicate unwritten rules to each other during play. Attention to social and cultural contexts, as facilitated by taking a sociocultural perspective, allowed me to understand unwritten rules and how they affect learning.

To explain the importance of social interaction for learning and development, Vygotsky (1978) put forth his genetic law of cultural development: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on a social level, and later, on the individual level: first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals” (p. 57). According to this law, skills and understandings are achieved first within interaction with others and then by the individual alone; intramental processes are created from children’s social interactions.

The sociocultural approach views children as constructers of knowledge, not as passive recipients (Vygotsky, 1978). Children do not merely take in information from the environment, but rather they actively construct their understanding from their views on the tasks that they need
to accomplish, and the negotiation of unwritten social rules within peer spheres is a situation in which kids actively construct understandings beyond the immediate control of adults. Their understandings are mediated by past experiences and the physical and cultural resources available to them. *Mediation* describes the how people come to understandings by their indirect interaction with objects and ideas (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, we do not have direct contact with objects and ideas because our perceptions are affected by cultural, historical, and institutional influences (Wertsch, 2007). Our perceptions can be explicitly mediated by memory aids such as notes or pictures or implicitly mediated by ways of thinking such as processes we use for organizing information. Thus our individual psychological orientation to objects and ideas is always mediated by those social influences. For this study, it was important to acknowledge that children’s understandings of unwritten rules are mediated by a variety of social influences based on past experiences and their current resources: outcomes of previous interactions, views of their own abilities, expectations of others, and ideas about what is expected of them. Written or explicit rules, such as the rules of games kids play, also mediate interactions. Rules are a mediational artifact in that they shape what kids do and influence the game by defining which moves are valued, how to reach the end, and which possible outcomes exist.

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that language is the most important mediator and a way for processes that first occur between people in social interactions to later be used by the individual. Language is used to communicate with others, and the speech that occurs within an interaction affects the understandings of those who are interacting (Cazden, 2001; Wertsch & Toma, 1995). For Vygotsky, language was not just a product of development, but it was also a force that aids in learning and development. Language gives the individual the ability to create and organize ideas and to plan future actions. Rogoff (1990) usefully extended Vygotsky’s idea of language to
include nonverbal communication such as gaze, facial expressions, and gestures. I used this expansive notion of communication in this study as many of the activities in which participants were observed for this study (e.g., crafts, cooking, games) incorporated nonverbal actions that communicated meaning in addition to verbal communication. For instance, within the context of a card game, a peer could indicate that a child made an error by pointing to the rules on the game box or physically blocking a move. The child may then read the rules, notice the error, select a different card, and then ask for help from another child. The available resources that might have affected the outcome of this interaction include: the watchful peer, the nearby game rules, the variety of available cards, and the opportunity to ask for help. In this example, the child has practiced and learned about that particular card game, referencing explicit game rules, and working in collaboration with others. Additionally, the card players sustained their interaction by working through a breakdown, or a difference in understandings about how to play the game.

The sociocultural approach also calls for a methodology in which the analysis emphasizes learning as a process and not learning as an outcome (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, it was the process of children’s learning that was of interest. In particular, I studied how the unwritten rules of negotiating breakdowns shaped how children were learning to sustain their play. Studying learning within interaction also demands the recognition that context changes as people act; contexts are not static and dependent on unchangeable interpretations of ideas and objects. People who are in interaction may construct differing understandings of the situation because their individual understandings are mediated by differing past personal experiences and cultural influences. Their understanding is also mediated by the collaboration that occurs within the interaction. Thus it is important to capture learning as it occurs, which involves studying people
and activities in the process of change. For this study, learning was studied while it was occurring within interaction.

**Intersubjectivity.** Wertsch (1984) has critiqued Vygotsky’s writings for not including a full explanation of how learning occurs. Wertsch offered intersubjectivity as an additional construct to operationalize the process of learning for research purposes. When people who are communicating with each other develop a shared understanding, they have created *intersubjectivity* within their interaction (Wertsch, 1984). Intersubjectivity is necessary to understand others within an interaction, so kids must develop intersubjectivity to sustain their play. The classic idea of intersubjectivity refers to a shared or partially shared view of what is going on in a situation.

*Participatory intersubjectivity* is a useful extension of the concept of intersubjectivity. This view focuses on the coordination of communication, and it can involve both shared understandings and misunderstandings (Matusov, 1996). This is important because kids at play may create participatory intersubjectivity within disagreements as they engage in communication around the same idea or activity. To be clear, intersubjectivity does not mean that people share exactly the same views or that they recognize explicitly their views or the views of others; rather, intersubjectivity is created when individuals have views that are compatible enough to allow them to interact. I am going to show how the kids I studied created intersubjectivity within their interactions, which helped them to negotiate through breakdowns. Developing intersubjectivity is important to being able to participate in the shared cultural activities that make up learning experiences. By communicating and creating intersubjectivity, people are able to engage in activities together. Within the context of my study of kids’ play, intersubjectivity is a part of learning in that it enabled kids to negotiate through breakdowns in their play.
Breakdowns. One obstacle to sustained play among kids is breakdowns in interaction. Breakdowns are situations in which interactants have differing goals and thus one person does not act as expected by the other (Ohtake et al., 2005). An argument is an example of a breakdown, as is a slight misunderstanding in which participants discuss their differing ideas. Breakdowns can also be less obvious, such as when someone stops and changes their course of action. An example would be when a child on the playground was calling for the attention of another child, did not receive acknowledgment, and then joined in the play activity of the other child. Identifying breakdowns helped me to understand kids’ perspectives on what they are doing within a play activity. Interaction Analysis research refers to these instances of misunderstandings or misalignments as “trouble” (Jordan & Henderson, 1995).

Trouble within interactions is often repaired quickly by interactants, and both talk and physical actions are used to repair trouble. Within the context of play, breakdowns or trouble occur when kids disagree on the rules of a game, and interactants hold differing expectations for the behavior of their playmates. If kids are able to negotiate a common understanding following the breakdown, their play can be sustained. As analyses of trouble generally reveals “the unspoken rules by which people organize their lives” (Jordan & Henderson, 1995, p. 69), studying what kids did after a breakdown occurred helped me to identify the unwritten rules by which they organized their play. That is, the negotiations that occurred to repair breakdowns or trouble were shaped by unwritten rules such as rules around which kids are excluded, who is allowed to change the official rules, and how players take turns.

Participation framework. Participation frameworks are one way of identifying patterns of communication that lead to changes in understanding, or learning (Goffman, 1981). Participation frameworks are created within interactions and are a way to recognize how
participants use verbal and nonverbal communication to position themselves and others (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996). Frameworks are not made up of pre-determined participation statuses but are co-created by participants within interactions, and play and free-time contexts allow kids to practice creating ways to negotiate statuses without management by adults. Frameworks are a way of examining how ideas are taken up, and they are a fluid way of describing the dynamics of an interaction.

By examining participation frameworks, I was able to identify breakdowns by how people were talking and doing things together. The notion of participation frameworks helped me to understand the negotiations that kids undertake following breakdowns and the relations of status roles that kids assume in relation to one another. The use of video and the careful analysis of talk and action aided my identification of participatory intersubjectivity, or the coordination of communication, within participation frameworks. Breakdowns or trouble were evidenced by breaches in intersubjectivity. I was also able to consider how the interactants positioned themselves and others, which provided insight into ways participants’ roles affected breakdowns. By examining participation frameworks, I was able to describe frameworks that enable kids to sustain their play, what led to breakdowns, and how breakdowns were repaired.

Unwritten rules. Children use talk and action in complex ways to negotiate the unwritten social rules that guide interactions during play. Kids negotiate the written rules of games and the unwritten rules of social behavior (Goodwin, 2006). Unwritten rules are implicit and govern everyday behavior. For most people, understanding and acting according to unwritten social rules comes easily. For those with social-cognitive learning disabilities, which include autism spectrum disorders, unwritten rules are a “hidden curriculum” (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan,
2004) because they are based on the interpreting of social nuances. This reading of social cues is one important aspect of unwritten rules.

Because unwritten rules lay in the background of all social interactions, they are also present in kids’ play activities. In play, kids give each other subtle cues, such as when they ignore the suggestions of a kid. At other times, the unwritten rule is more apparent; for example, when a kid who takes charge of an interaction teases another kid. Unwritten rules help avoid breakdowns and also guide the negotiations in which kids engage to work through breakdowns.

**Summary**

In my study, I identified how kids sustained play interactions. I closely studied their talk and actions by examining the participation frameworks they created within their interactions. When I looked for evidence of intersubjectivity and breakdowns, I found that the participation frameworks kids created helped them negotiate through breakdowns to sustain their play. Additionally, unwritten rules guided their communication and helped me to see how they worked to sustain interactions. In later chapters, I emphasize that kids have subtle ways of taking charge of their peers so their interactions can continue. They were learning by participating and working on the developmental task of sustaining their play interactions.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

In this section, I review studies that relate to the conceptual framework of my proposed study. Play and the role that rules, both explicit and implicit, have in play are highlighted. I have also identified features of my sites that interacted and affected learning: Language and hybridity. Language, as a way to communicate ideas and a way to develop new ideas, facilitates learning through interaction. The hybridity of an environment supports learning and the creation of ZPDs, or spaces for learning. I also review studies of unwritten rules. Unwritten social rules are negotiated within these child-child interactions, and children’s interactions around play are a way for children to explore ideas, which promotes the emergence of spaces for learning. Being familiar with the work other researchers have done in related areas helped me to focus my research and attend to these important features.

The studies that I include in my review here share a view of learning as a process that occurs in social and cultural interaction. Most studies took place in naturalistic settings, though some occurred in labs. I have included studies that focused on the constructs I used to examine learning and explicitly discussed learning. Finally, I focused on studies that included school-age kids as participants.

Play

Scholars who study children’s play typically divide play into one of two categories: game play or pretend play (Frensch & Sternberg, 1991; Kim & Kellogg, 2007; Lloyd & Goodwin, 1995; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008). Game play is defined as being rule-based, whereas pretend play requires an imaginary situation. Vygotsky (1978) described both game play and pretend play as involving both rules and imagination. In this section, I detail the two existing categories of play and show how scholars have incorporated Vygotsky’s notions of rules
and imagination into play. In later chapters, I will argue that a third play context is necessary to understand the full range of play contexts that are created by kids within their play.

**Pretend Play and Game Play.** Pretend play and game play are the two most commonly used categories for classifying play. Pretend play is focused on the use of imagination and involves players interacting within made up situations that often, but not always, correspond to real life situations. Game play consists of activities that are organized by rules that are known before play begins such as sports, board games, and card games.

**Characteristics of pretend play.** Pretend play, sometimes called imaginative play, has an overt imaginary situation and implicit rules. An overt imaginary situation is created when kids openly reference that they are pretending, such as when one says, “Let’s pretend we are driving race cars.” The players enact the situation and engage as characters within it. Implicit rules are rules that determine acceptable behavior within the context. For example, when a player is acknowledged as having taken on the role of boss of the pretend play activity, the implicit rule is that other players accept direction from that boss. Implicit rules are not typically discussed, but players can be sanctioned for not adhering to them.

Pretending might involve role playing and make-believe scenarios, such as when kids enact a battle scene or cooking a meal. These imaginary situations are overt in that they are discussed by players, and the imaginary scenario is the focus of the play (Lloyd & Goodwin, 1995). They create the scenario, and then they act out the roles within it. Their actions are guided by their ideas about the available or necessary roles and responsibilities, based on what they have learned from personal experience, books, movies, television, peers, and adult conversations. For instance, if kids pretend they are on a space ship, they might pretend they are wearing special
clothing and floating in the air. If kids are pretending to take care of a baby, they might sing lullabies and tell others nearby to be quiet.

The rules of pretend play are implicit in that imaginary situations are not governed by “formulated rules laid down in advance” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 94). Within pretend or imaginative play, kids must obey the rules of the behavior they are enacting or risk being sanctioned by other players. For example, children pretending they are shopping at a store act as if they are gathering items and paying for them because those actions are what they have experienced during a typical shopping trip in real life. Each pretend scenario of shopping is unique in that those involved decide how many people can play, where the physical boundaries of the activity are located, and how long the activity will last. Additionally, the implicit rules that guide pretend play are culture-specific, and in the shopping example kids from different cultures would have different experiences of acquiring goods (Wolf, 1984). Kids might enforce their understandings of a shopping trip scenario (i.e., their ideas about the implicit rules of the setting) by telling a playmate, “You don’t swim in a grocery store!” Not swimming in a grocery store does not break an explicit rule (i.e., one that is written down or agreed upon ahead of time), but it does break an implicit rule as it is not one of the behaviors that is implicitly understood as acceptable within the imaginary grocery store situation.

Language use in pretend play is fairly predictable (Kim & Kellogg, 2007). Children speak about roles and use objects in ways that are usually associated with their culture-specific meaning. For example, a stick that represents a horse is treated as a horse is typically treated: it is given food and water, and children might ride the horse. When a girl takes on the role of a mother in pretend play, she acts as she believes a mother acts; the girl is relying on her knowledge of how a mother should behave. Though the imaginary situations offer some
flexibility, kids’ understandings and expectations about the roles and responsibilities required by
the situation guide and even direct their language use within pretend play activities.

*Disciplined improvisation* is a useful way of understanding language use and the course
of the play sequence within a pretend play interaction. Disciplined improvisation is
improvisational in that it is not scripted or predetermined, and disciplined because it has a goal or
direction (Sawyer, 2004). When kids engage in pretend play, they enact scripts around themes
such as cooking a meal. During their play, the kids decide who takes on the role of the head cook
or perhaps the parent in charge of the kitchen, but the available roles are guided by the theme of
cooking a meal. That is, although what exactly occurs is unpredictable, the broad structure or
routine of the pretend play sequence is predetermined by the participants’ knowledge of what
typically occurs within the context of that broad script or archetypal situation. In this way,
pretend play is both improvisational and disciplined.

*Characteristics of game play.* Game play consists of implicit rules, explicit rules, and
covert imaginary situations. Implicit, or unwritten, rules are the norms of the play context and
guide the interaction by helping players know when to talk during the game, how to settle
disagreements, and whether and how to allow in new players. Implicit rules are related to
cultural norms. They are created by players within the game and are rarely discussed unless one
is broken (Rakoczy, 2008). Explicit rules are rules that can be named and are often written in
advance. These rules are the essence of games and govern aspects such as turn taking, winning,
and the various actions that can be taken by players within games (Frensch & Sternberg, 1991).
A covert imaginary situation is one that is created by the inventor of the game and conveyed by
the explicit rules of the game. Within the game of Battleship, for example, players pretend they
are sinking each other’s ships. The imaginary situation is covert in that the players do not
generally speak in character, talk directly about pretending, or make pretending the main object of the play activity. Explicit rules of gameplay help to create a covert imaginary situation. For example, players of the board game Chutes and Ladders enter into an imaginary situation by adhering to game rules such as climbing ladders to advance and falling down slides and having to move back. This is imaginary in that there is “no direct substitute for real-life” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 95) and these specific concepts exist only within this particular game.

When kids play games, they engage in talk around what the rules are, whether players are following the rules, and what the consequences are for breaking rules. Playing games with rules is one way children learn about morality because kids come to view rules as obligations that have consequences (Piaget, 1965). Game players might conform to the rules, demonstrating one type of morality: a morality of obedience (DeVries, 2001). Often, however, players change rules or choose not to follow them, and then they witness the consequences for themselves and other players. While engaged in game play, kids may play with the rules (Garvey, 1990). Players sometimes change game rules to suit their desired outcomes or as a way to be creative and use experimentation to see the effects of a rule change. For example, my colleague and I, who were studying how rules and conflict interacted in kids’ foursquare play, found that the kids negotiated and changed the foursquare rules (Eyerman and Roberts, 2008). When playing games, kids are aware of and generally conform to the explicit rules, but they sometimes play with the rules and negotiate changes to those rules.

Through games, children come to understand that explicit rules exist and are enforced within games because they serve a purpose: to organize the play (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008). Rules are conventions in that they dictate what to do in a particular context but might not apply in other contexts. For example, players hold seven or nine cards in their
hands when playing the card game Go Fish. If players held more cards, there might not be
enough from which to draw new cards. If players held fewer cards, progress in the game would
be very slow. In a different card game, however, players might hold only five cards to suit the
circumstances of that game. The Go Fish rule that dictates that players hold seven or nine cards
organizes the game in a certain way. Kids as young as three years old understand that this is a
convention of the game, as opposed to an unchangeable law of nature (Rakoczy et al., 2008).
Thus by playing games kids can practice using rules; changing rules and witnessing how the
changes affect the game; and coming to understand the purpose of some conventions. Though
kids are learning about these ideas within the context of game play, they are practicing using
context-specific rules (i.e., conventions), which is useful for settings other than game play.

It is also helpful to recognize that some games have widely recognized names (e.g.,
Capture the Flag, basketball, freeze tag, Go Fish), though the names may vary by region
(Garvey, 1990). Games are traditional or institutionalized play activities “structured by explicit
rules that can be precisely communicated” (Garvey, 1990, p. 104). Explicit rules provide
procedures for play, including pre-determined consequences for rule violations. This means that
the same game will be carried out in a similar way even when played by different people at
another time and location.

Language use in game play is less predictable than in pretend play. Whereas the rules of
pretend play are treated as fixed (i.e., no swimming in the imagined grocery story), children view
the rules of game play as more changeable and available for negotiation (Garvey, 1990; Kim &
Kellogg, 2007). Game play offers space to less predictable language use because kids are
negotiating rule changes, and so kids learn by participating in game play and engaging in
interactions that allow them to develop more advanced understandings of language. This occurs
because the less predictable use of language in game play creates opportunities for children to move from intermental to intramental understandings of language. Therefore game play has additional developmental significance in that it is a context in which children can practice using language in ways that are more varied than how language is used in pretend play contexts.

**Vygotsky and Play.** Unlike scholars who write about play as either being defined by rules or imagination, Vygotsky (1978) argued all play activities involve both rules and imagination. He asserted that imagination is the “defining characteristic of play” (p. 94) and behavior is always directed by rules. Young children engage in play around overt imaginary situations, and their behavior is guided by implicit rules; older children play games with explicit rules, but the rules of the games create covert imaginary situations. For example, when children say things like, “Let’s play house,” or “Let’s play store”, the imaginary situation is overt in that the scene can be “seen and heard” (Bodrova, Leong, Hensen, & Henninger, 2000, p. 25) by those observing the play but the rules are implicit in that participants’ actions are guided by cultural norms that are not written down or spoken aloud. In contrast, the game of chess has explicit rules and a covert imaginary situation. Within the game, the rules create an imaginary world in which knights, kings, and queens move about in particular ways. This situation is imaginary in that it exists only within the game. Additionally, the players do not imagine themselves as part of the game. Chess is a covert imaginary situation because the imaginary situation is created by the explicit rules. When people play chess, they do not say they are going to a place where kings can only take one step at a time, yet their actions during the play activity are guided by rules governing the movement of the named pieces.

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that play has an important role in children’s development. He emphasized that play is not merely activity that is fun or enjoyable, but it also has value as a way
to explore and learn. Play, as Vygotsky explained, is imaginative and satisfies the needs of children by allowed them to realize desires they cannot fulfill otherwise. Play is a context in which children can explore possible future actions (What would it feel like if I did this?), roles they cannot now or may not ever take on (What would it be like if we were sisters?), and ways others react to their choices (What will she do if I say no?). Vygotsky wrote that all activities in life have rules, and play is a way of exploring those structures and boundaries. Play occurs within an imaginary situation that has rules, which can be created and negotiated during the interaction. Through play, children learn that meaning and understandings can be created and are not dependent only on physical objects or the interpretations of others. Vygotsky offered the examples of children who use a piece of wood as a doll or who play chess and see a particular piece as the queen. In both what we typically call imaginative play and in what we call games, children are engaged in play and are using their imaginations to define the meaning of objects. Later in their development, children are able to separate further objects and meaning, and they do not need the presence of an object to hold the place of a meaning. That is, a child can imagine doing something (e.g., riding a horse) or can talk about an idea (e.g., having a sister) without the presence of the relevant objects. Thus play is a way for children to learn about meaning and make the developmental transition from creating or negotiating understandings based on objects and actions to those based on ideas and meaning.

In play, children act in more advanced ways because they are using their imaginations to explore future possibilities (Vygotsky, 1978). Cognitive development is advanced by play because children are accessing abstract thought, though they may still be acting based on less advanced understandings in non-play activities. The context of play is itself a type of assistance that enables children to do things they would not otherwise be able to do independently, thus
creating a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or a space in which learning occurs through interaction. In play, children are motivated to act within the boundaries of the imagined setting and to coordinate their actions with others. Still, because the risks may seem fewer within the context of play, children are more willing to explore and negotiate new meanings and understandings.

Rooted in the work of Vygotsky, Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sá, Ilgaz, and Brockmeyer (2010) utilized the two existing categories of play but presented them as “two poles of a single continuum” (p. 44) rather than two discrete categories (see Figure 1). On one side of the continuum is game play, which is characterized by explicit rules and a covert imaginary situation. Explicit rules are overt and often written down. A covert imaginary situation is a pretend situation created by the explicit rules. On the other side of the spectrum is pretend play. Pretend play is characterized by implicit rules and an overt imaginary situation. Implicit rules are expectations about how players should act within the play interaction. An overt imaginary situation is a pretend situation that is stated by and known to the players. From this perspective, all play involves rules and imagination but the rules vary from explicit to implicit and the pretending can vary from being an aspect of it to being the essence of the play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule-Based/Game Play</th>
<th>Pretend Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit rules</strong></td>
<td><strong>Implicit rules</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covert imaginary situation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Overt imaginary situation</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Spectrum of play types based on Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sá, Ilgaz, and Brockmeyer (2010)*
Intersubjectivity and Language

Intersubjectivity is the coordinated communication that occurs between people within an interaction. It has traditionally been characterized as agreement between interactants, but Matusov (1996) expanded this definition to include disagreements. That is, intersubjectivity involves the development of mutual understandings as well as communication in which participants disagree but are having an interaction around a shared topic. To create intersubjectivity, interactants must negotiate some shared meanings that allow them to communicate. Although they may not agree fully, they must coordinate their communication such that they can engage in dialogue. Intersubjectivity is a component of a ZPD (Wertsch, 1984), though ZPDs are not a focus of this study. Because ZPDs tie to language and learning within interaction and are therefore a closely related concept, I reference them in my review of the literature.

Prior research has indicated that intersubjectivity is developed through and evident in the communication between interactants. People communicate their ideas through talk, and talk is also a way of developing ideas within interaction. Additionally, the creation of ZPDs, spaces for learning, may be indicated by the use of particular words within interactions, such as words like “might” (Gutierrez, 2008, p 157) that indicate future possibilities. Therefore, studying language use is central to being able to assess intersubjectivity.

Language is important to the creation of intersubjectivity. For example, Gutierrez (2008) studies the use of language within ZPDs and has suggested that particular words often accompany the creation of a zone. She noticed that words such as could, should, and might are used by participants when communicating within ZPDs. For example, a more experienced child who is working with someone who is less experienced may use these words when offering ideas,
and their word choice implies their understanding of the tentative nature of their suggestions; the child is working to support the learner and recognizes that learner may or may not take up the suggestion. One child may say to another, “You could use put this card down and then you would be able to draw a new one,” proposing the idea as a possible future action. The creation of the ZPD depends on the offering of support by one person and the use of that support by the learner. Though participants may not be intentionally creating a ZPD, Gutierrez (2008) explained the choice of these verbs as representative of participants’ exploration of possible actions and engagement in a “dialogue with the future” (p. 157). In other words, this use of language demonstrates participants’ tacit understanding that they are connecting potential solutions to present resources and conceptions.

Rogoff (1990) studied intersubjectivity, or the coordination of communication and contributions, as an aspect of interactions between children and adults at home and at school. This work focused on guided participation, an extension of the ZPD, and Rogoff wrote of intersubjectivity as agreement or mutual understanding. She detailed how children learn through collaborative problem solving, and explained that this collaboration is an essential aspect of children’ development. Rogoff emphasized that intersubjectivity happens between people and that the child learner is an active participant, even though the more capable child often takes on more responsibility for achieving intersubjectivity. That is, although intersubjectivity is developed within an interaction and is not attributable to just one of the individuals, the learner typically does not direct the interaction. For instance, when the more accomplished child makes adjustments in language to accommodate the learner’s level of development or to gain the learner’s attention, we see an example of the characteristics of both people affecting the interaction: the more experienced child is able to recognize the perspective of the child, and the
learner will be better able to respond to this type of communication. Kids are also active
participants in that their contributions to intersubjectivity depend on their understandings as
gained through past experiences and past interactions. Learners can then extend or give up their
current understandings. In her explanation of this learning process, Rogoff (1990) described
intersubjectivity as a “bridge between one understanding of a situation and another” (p. 71).

Language use and action can together create intersubjectivity. Nathan, Eilam, and Kim
(2007) studied language use and relied on Matusov’s (1996) participatory view of
intersubjectivity in their study of the role of intersubjectivity in classroom interactions. Their
study analyzed the talk and actions of students and identified a three-part participation
framework that occurred often within the classroom discussion: initiation, demonstration, and
elaboration. The researchers found that the middle step of this framework, student’s
demonstration of their work, was essential to changes in understanding. After demonstrating an
idea, students often adopted shared perspectives of representational drawings, which allowed
them to communicate about the idea though they still sometimes disagreed on their solutions to
the initial problem. The researchers viewed this coordination of communication as evidence of
intersubjectivity, though it included disagreements.

Nathan et al. (2007) asserted that intersubjectivity is of utmost importance in research on
learning because it is required for effective communication. They did not view intersubjectivity
as a total agreement between interactants but as a general harmony or coordination of
communication with individuals disagreeing on some ideas. Nathan et al., however, did
emphasize the need for some shared understanding to be able to express disagreements. If
individuals do not have a shared understanding of some aspects of the context, for example a
mutual understanding of roles, they will not be able to have a conversation in which they disagree.

The importance of studying language use as part of the development of intersubjectivity is evident the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding has been used as a metaphor to understand what occurs within the ZPD and was originally developed by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). The fundamental idea regarding scaffolding is that the task is unchanged but the more capable child or adult provides lessening degrees of assistance as the learner progresses within the ZPD, akin to how construction scaffolding is removed from a structure as the building progresses (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Scaffolding is the assistance given to the learner, and the learner should gradually be given more responsibility for managing and completing the task. Scaffolding is closely connected to language use because the more accomplished person in the interaction typically uses language to assist the learner. Griffin and Cole (1984) offered examples of scaffolding that include the adult directing the attention of the learner, offering encouragement, and prompting the learner to recall something.

Researchers have argued that the metaphor of scaffolding has not been explained well and has been used in a variety of ways in research studies (Stone, 1993). In particular, Stone pointed to the need to define the communicative mechanisms that are used to scaffold experiences for learners. Griffin and Cole (1984) criticized scaffolding for not leaving room for children’s creativity or the negotiation of goals because the metaphor presumes a predetermined blueprint of the building (i.e., a set outcome of the activity). Still, scaffolding continues to be a prevalent concept for understanding teaching and learning in educational research.

In the work reviewed here, Gutierrez (2008) suggested that particular words may mark the creation of spaces for learning and Rogoff (1990) and Nathan et al. (2007) studied
intersubjectivity as a mechanism for changes in understanding. Language is important to this study because it is used to communicate within interactions, and interactions are the context for learning that were investigated. In particular, language was studied for evidence of participatory intersubjectivity or the coordination of contributions.

**Hybridity**

Sociocultural research over the past two decades has emphasized the value of diversity – of language, backgrounds, and perspectives – in learning. Rather than treating diversity as a problem to be overcome or differences to be suppressed, sociocultural researchers have demonstrated that diversity can act as a resource on which learners can draw. Thus diversity of languages, backgrounds, and perspectives is viewed here as a useful resource that helps to create hybrid spaces within learning environments; the concept of hybridity encompasses and is facilitated by diversity. Hybrid spaces can be created through the unintentional combination of discourses and knowledge (e.g., Moje, Collazo, Carrillo, & Marx, 2001) or through the intentional combination of different practices (e.g., Jurow, Hall, & Ma, 2008). Though multiple discourses, types of knowledge, and practices are present in all settings, they are not always invited or accepted aspects of interactions. Child-child interactions within play are typically more welcoming of hybridity. Hybridity was a useful concept for this study because it can help create spaces for learning, and this study’s focus on participation frameworks helped show that kids create hybrid space within child-child play interactions.

Gutierréz has developed the concept of *third space* to describe a type of ZPD, which addresses the relation between hybridity, diversity, and learning through interaction. Third space describes a productive area of intersection between the official and unofficial talk of a learning environment such as a classroom (Gutierrez et al, 1995). Within a third space, the resources of
learners (typically, but not always, the students) and the more accomplished other (typically the teacher) are available to be used by participants. Diversity refers to more than a diversity of ethnicities and languages, and it includes other ideas such as meditational tools. An example of diversity of meditational tools is the way past experiences are cultural resources that mediate interactants understandings of a setting, which produces a variety of understandings. Like a ZPD, a third space is a space constructed by participants within an interaction and is an opportunity for learning and development. The coordination of communication among participants, or intersubjectivity, creates a change in understandings. Learning environments that have diversity are especially suited for the creation of third spaces because diversity is the source of the variety of resources that are available to be utilized within the hybrid space. Gutierrez’s work has focused on the creation third spaces in settings that target literacy development, such as in classrooms (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999) and in academically-oriented afterschool programs (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999).

Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda (1999) wrote about the use of hybridity in a study about classroom discourse and third space. In third spaces, discourse hybridity, or the use of a variety of language practices, is allowed and even encouraged because teachers perceive hybridity as greatly expanding opportunities for learning. As one example, hybridity avoid privileging one register over others, so students are able to make use of everyday discourse in addition to academic discourse. The authors wrote that they sought to emphasize ZPDs as “disharmonious and hybrid space” and that “conflict, tension, and diversity are intrinsic to learning spaces” (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999, p. 287). This suggests a view that is akin to Matusov’s (1996) participatory intersubjectivity. The researchers consider disagreements to be important aspects of the collaboration that leads to learning within
interactions through the creation of third spaces, which is a characteristic of participatory
intersubjectivity.

Hybridity of languages, roles, and perspectives helped foster interactions in the play
environments I studied. My participants came from white and English speaking families and
from non-white and non-English speaking families. Some children were born in other countries,
some lived with relatives, and some were adopted. The children have also experienced a variety
of educational settings and had varying levels of academic success. This diversity provided a
variety of resources that the children could draw on in their interactions with each other. I also
examined unwritten rules to see how they helped create hybrid spaces for learning at my two
data collection sites.

**Learning about Rules**

I studied how unwritten social rules affect opportunities for learning within the context of
play at my two sites. Though kids are not closely supervised at the sites, both sites did have some
official rules that accompanied activities and originated from a variety of sources. Some official
rules existed for particular activities, such as the rules that governed games. Other rules were
more comprehensive and applied to all children. For example, rules of winter recess specified
that kids were not allowed to play on the snowy field without boots. Both of these instantiations
of rules were relevant to children learning about unwritten rules in this setting.

I am most interested in the unwritten rules regarding social interactions that govern kids’
play. Unwritten rules affect who the boss of a game is, who can participate, and how rules are
changed, for example. While children are engaged in such interactions during play, they are
practicing negotiating unwritten social rules. Play provides opportunities for hybrid spaces to
develop, and kids can explore the consequences of various possible actions within that space. By
documenting child-child interactions, I show that unwritten social rules shaped interactions within children’s play activities at summer camp and winter recess. My goal was to demonstrate that children were practicing something important (i.e., sustaining their play) through interactions with each other.

I have previously studied children learning though play (Eyerman & Roberts, 2008), and the current study examined the “how” of children’ learning about rules with an emphasis on the ways it interacted with participation frameworks. As described previously, Vygotsky (1978) wrote that children can explore rules in play, and this is important in other areas of life because all activities have structure and boundaries. Imaginary play and game play both offer settings in which children can explore rules, according to Vygotsky. The summer camp and winter recess environments are designed to be fun and enjoyable, and the time is filled with play and playful activities. Play, while fun and enjoyable, is also bound by rules (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, reviewing studies about rules and play seems most appropriate here. The studies I report on have been published over a period spanning the last several decades and are from researchers with differing theoretical approaches, thus these studies represent a variety of perspectives; however, all studies here claim that play is important to learning and development.

**Rule-based play and negotiation.** Research about rules and play has shown that language enables children to discuss, develop, and negotiate rules during play. When playing games such as jump rope, Goodwin (2006) found that girls continually negotiated game rules and social status through complex uses of language. Goodwin refuted the typical gender dichotomization of play and explained that she found that girls do not play as cooperatively as previous studies had suggested. They instead develop rules through negotiations that often involve conflicts, and the girls then strictly enforce the rules during play.
Though learning about rules through play is typically a low-stakes endeavor (Garvey, 1990) and can be accomplished by very young children (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008), the rules of play can also be intricate and complex (Goodwin, 1995). Goodwin, an anthropologist who studies talk in interaction, has studied games and play to examine how children use language to negotiate within the context of play. In her study of girls playing hopscotch, Goodwin found that the players worked together to construct the rules of each particular hopscotch game. Though they negotiated and cooperated to construct the game play, Goodwin (1995) emphasized that the girls played “not simply by the rules but [played] with the rules” (p. 279). That is, the players used of the traditional rules of hopscotch, and then they added to and altered them. Goodwin argued that games provide a context in which children can practice skills, such as persuading others in a disagreement, which are useful for other aspects of life.

**Rule-based play and exploration.** The context of play is a space in which children are freer to explore ways to talk and act that they might not be able to take up in other settings. As children develop, they play fewer games of chance and more games of strategy, and Sutton-Smith (1972) asserts that this occurs because children gain greater understanding of rules and thus seek to play games that offer opportunities to explore, negotiate, and manipulate rules for their gain during games. This practice is important because children are working on the developmental task of understanding logical consequences for their actions and those of others. Developmental tasks are concepts a culture expects its members to understand (e.g., the inevitability of death) or accomplishments people are expected to achieve (e.g., financial independence), typically at particular ages or stages of development. Within the context of children’ development, children are expected to be able to understand the concepts of logical
consequences and to be able engage in negotiations with others. Games provide a setting in which children can practice with these concepts and explore how rules can be changed.

Taking the perspective that play is a setting in which children can accomplish developmental tasks, I and a colleague (Eyerman & Roberts, 2008) found that children routinely negotiated with other players to create new rules or adaptations of existing rules for the playground game of foursquare. The rules children used for game play were flexible and could be altered over the course of one recess period, thus allowing children the opportunity to explore immediately the consequences of their new rules. Within the context of foursquare, children were able to negotiate rules with adults and other children. Thus they were working on understanding and negotiating rules while engaged in playing foursquare. The players also created their own rules for managing rule disputes, which were different from the conflict management strategies given to them by adults.

**Unwritten social rules.** Some studies that have examined children’s interactions with their peers have included unwritten social rules as an important factor that affected the outcomes of those interactions. In our study of children’s foursquare play (Eyerman & Roberts, 2008), I and my colleague observed occasions when children’s status affected their play, such as in the introductory example of four players who were allowed to resume playing after leaving the game though this breached an official rule of the game. We found that unwritten social rules, such as those regarding status, affect the context and can change the outcomes of the interaction. That is, if the kids had been playing according to the official rules of the game, the players who had left would not have been allowed to regain their spots on the foursquare court and resume playing the game.
In Goodwin’s (2006) study of girls’ interactions during recess, she found that unwritten social rules shaped children’s interactions, specifically the interactions of girls with their peers. Goodwin writes that her work has been in reaction to studies that conceive of girls as conflict avoiders and inherent supporters of their peers. She says that she found instead that girls use talk and action to assert their authority over other girls and boys. For example, a clique of sixth grade girls frequently demonstrated their authority by insulting younger girls and by claiming playground space, and the younger girls resisted by verbally defending themselves. Within these interactions, girls would “demonstrate their ability to artfully collaborate to present a position and debate it through clever, appropriate, and forceful comebacks” (Goodwin, 2006, p. 119). Thus while the girls were ostensibly engaged in play during recess, they were also engaged in drawn out negotiations over unwritten social rules.

In her research on children’s interactions in her Kindergarten classroom Paley (1992) argues that unwritten social rules continually affect the way children interact. Paley was having a problem with children being excluded from play and believed it was due to unwritten rules around power. To investigate how she might change the power structure in her classroom, Paley (1992) instituted a rule she called “you can’t say you can’t play” (p. 3) and explains that it was necessary for the times when children are at play with their peers. From her perspective, play is a time when children interact around activities that are not bound by a teacher-created goal. These are interactions in which “public and private needs and obligations are in conflict” (Paley, 1992, p. 67), and so unwritten social rules such as power are more likely to shape interactions. Paley’s new explicit rule did not allow children to reject each other as playmates, and she writes that the interactions within her classroom changed because it eventually eliminated most of the struggles over power, status, and authority.
Dyson (1997) also studied the way power affected classroom interactions. Dyson observed second and third grade students as their teacher encouraged them to write freely and then to direct their classmates in a performance of their story. Dyson found that power affected the themes the children choose and the ways the various stories are enacted. For example, the middle class children and the white children wrote stories borrowed from mythology and rejected the idea that they could possibly write about characters from popular culture. When students directed plays of their stories, their peers vied for particular roles and the writer/directors used their positions to choose only favored peers for the best roles. Within these classroom interactions around story writing and acting, unwritten social rules regarding power, status, and authority were continually negotiated.

Studies from inside classrooms and from children’s play outside of classrooms have investigated the role of unwritten social rules and especially the way unwritten rules interact with power, status, and authority in children’s interactions. Goodwin (2006) found that girls’ talk and actions were intended primarily to assert authority during play, Paley (1992) explored the effects of her attempt to remove struggles over power, and Dyson (1997) studied the ways power affected students’ choices. This work shows how unwritten social rules affect children’s interactions with their peers and suggests it may also shape opportunities for learning within those interactions.

**Summary of the Reviewed Literature**

The studies reviewed elaborated on how learning occurs within child-child interactions. I have also reviewed studies that show learning about rules through play to be important to learning and development. In my study, I show how children learn about unwritten social rules within interactions by negotiating through breakdowns. Because of the play-filled nature of my
sites, I had expected play and games to be important aspects of the study. Language use was also of importance because language is important to the construction of spaces for learning and learning about rules. The broad purpose of this study was to examine how kids work to sustain their play. Specifically, I studied how children created participation frameworks that defined each play context. Investigating children interacting with other children is of interest because it is an aspect of children’ culture that is being restricted as children’ lives become more closely governed by adults, and children’ time to work on the important developmental task of sustaining play is becoming limited.
CHAPTER 3: Methods

In this chapter, I describe and detail the strategies I used to collect and analyze data for this research project. First I introduce my data collection site. Then I describe the types of information sources I collected and how I identified or located that information within my site. I also explain how I analyzed my data and how I worked to increase the validity of my study.

Research Design

**Setting and participants.** To answer my research question of how kids sustain interactions with each other during play, I documented kids playing with their peers during summer day camp at a YMCA and during winter recess at a charter school. In both the summer camp and winter recess settings, kids spent most of their time interacting with peers outside the immediate control of adults. That is, although adults were overseeing the activities, the kids’ behavior was not closely managed by adults. For example, kids at summer camp were able to choose to do craft or cooking activities or to play with board games, playing cards, wooden shape blocks, or plastic animal figures. During winter recess at the school, the kids could play on the playing field, the hard surface playing area, the swings, or the play structure. In both settings, adults watched over the kids and intervened when kids were hurting each other or doing something dangerous such as climbing very high or playing with sharp items; however, the adults did not mandate particular activities be undertaken, as in the case in most school classrooms or during other structured activities (e.g., music lessons, sports practices). For this reason, I refer to the camp and winter recess settings in which I videotaped as not closely managed or less structured settings.

The YMCA summer day camp and charter school were located in the same town. Though located adjacent to a major interstate highway and not far from the city of Denver, the county has
farms and acres of protected open space and is designated rural by the Census Bureau. The regional school district in which the town is located is approximately two-thirds non-Hispanic white (27% Hispanic, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% Black) (Colorado Department of Education, 2010), and 75% of the attendees of both the summer camp and the charter school were non-Hispanic white. Approximately one-third of the district’s students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (Colorado Department of Education, 2010). The summer camp and charter school consisted mostly of middle-class families, however, because the summer camp did not accept vouchers from Colorado’s Child Care Assistance Program (i.e., families must fully pay for childcare) and the charter school accepts students through a voluntary application process. That is, families must self-select into the school, and middle-class families more often choose to apply and be entered into the enrollment lottery.

**Summer camp.** I had worked at the YMCA summer day camp for three summers, which is how I became familiar with the camp. The day camp offers typical camp activities: sports, games, swimming, field trips, and crafts. Camp opens at 7:00 a.m. and closes at 6:00 p.m., with most kids attending for eight to nine hours a day. The camp program serves as childcare for most of the kids who attend, as their parents are at work when they are at camp.

Approximately 20 kids attended summer camp each day, with some being present five days a week, some three days a week, and some two days a week. In total, 35 kids attended camp, and I obtained parent permission for their children’s participation and child assent from 31 of the kids (see Table 1). I did not record interactions of the four kids whose parents did not assent: the mother of two of the kids did not assent, and the mother of the other two never returned the forms. I was able to avoid videotaping those four kids by either not videotaping on days when the four non-consented kids were present or not videotaping activities in which they
were involved. Kids who were taped were in grades one through five. All three camp staff members consented to being videotaped.

Table 1

*Consented Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Summer Camp</th>
<th>Winter Recess</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>31 first through fifth graders</td>
<td>95 first, third, and fifth graders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Winter recess.** The school at which I videotaped the winter recess period was a charter school, and I was familiar with it because a friend taught there. The school is small and has one to two classes per grade. The playground area is approximately 100 yards by 100 yards and contains many adjacent play areas: an open field area, a soccer field (that overlaps a baseball field), a hard surface playing area with basketball half-courts, and a swing set and play structure over woodchips.

At the school where I collected data, the schedule for recess varied by grade, with each grade being on the playground for 20 minutes. The first, third, and fifth graders had recess on overlapping schedules between 11:00 and 11:40. Kindergarten, second, and fourth graders had overlapping recess schedules from 12:10 to 12:55. Parents of many of the Kindergarteners and several parents of second and fourth graders did not give their permission for me to videotape their children, which would have made data collection difficult during the second recess period. In contrast, I was able to record all kids in the first recess period, so I chose to videotape during the first recess period only. In total, I obtained parent permission for their children’s participation and child assent for 38 first graders, 34 third graders, and 23 fifth graders (i.e., all first, third, and
fifth graders). The kids who were taped were in grades one, three, and five (see Table 1), though most of the footage is of third and fifth graders. All four staff members who supervised recess consented to being videotaped.

Although the first graders at summer camp had participated in verbal interactions that were as extensive and sophisticated as kids in the older grades, the first graders at winter recess did not speak often during their play. Because this study of kids’ sustained play requires videotaped interactions of kids talking together, I primarily collected data about kids in grades three and five (i.e., the older kids I had permission to videotape).

Data collection. Summer camp data were collected in July and August of 2009. Winter recess data was collected in December 2009 and January 2010. I collected data from two sources to answer my research questions. These included videotapes and fieldnotes of kids’ interactions. My work was guided by the following overarching research question: How do kids sustain play with each other during play? These sub-questions helped direct my study:

- What do kids do when there are breakdowns in their interactions?
- How is intersubjectivity (i.e., coordination of communication) evident in kids’ interactions?
- What are the unwritten rules that shape kids’ negotiations following breakdowns?

Identifying instances to videotape. I chose to videotape interactions to create a detailed record of interactions that I could later re-examine. For example, I was able to capture more nonverbal aspects of an interaction on video than in fieldnotes. I am also able to show the video to others for presentation purposes, which is useful because showing video is more illustrative of the subtle communication that leads to intersubjectivity than transcripts or narrative description alone. I have, however, kept in mind that a videotape record is not a “phenomenologically
neutral document” (Erickson, 2006, p. 178) because it was affected by my decisions such as when to begin and end recording or where to position the camera. Still, videotaping interactions provided more fine-grained information than fieldnotes could have provided.

When choosing which kids to videotape, most of my selections were based on the number of kids in the activity, noise level, and the space the activity took up. I looked for interactions in which kids were engaged with peers in play or playful activities but were not directed by adults. I documented kids playing together in pairs or small groups because the small number of participants provided the best opportunity for me to record the activity of the entire group. I looked for interactions in which kids use language to communicate so I could better assess intersubjectivity. I did not document kids playing alone. Because I needed to capture the talk of participants, I did not videotape on windy days or kids playing physically far apart. I did not study large groups of kids or activities that took place over large spaces because I needed high quality video and audio recordings and because I sought to record the entire activity of groups.

Another consideration in identifying instances to videotape was whether to select particular focal kids. One goal was to collect video of a variety of kids so I could analyze how different kids interacted during play. Another, and somewhat competing, goal was to videotape the same kids on different days to be able to describe ways they sustained (or failed to sustain) play across multiple interactions. I managed this tension by taping a variety of kids during my first three days at each site and then seeking out those same kids to document their play repeatedly on my following visits to each site. For example, after I recorded a group of third grade boys during winter recess, I looked for those boys the next time I was collecting data in hopes of recording them again. This strategy was successful such that I was able to capture three
interactions of those particular boys. In addition, I documented multiple instances of other groups of kids at both sites.

When multiple play interactions were occurring at the same time, I had to choose one interaction to record. Some of those decisions were easy to make, such selecting which fifth graders to videotape during winter recess. Approximately half of the fifth graders played together, while the other half instead walked around the field and talked or sat against the school building and read books. The half of the fifth graders who played engaged in three play activities, and I was able to record two to four instances of each: I recorded one group who played basketball two times, a group playing what I call Mario Spider Tag four times, and a group playing Monkey in the Middle two times. While I was able to record some video of all three of the fifth graders play activities, other decisions about which kids to record were not as easy to make. For example, so many third graders were engaged in play during winter recess that I could not record all of them. To manage that difficulty, I selected one group of boys that I recorded three times and one group of girls that I recorded five times. Some of my winter recess selections were aided by a rule at the school that allowed only kids with winter boots to play on the snowy and/or muddy field. Many kids often forgot to bring boots to school, so they would have to stand in a small dry, paved area during recess, which precluded them from playing and meant that I had fewer kids to choose from to record their play activity. At summer camp, the kids were inside and playing in a much smaller space, so I typically chose which kids to record based on which interactions were somewhat isolated because that allowed me to capture better video and audio. Thus when two card games were being played at the same table, I instead recorded an instance of play that was taking place in another area of the room because I knew
that the audio would be easier to understand and transcribe than a recording of two games taking place in the same small area.

**Data collection at summer day camp.** I video recorded nine hours of kids’ play over 16 days of summer day camp. I videotaped kids while they were engaged in less closely supervised play activities at various times during the day. At camp, an hour at the beginning, middle, and end of each day was dedicated to free time in which kids could choose to play with any of the available games, toys, or art materials. Between those unstructured play times, kids were engaged in somewhat more structured activities set up by the camp staff, but kids were given freedom within many of the activities which resulted in the creation of games or pretend play interactions within the activities.

The activities that I refer to as more structured were craft and cooking activities. These activities were set up by adult camp staff, and staff members were available to help kids; however, kids were not required to do the activities, nor were they required to participate in particular ways. Supplies were offered and a goal of the activity was identified, but kids were then basically free to do what they wanted in that area. For example, making a snack of Bumps on a Log was one “cooking” activity. A staff member set out celery sticks, peanut butter, and raisins on tables and explained how to make the supplies into Bumps on a Log. Kids were then able to choose to do that activity or use the supplies how they wished. Putting peanut butter on other kids probably would have been a situation in which staff would have intervened because that action would be seen as violating the YMCA “core value” of respect. Staff did not intervene, however, when kids ate the peanut butter off of spoons, made Army men instead of Bumps on a Log, or sang songs about grapes and raisins without making the snack. Other activities were less defined. An outdoor activity offered access to a water hose, a plastic tarp, and a bottle of dish
soap. Kids were also able to choose, for example, to play card games or play with colored shape blocks. Adult counselors were available to offer guidance but rarely provided specific instruction or direction. Though some of these activities resembled what kids do in school classrooms, far fewer restrictions governed their choices at summer camp because there were no academic goals or specific expectations for completion of the activities.

I had planned to be near the camera while I videotaped kids’ interactions, but I soon found that my presence seemed to disrupt their play. The first three times I recorded video at summer camp, I remained nearby to observe their interactions so I could immediately follow up if I had questions but decided that my being nearby was too disruptive to the kids’ play. This is because they often stopped their activity to wave at the camera and say things like, “Hello, world!” or, “Hello, America!” They would talk about being on a “reality show” or on “reality TV.” In addition to noticing the camera, they sometimes talked to me or glanced up at me while playing. Because a purpose of this project was to study kids while they are engaged in kid-kid interactions during play, I decided that my being near the camera was too disruptive to their interactions. During my next visit, I set up the camera but did not remain next to it while it was recording and instead sat nearby. When I was not holding the camera, the kids did not seem to take notice of it. They stopped speaking directly to the camera, and kids occasionally bumped into the tripod and then looked surprised that it was there.

Because I was not holding the video camera while recording the kids’ play, I was able to take fieldnotes while simultaneously recording play interactions. However, I was not always close enough to hear their talk while I was taking notes, though the video did capture the kids’ talk. My strategy was to sit nearby but not to make eye contact with the kids who were being recorded. I often sat nearby and wrote in my notebook. As long as I seemed engaged in
something other than watching them, the kids seemed to forget about or ignored my presence. In my fieldnotes, I documented the grade and gender of the kids who were interacting and a rough outline of their play. I included who initiated the interaction, whether I observed any breakdowns, and how the interaction ended.

**Data collection at winter recess.** I recorded five hours of video over 10 days of winter recess. I videotaped kids playing at recess while they were playing on the field, on the play structure, or on the hard surface playing area. I sought out kids playing together in pairs or small groups because the small number of participants provided the best opportunity for me to record the activity of the entire group. In contrast to the kids at summer day camp, the kids at winter recess did not take much notice of my videotaping, and my presence did not seem disruptive to their play. After I initially approached to begin videotaping they rarely acknowledged my presence. Only once did a winter recess participant obviously act out for the camera, and she was the one kid who knew me from both summer camp and winter recess. Because I was present to hear and closely observe the interactions I was recording, I occasionally asked follow-up questions at the end of kids’ play interactions. For example, the fifth graders repeatedly played a game on the play structure that I later named Mario Spider Tag, and I was unable to discern all of the rules. I asked two kids what they were playing, and they said, “Our recess game.” They told me two of the rules that structured the game (i.e., one person is “it,” and players cannot touch the ground), and then they continued playing.

Prior to beginning my data collection at the school site, I observed recess time on five occasions to meet the teachers, support staff, and collect consent forms. I noticed that the kids at recess moved around far more than had the kids at summer camp, so using a tripod was not likely to work for capturing whole play interactions. I took a tripod with me the first two times I
videotaped, but I was not able to use it because of how much the kids moved around the field and hard surface play area.

   Because I carried the video camera with me, I was unable to take fieldnotes while I recorded video. Instead, immediately after I videotaped I wrote notes while sitting in my car or in the school lobby. My video camera has a table of contents feature that shows still shots of the first frame of each video segment, and I used that to prod my memory when I wrote my notes. My fieldnotes described the location of the interaction, a rough outline of the play interaction, and any relevant contextual information that I did not capture on video, such as what occurred immediately before the interactions documented on video. I also documented the gender and grade of the participants.

   Role of the researcher. I was a non-participant observer when I was collecting data for this project; however, the children and staff members knew who I was and were aware of my presence. I did not plan to interact with them while they were engaged in interactions with others. I tried not to talk with the kids while I was videotaping, though they sometimes acknowledged or spoke to me. As previously noted, some of the kids at summer camp were distracted by the video camera when I was holding it so I instead made use of a tripod. The kids at winter recess were aware of my presence, but they seemed not to change their behavior because of me in the way the kids did during summer camp. Only one kid at winter recess seemed to perform for the camera, and she had also attended summer camp and been witness to kids performing for the camera in that setting. At winter recess, one boy did stop pretending, look at me, explain a term to me, and then return to pretending. His offering of an explanation indicated he was aware of my presence, but neither he nor the other kids at winter recess treated me as they treated the adults who acted as playground monitors. The playground monitor did not
allow kids to throw snow at each other, so the kids made sure they were not being watched by a monitor when they threw snow. They did not, however, suspend their snow throwing while I was present and videotaping.

Data Analysis

I began to analyze my data as soon as I began collecting it. I watched my video the day I collected it or the day after and created content logs. To create content logs, I typed my fieldnotes and then added detail to those notes while watching video of the kids playing (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). I created a content log that was based on my fieldnotes and also included things related to sustaining play that I noticed when I watched the video. In making content logs, my focus was on the communication, both words and actions, which occurred between kids within an interaction. This was because intersubjectivity is evidenced by agreement or communication in attempt to reach agreement.

As I watched the video, I looked for breakdowns, whether they were in the form of arguments or more subtle cues such as kid who proposed a new idea or a different way of doing something within the interaction, and I noted when breakdowns occurred. Some breakdowns were more evident than others, such as when a group of third grade boys was pretending they were engaged in a sword battle on a ship. Peter made a suggestion about the next action that could take place, saying, “I, like, get off the floor.” Andy, however, disagreed and shouted, “No we’re done. We’re done! We’re done!” and put his hand up to block Peter’s pretend swing of the sword. In this example, Peter voiced and tried to enact his idea about the continuation of the sword battle, but Andy wanted the battle to end. In disagreement, Andy shouted at Peter and physically blocked him from acting out the next part of the battle. Some breakdowns were more subtle indications of individuals’ differing goals, such as occurred when a group of third grade
girls were playing together. One girl, Lily, was poking around in the snow, located a marker, and yelled to three others, “Guys, I found a marker?” When Lily yelled, Sarah stood up and walked over to her while two others continued to crawl across the field while pretending they were animals. The two girls who continued crawling ignored Lily and did not acknowledge her by speaking to her or turning to look at her. The two pairs of girls had differing goals and expectations for their play at that time, though Lily and Sarah later joined the other girls in their pretending. Both of these examples of breakdowns indicated differing goals and expectations within play interactions. I looked for breakdowns because kids had to work through them to be able to sustain their play.

When I began to collect video recordings and create content logs, I also began to write memos on a regular basis. This helped me notice whether I was collecting data that would assist me in answering my questions (Glesne, 1999). In particular, writing memos shortly after collecting my data and reviewing it allowed me to capture newly formed ideas or early analytic concepts when events were still fresh and recent in my mind. Staying familiar with my data also helped me begin to recognize patterns.

After I had gathered all of my data and was making some initial attempts at recognizing patterns, I noticed there were some instances of play (i.e., the fifth graders’ Mario Spider Tag activity) that could not be explained by what I had read about play. I then made a first pass at coding my data according to the type of play in which the kids were engaged, using theoretical categories (Maxwell, 2005). The categories of pretend play and game play are commonly used by researchers who study play, and I thought that sorting play interactions into those categories and looking at pretend and game play separately might help me understand Mario Spider Tag. Additionally, based on my viewing of the video and my review of my content logs, I was
beginning to anticipate that kids might sustain play differently in the pretend play and game play contexts. When I attempted to code my data using those two categories, however, I found that Mario Spider Tag did not fit either coding category. In the next chapter, I explain how I expanded on current theory to create a third coding category, which is a third play context. After initially sorting the video into three categories (i.e., pretend play, game play, other play context), I watched the video that had been captured by each code. That is, I watched all of the game play interactions, then all of the pretend play interaction, and then all of the other play context interactions. I re-coded some of interactions because a second, closer look at the video helped me see that some interactions fit better with a different code.

To understand what kids were doing in their play, I had to study and ask questions about the games kids play and the television shows, movies, and other media that interest them. In terms of the games they played, I often did not know about the game or I had forgotten about it since I had played it as a kid. For example, I have had very little experience with video games, so I did not know the characters and other elements of the Super Mario Bros. video game. My husband is an avid video game player, and he was a resource for me in terms of video game knowledge. To understand the games the kids played, I sometimes read the directions on the game box after they kids were finished. I also often looked online for information about the games and game rules. I also had to study to understand the kids’ interests, which were interwoven with their play. Within their interactions, the kids were continually referencing television shows and characters from popular culture that were unfamiliar to me. I either later asked the kids what they had been talking about or looked online for further information.

I also created transcripts of selected interactions from my video recordings. I created the transcripts because I needed a more detailed record than content logs to analyze the data, but
continuously viewing sections of video was not efficient. When selecting play activities to transcribe, I had analytical and practical concerns in mind. In terms of analytical concerns, I had a strategy of having transcripts from interactions different groups of kids so I could see whether different groups of kids acted in similar or dissimilar ways. I also wanted to be able to see, however, whether a particular group of kids acted similarly on different days. To meet both goals, I transcribed an interaction from one group of kids and then compared it to other interactions with the same group of kids on a different day. For example, I transcribed one interaction of a group of four third-grade boys and read it over to familiarize myself with it. I then watched interactions with those same boys from two other days of data collection and decided that the interaction I had transcribed was a good example of the video I have of those boys playing together. By repeating this strategy, I created transcripts of eight groups of kids. My selection of interactions to transcribe was also guided by practical concerns. Sometime after selecting an interaction based on my analytic concerns described above, I would try to create a transcript but found that the audio quality or video angle hindered the process. For example, one problem I encountered was that some kids spoke very softly or there were loud background noises interfering with kids’ words. I had been able to create content logs because I could hear enough of what was said to create a rough outline of the interaction, but I could not hear enough of the kids’ words to create a detailed transcript of the talk. Twice I came across play interactions that I could not transcribe because I could not hear most of the words that one kid spoke.

Through the process of creating content logs, writing memos, coding my data, and creating transcripts, I was able to identify participation frameworks that occurred within interactions. To analyze the framework within each play interaction, I looked at the kids’ participation statuses and at how they positioned themselves and others. For example, examining
the participation framework of the interaction that follows helped me to see how the older boy was in charge of the interaction and steered it so the boys could continue playing together. In this interaction, two boys – Max, a fourth grader, and Ryan, a first grader with Cerebral Palsy – were playing the card game Uno. Ryan had only one card left in his hand and, according to the written rules of the game, should have said, “Uno,” right away. Ryan did not, however, say it before Max did. Max then told Ryan to draw four cards, though the written rules say he would have had to draw two. Ryan was upset that Max yelled, “Uno!”:

1 Ryan Max you can’t say it for me.

2 Max Yes you can. It’s the- It’s the race to see whoever says Uno. So you have to draw four. (Ryan is frowning and slaps his empty, non-card-holding hand to the table.)

   It’s okay Ryan. (Ryan puts his head down on the table) You know you already- two four (counting). I already have five cards Ryan. (pause, then speaks very softly)

   Ryan?

3 Ryan (lifts his heads up, and then draws four cards while speaking several indistinguishable words in a squeaky, crying voice) you Max.

4 Max It’s okay Ryan. How many do you have? Count them.

5 Ryan Four

6 Max Four? I only- I have five. You have one less than me. So you’re technically still beating me.

The explicit rules of the game are an important part of this interaction. Max references the rules and indicates what is allowed by them. When Max says, “Yes you can,” it is as though he is saying “This is permitted by the rules of the game.” We can also see that Max positions himself as in charge by giving Ryan commands such as, “Count them.” Ryan demonstrates that he
accepts the positioning by complying and counting his cards. Referencing the rules of the game and positioning Max as in charge are two aspects that emerged during analysis. This interaction contains more nuances that can be seen through further examination of the transcript and video, but the above is an example of some elements that emerge from the use of participation frameworks as an analytic tool.

After analyzing participation frameworks, I compared transcripts from the three theoretical play context coding categories and noticed difference in frameworks, or ways that people position themselves and others through verbal and nonverbal communication (Goffman, 1981; O’Connor & Michaels, 1996). These participation frameworks became an important tool for my investigation of intersubjectivity because their identification helped me characterize how intersubjectivity is created within the various play interactions.

Validity

Identifying and addressing threats to validity is important because it strengthens researchers’ findings (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Maxwell, 2005). In qualitative research, bias in the selection of data (i.e., selecting data that stand out to the researcher) is a great threat to validity (Maxwell, 2005). To manage bias, I selected data in a systematic way (described above).

One specific threat I discovered during my study was my creation of a new theoretical category not currently discussed in research about play. I addressed this by providing readers with enough thick description to enable them to understand my analysis (Geertz, 1973). My written analysis includes narratives that permit others to understand the meaning of the communication within the play context and how it might be compared and contrasted with other interactions. Another threat to validity was my influence on my participants, or reactivity (Maxwell, 2005). As described above, the kids at summer camp took notice of me recording
them, so I changed data collection strategies and used a tripod instead of holding the camera. To further reduce the possibility of participants’ reactivity, I visited both data collection sites many times so the kids would become more familiar with my presence.
CHAPTER 4: Pretend, Game, and Hybrid Play Contexts

Scholars who study children’s play typically divide play into one of two categories: game play or pretend play (Frensch & Sternberg, 1991; Kim & Kellogg, 2007; Lloyd & Goodwin, 1995; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008). Game play is defined as being rule-based, whereas pretend play requires an imaginary situation. Vygotsky (1978) further specified play contexts by describing all play as involving both rules and imagination, though he explained that game play is focused on rules while pretend play is focused on imagination. In this chapter, I argue that a third play context, one that allows kids to use both explicit rules and imagination is necessary to understand the full range of play contexts that are created by kids within their play.

A New Way to Describe Types of Play

My findings align with the traditional way of describing play (i.e., as pretend or game play) with the addition of a third category (i.e., hybrid play). Although Nicolopoulou et al. (2010) extended this idea and wrote about play interactions as lying along a spectrum (see Figure 1), during my data collection I found that kids engaged in play that did not fit the characteristics laid out by the researchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule-Based/Game Play</th>
<th>Pretend Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit rules</strong></td>
<td><strong>Implicit rules</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covert imaginary situation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Overt imaginary situation</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Spectrum of play types based on Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sá, Ilgaz, and Brockmeyer (2010)*
Although previous research about play has described play as having either explicit rules or an overt imaginary situation, I found that some children’s play activity contained both. Thus, according to my analysis, kids interacted in three different play contexts that they created: game play, pretend play, and hybrid game-pretend play. In all three contexts, the kids make use of rules (always implicitly and sometimes also explicitly) and imaginary situations (either covertly or overtly). That is, the play contexts are defined by the presence of explicit rules and whether the imaginary situation is covert or overt.

All play interactions, like all human interactions, have implicit rules. These are the implicit social rules that guide behavior, such as who is allowed to talk, when it is appropriate to talk, and what subjects are appropriate to discuss. Figure 2 illustrates how all three play contexts can be conceptualized as existing within the bounds of sets of implicit rules and as having differing relationships with explicit rules and imaginary situations. The idea that all play contexts are affected by implicit rules contrasts with the work of Nicolopoulou et al. (2010), whose spectrum of play shows implicit rules being a part of pretend play but not game play. In my observations, I saw kids’ game play interactions guided by implicit rules, such as unwritten rules about how to settle disagreements.
Figure 2. Concept map of how the play contexts (i.e., game play, hybrid play, and pretend play) are defined by rules and imaginary situations.

Three Play Contexts

The three contexts for play are different play-worlds that have different participation frameworks. In this section, I will provide greater explanation of the play contexts; describe the typical participation frameworks that emerged in the three contexts; and explain the different types of roles that kids created and took on in each play-world. I will use transcript excerpts to support these claims.

Many of the play interactions I videotaped were of game play. At summer camp, 32 of the 42 play interactions were game play (see Table 1). From the winter recess play that I documented, 11 of the 36 interactions were game play. In contrast, during observations of kids play during summer camp and winter recess, I found 22 instances of pretend play. Of the 42 total interactions at summer camp, 6 were pretend play. Of the 36 play interactions during winter recess, pretend play occurred in 16 of them. Pretend play was probably more common at winter
recess than at summer camp because of the amount supplies or equipment available to the kids. At summer camp, kids had access to games, books, cards, and art materials. During winter recess, the only equipment available was a few basketballs and one football, plus there were more kids sharing these resources. Thus pretend play probably occurred more often at recess because kids had to make use of their imaginations since they did not have other play equipment. Though I would have expected third and fifth graders to play games more often than play pretend because kids of that age are more often found to be engaged in game play (Vygotsky, 1978), this was not the case.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Pretend Play</th>
<th>Game Play</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>No Code</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summer Camp</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Recess</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hybrid play was rare in my documentation of kids’ play. As mentioned earlier, play is typically thought of in terms of the two categories of pretend play and game play, and previous analyses have not identified other types of play. Despite its rarity, I argue that hybrid play is a distinct play context because it has characteristics that set itself apart from game and pretend play. In these next sections, I am going to build on the characteristics of play I have described by showing how kids engaged in play in three different play contexts. In addition to detailing these

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2 The “No Code” category applied to instances in which kids were involved in an activity that did not fall into any of the other coding categories. This was often activity that seemed playful, but the kids did not interact with each other enough for me to be able to describe the intent or meaning of their play. One example is a girl who repeatedly ran and fell on the ice while others watched, but they did not talk.
elements, I will show how different participation frameworks were created and how different roles were available within each play context.

Across the three play contexts, I found a consistent hierarchy: one kid was in charge, and the other kids took on subordinate roles. The kid in charge had specific responsibilities that varied by play context. The main responsibility overall was to manage the activity by navigating through breakdowns to sustain the play. The other kids supported the leaders by looking to them for management oversight and by obeying their directions or decisions.

Though I rely on particular examples throughout the sections and chapters that follow, I found these instances to be representative of the patterns that I identified in my analysis of kids’ play activities. I intend for my use of these excerpts to serve as illustrations of the points in my analysis, not for my analysis to apply only to the examples I selected to include.

**Pretend play observed.** One example of pretend play that I documented was a 15-minute interaction that occurred during winter recess. Four third-grade boys, Andy, Peter, Dylan, and Joey, played together on the snowy field. See Figure 3 for a picture of the boys during their pretending activity. I classified this interaction among the four boys as pretend play because it has implicit rules and an overt imaginary situation. The imaginary situation was the essence of their play interaction. The boys began their play by pretending that the footprint-covered snow on the playground field was “radical soda” that turned them into “evil kittens.” As the boys’ play continued, they cycled through several overt imaginary situations and pretended until their recess time was over.
Figure 3. Four third-grade boys engaged in pretend play.

As the boys played together, Andy led the group in a 47-second pretend play activity that began with the idea of “radical soda,” a concept I had seen them use before in their play:

1. **Andy**  The ice is all like cracking *(he barks, flaps his arms, and runs away)*

2. **Peter**  *(said as he turns and runs, following Andy)* And radical soda is all like under it. *(Dylan and Joey also turn and run, following behind Peter. The boys run only approximately 20 feet until Andy stops, and then Peter stops, and then Joey and Dylan catch up and also stop.)* Undisturbed snow is not radical soda. What if that is radical soda?

3. **Andy**  Why don’t we play like invisible station. Like **this** is radical soda. Right over there *(points to an area of the field)*, over here is going to be like radical soda.
4. Peter  

((barking while the other three boys look at him)) I am sinking into radical soda 

((barks several more times and slides one leg to the side so his body gets closer and closer to the ground))

5. Andy  

((takes hold of Peter’s arm and pulls him to standing again. The boys start walking toward the middle of the field. Andy turns to face me and my camera, and the other three boys stop and face me too)) And if you’re wondering what radical soda is, it’s a mix of toxic waste and poison.

Andy was narrating the boys’ play and described what he was pretending was going on. Here he pretended that they were walking on a very dangerous substance, which he called “radical soda.” It is made of toxic waste and poison and is found in areas where people have crunched up the snow by walking on it. At the time, approximately four to six inches of snow covered the field. The weather was very cold, so the top of the snow had a hard crust. According to the boys, radical soda was not under the “undisturbed” areas of the field, the areas in which no one had walked and messed up the snow. Radical soda was only found in areas where the crusty surface of the snow had been touched. Andy took the lead in imagining various things, and the boys followed his lead in their pretending too. In this excerpt, Peter spoke about information from their previous play sessions: radical soda is found under the icy, cracked surface of the snow. The two other boys, Dylan and Joey, did not speak in this excerpt and rarely spoke during any of the four times that I videotaped them.

The imaginary situation in this play activity was easy to identify because it was obvious during their interaction. The boys repeatedly named what they were doing in their talk to one another, such as when Andy said, “This will be radical soda, right over there.” He announced the situation as he pointed to a nearby area of the snowy field. As in the other instances of pretend
play that I observed, one kid was in charge of the pretend play, directing the action and choosing the imaginary situation. The rules were not explicit because they were never discussed openly or in advance by the group, as rules often are in games like basketball.

After their interaction around “radical soda,” the boys engaged in pretend punching. It was approximately seven and a half minutes into the recess period, and Joey spoke for the first time as the boys were walking across the field:

1. **Joey**: There’s like a wall that we can’t go through so me and Andy punch through walls
   
   (Andy punches at the air in front of him as he walks and then pumps both arms out and back.)

2. **Peter**: (begins talking while Joey is still speaking) Like like one of the like king like evil dudes, like one of the like king evil dudes like comes in and like turns me into like a evil dude (makes loud choking/gagging noise while sticking out his tongue and staggering around. The boys stop walking. Joey and Dylan turn and watch Andy and Peter.)

3. **Andy**: It takes 10 hits, and it takes 90 hits to defeat you.
   
   (Peter stands still in front of Andy while Andy pretends to hit him and makes sound effects. Andy takes a step closer to Peter, and Peter puts his arms across his chest and stands still. Joey throws one pretend punch, and Peter walks closer to him. Dylan tries to get between Andy and Joey, and he too throws pretend punches at Peter. Peter walks between Andy and Joey and throws pretend punches back at Dylan.)

   I get more toxic waste.

   (Peter advances toward Dylan. Peter also pretends to punch at Andy occasionally. Dylan walks backward as Peter walks toward him, pretend punching and making “pow” noises all the way all the way.) And now my hit has like 90 health? (Andy gestures
punching Peter with his “90 health” punch. Dylan falls to the ground, and Peter turns and walks away from him.)) You like snap out of it. ((Andy follows Peter and speaks while throwing a pretend punch at Peter’s back.)) You like snap out of it. ((Joey is standing in place and turns around to watch Andy and Peter.))

4. Peter ((speaks while jumping one time)) P-yuh! ((Andy and Peter stop moving and stop talking))

During recess, Joey and Dylan followed the lead of Andy and pretended around the ideas that he initiated. At the beginning of this excerpt, Joey spoke in a narrative way as if offering a new idea into the pretend play interaction. He was ignored by the other boys, however, and Peter spoke over him. Peter said that he was turned into an “evil dude,” which prompted Andy to declare that it would take 90 hits to defeat him. Andy repeatedly pretend punched Peter while Peter stood still. When Joey and then Dylan pretended to punch Peter, however, he did not stand still. Peter stepped toward Joey after his pretend punch, and he pretend punched Dylan until Dylan fell to the ground. Andy did not acknowledge that Peter was interacting with the other boys, and he continued to narrate his interaction with Peter. Next he said that his hit had “90 health,” which seems to have meant that it was strong enough to defeat Peter. Andy then told Peter that he would “snap out of it,” or stop being an “evil dude.” The boys stood facing each other without talking. Following Andy’s lead, soon the boys were munching on crunchy snow they picked up from the ground, then they were pretend punching again, and after that they returned to talking about “radical soda.”

**Participation framework.** The participation framework the boys created in their pretend play interaction was one in which Andy took charge and the imaginary situation frequently changed. Andy positioned himself as an authority on the pretending. He even interrupted the
activity to provide me with information about what they were doing. He said, “And if you’re wondering what radical soda is, it’s a mix of toxic waste and poison.” Peter positioned himself as an assistant who inserted reminders into the activity, such as when he said, “Undisturbed snow is not radical soda,” which was information carried over from previous recess periods. Peter did not provide new information or add new ideas to the play. When Peter barked like a dog and pretended that he was sinking into the radical soda, Andy pulled him back to standing. The two other boys, Dylan and Joey, participated by following the lead of Andy. They enacted the ideas he presented and did not disagree or try to add their own ideas. In this way, Dylan and Joey helped position Andy as being in charge of the group.

In my analysis of the boys’ pretend play interaction I noticed that the participation framework included changes in the imaginary situation. The four boys started with finding “radical soda” that turned them into “evil kittens,” then they went to a “medical motor factory” where they were attacked by bombs, and at the end of their play they were engaged in a “cannon battle” on a ship. Changes in imaginary situation occurred after the boys had played within one situation, which to a non-participant such as myself looked like they were aimlessly walking or running around the playground field, but perhaps the kids were thinking of what to pretend next. For example, after the boys had imagined a bomb was falling on them at one point, Andy ran part way across the field and stopped abruptly. Andy then asked the other boys, “Do you want to have a cannon battle?” and Peter answered, “Yes!” The other two boys also played in the ensuing cannon battle, but only Andy and Peter spoke during the play interaction. Throughout the interaction, Andy or Peter would yell directions or suggestions about the imaginary situation. For example, Andy said, “It’s just like for fun and we like get hurt when we are battling with swords.” After he said this, Joey acted as if he were slicing at Andy with a sword. The
participation framework allowed for the focus of the boys’ action to shift repeatedly as either Andy or Peter called out information about the emergent scene or imaginary situation they were enacting. Watching the boys play felt like television channel surfing because the action changed continually. Additionally, it did not seem like anything was occurring between action scenes as the boys walked or ran across the field, much as there appears to be nothing between television channels. In the boys’ pretend play and in the pretend play of other groups of kids, the activity itself and the actions to be taken changed repeatedly during a recess period.

**Roles.** Given that there were many shifts in the action, the role of *director* was prominent in the pretend play interactions that I documented. The director managed the play by guiding or ordering other players to act in particular ways. The director made decisions based on personal preference and implicit rules. When the third grade boys played together Peter and Andy were both vying for the role of director within the play interaction in the snow field, but Andy emerged as the boy in charge of the interaction. When the four boys were walking around the field and Peter abruptly fell to the ground, Andy said, “That makes you lose ten health,” which is video game terminology for losing strength. Peter said, “I still have ten health left,” but Andy disagreed and stated, “No, you have 90 health left.” Peter did not respond and instead started to walk, run, and hop to another area of the playground field. At other times Peter was able to direct Andy, such as when he said, “I like make you mad so you punch me,” and Andy pretended to punch Peter forcefully in the face. Peter’s successes at directing occurred primarily when he gave powerful roles to Andy.

Effective director talk took the form of factual statements. Kids who took on the role of directors spoke as if the action was occurring at the moment they were speaking, as though they were narrating the action sequence. For example, Peter said, “And we, like, wake up,” as he got
up from the ground, and then Dylan also got up. Peter also attempted to direct the action by giving commands, such as yelling, “Run!” but only Dylan followed his commands. Factual statements, or the running narrative style, was the type of director talk that was continually accepted by the boys. Though Dylan obeyed Peter’s command-form director talk, neither Andy nor Joey did. Dylan demonstrated similar allegiance to Peter several other times during this play interaction. Peter and Dylan had a history of playing together at other times, as I documented two other winter recess periods when Peter and Dylan played as a pair together, without Andy and Joey.

Within pretend play activities at summer camp and winter recess, the director was also the lead actor, and the other kids took on roles as supporting characters. The supporting characters acted in secondary or lesser roles around the kid who was acting as the director and lead actor. For example, the director was the captain of the ship and the supporting actors were his sailors when the above group of boys was pretending they were on a ship. When a group of girls was pretending to make potato stew, the director was the head chef and the supporting actors were her sous chefs. The directors often gave direct commands to the supporting characters, but directors did not predetermine every word or action of supporting characters. Instead, the other kids improvised the talks and movements of their supporting character roles and were then sometimes corrected by the director when their acting did not fulfill directors’ expectations.

**Improvisation.** Kids’ talk during their pretend play was disciplined improvisation in that the boys were making use of familiar scripts. For example, when the boys pretended they were walking on “radical soda,” they were playing on the archetypal story that contact with a foreign or poisonous matter causes characters to change or mutate. In stories from Sleeping Beauty to
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, consumption of or contact with dangerous liquids results in harm. The third grade boys at lunch recess were imprinting their own ideas into the broad outline of this script.

**Game play observed.** Game play has implicit rules, explicit rules, and a covert imaginary situation. One example of game play that occurred while I was documenting kids’ play at summer camp was a 27-minute interaction around the board game The Game of Life. Two boys, fifth grader Owen and third grader Javier, played the game that day, while three additional kids observed. Third grader Alexis talked often and took an active role in the game. Fourth grader Max sat slightly away and observed, occasionally talking with the players. Fourth grader Nick lay on the ground near the board and talked sometimes too. See Figure 4 for a picture of the kids near the start of their game. I have identified this interaction as game play because it has implicit and explicit rules and a covert imaginary situation. The explicit rules require players to take turns spinning a dial that displays the number of spaces they can move their game pieces. Players move their pieces along a path on the game board, and the various spaces give instructions and information about progressing through the game. Along the way, players can acquire a job, a home, a spouse, and children. Players can also encounter an assortment of windfalls (e.g., winning the lottery, striking oil) and setbacks (e.g., medical bill, drop in stock prices).
Figure 4. Kids gathered around The Game of Life board.

The kids played The Game of Life for almost a half-hour, and this 80-second segment occurred near the beginning of the game:

1. Alexis  
   *(looking at a card in Owen’s hand)* You picked a house. It’s an old mansion.

2. Owen  
   That is a cool house. It’s a Victorian. *(holding up a card he has drawn)* I am going to pay for it.

3. Alexis  
   Okay. Give me the money.

4. Owen  
   Voila!

5. Alexis  
   I’m the banker.

6. Owen  
   No I am=

7. Alexis  
   I mean like I’m the one that takes the money back.

This interaction might be Alexis’s first time with The Game of Life. I did not collect data of her playing the game previously, and the questions she asks show that she is unfamiliar with the game. Owen acts as the banker and has control of the cards and the money needed to play. In the above excerpt, Alexis said, “I’m the banker,” but Owen said that he was. She then said, “I
mean like I’m the one that takes the money back,” and then began to act as an assistant to Owen, taking money and cards from him to sort into piles and also handing the money and cards to him so he could distribute them.

8. Julio  My turn ((spins the dial to see how many spaces he can advance)). Six.
   ((reaches to move his playing piece) One two ((counts spaces as he hops his pieces across them))

9. Alexis  I can still=

10. Owen  Hey no! Dude! Dude! ((reaches across the board and takes Julio’s piece out of his hand and counts aloud as he moves Julio’s piece across two spaces)) Two three. ((reads from the space the playing piece is now on)) Use your job-

11. Julio  No look. ((points to spinner on game board)) I got a six.

12. Owen  Yeah but I-

13. Max  ((leans in so he is now as close to the game board as the other players)) Dude he got a six.

14. Alexis  He’s next to you.

15. Owen  Yeah but I- I- ((counts aloud the number of spaces from the last resting place of his piece to its current place while he hops his finger across the spaces)) One. Two. Three. Okay you go. ((touches the dial and gestures as if he is spinning it)) That’s six! ((picks up Julio’s playing piece, moves it back to its previous location and counts aloud as he hops it across the game board’s spaces)) One two three four five six! Payday.

16. Alexis  ((At the same time as Owen, Alexis announce the space on which Julio’s piece lands)) Payday! ((Julio clenches his hands into fists, pumps his arms, and leans...)}
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back))

17. Max Again! That’s a combo.

18. Owen Two in a row. ((takes money from the game box and gives to give to Julio))

Julio was the only other actual player, and Owen repeatedly corrected him such as in turn 15 in the excerpt. Believing that Julio had made a mistake, Owen replayed Julio’s turn and his own previous turn. The outcome was positive for Julio; it was a “payday,” which meant that Julio received his salary. Max was a spectator who here commented on Julio gaining another payday. Throughout the game Max continued to make frequent contributions by commenting on the game and even occasionally offering some information about the rules.

19. Alexis Lookit. ((fanning a few cards in her hand)) You even thought I never helped. ((puts cards down on the ground)) Owen, let me see how much these cost. ((points to cards))

20. Owen ((looks at the cards Alexis is pointing to)) Uh, those are jobs. These are salaries. ((counting money out to Julio)) And that’s 40 50 60 70. ((to Alexis)) This is my house. ((picks up a card Alexis had been looking at)) this is my job. ((picks up another card Alexis had been looking at)) This is my uh salary. ((picks up a third card Alexis had been looking at))

Alexis, as an assistant to Owen, said that she “helped” him though it is unclear how she did so right then. At other times, she handed him money or took money from him and sorted it into the “bank” box. Owen was alternately attentive to her, such as when he spoke to her and gave her a detailed answer in turn 20, and ignored her, which he did more often as the game progressed. Nick, seen in the lower right corner of Figure 4, lay on the ground throughout the game and did not speak during this excerpt or very often during the rest of the interaction.
The explicit rules of The Game of Life created a covert imaginary situation in which players encounter circumstances of middle- and upper-class American life. This is not an overt imaginary situation because although players encountered circumstances that resemble American life, they were not pretending to be or acting as if they were in those situations. They were not pretending to be American adults by, for example, enacting going to work or talking to each other as though they were buying stocks. If this were an overtly imagined situation a player might say, “I’m a salesperson. Would you like to buy stock or insurance?” Instead, in this implicitly imagined situation, players say things such as, “I landed on the salesperson space. I get $10,000 every time a player buys stock or insurance.” The difference between this type of play and pretend play is that in pretend play, kids act as if they are actually in the situation when they engage in interactions around overtly imagined situations.

**Participation framework.** In my analysis of kids’ game play, I found that players routinely created a participation framework that centered on rule-referencing. Kids used words and phrases that indicated there was a correct way to do things, and the players should be doing things in that correct way. The correct way to act was based on the explicit game rules. Explicit rules provided additional information to players about how to play, as compared to pretend play in which kids relied on only implicit rules and the direction of the kid in charge. Though kids sometimes solved problems or disagreements in creative ways that allowed for some flexibility around the rules, talk during game play included references to how things were supposed to be done. For example, in The Game of Life interaction, Owen said to Julio, “Now you gotta pay me fifty thousand.” Owen’s use of the word “gotta” indicates that Owen believes that Julio must act in a particular way to play the game correctly. Later Alexis specified how Owen should proceed when she held out a stack of cards to him and said, “You may pick one card.” Not only did
Alexis specify the number of cards Owen should take, but she also held the card pile out to him so his action of taking the card could be seen by all players.

**Roles.** Perhaps because the participation during game play at summer camp and winter recess centered on rule-referencing, one common role was that of referee. The referee was the player who acted as a game regulator, reminding players of the rules throughout the interaction, telling players when they had done something that was not in accordance with the rules, and directing players about how to proceed. See Table 2 for a summary of the key responsibilities of the kids in charge of the three play contexts. This role is different from the director of the pretend play context in that the referee can reference explicit rules as the “correct” way to play. During The Game of Life interaction, Owen took on the role of referee with commands such as, “You need to roll,” telling Julio to spin the dial to see how many spaces he could progress on the game board. When Julio spun the dial such that the dial lifted up out of its indentation in the board Owen said, “Oh, dude, you messed it up,” and then Owen put the dial back into place. Later in the game, Max, the boy who had been sitting quietly to the side and observing the game placed a small plastic dinosaur figure on game board. When Nick and Alexis then did the same, Owen told them that they were “ruining the game” because they are interrupting it by inserting objects that are not part of The Game of Life.
Table 2

*Types of Bosses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretend Play</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Guide or order supporting players about how to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Play</td>
<td>Referee</td>
<td>Regulate game, remind players of the rules, manage disputes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid Play</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Remind kids of the rules; create and assign character roles, authorize other kids’ ideas for characters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Owen was in charge of the interaction and acted as referee in part because he was the banker and in part because he seemed to be an authority on the game. The banker distributes money to the other players for their salaries and takes in money when players have to pay taxes or buy a home. The banker also holds the cards for the different jobs, homes, and families the players acquire. Because every turn a player takes involves cards and/or money, acting as the banker put Owen in an important role within the game.

In addition to being the banker, Owen acted as the referee because he was positioned as an authority on *The Game of Life*. Alexis in particular asked Owen questions about the games, such as when she pointed to cards and said, “Owen, let me see how much these cost.” Owen took this statement as an inquiry about what the cards mean and explained that some indicate which job a player has and some designate salaries. English is not Alexis’ first language, and his assumption about what she was meaning to ask seems accurate given that she next picked up one of his cards and asked what his job was. The other player and the onlookers did not ask questions of Owen about the game, but they also positioned him as a referee by allowing him to answer Alexis’s questions even when her questions were not directed to him.
During game play at summer camp and winter recess, the other participants acted as players under the regulation of the referee. The referee was a fellow player who often took the lead in the game, and the other kids were somewhat subordinate players. When Owen was the referee of The Game of Life, the other kids were players who also participated in the game. Owen took on the role of “banker” within the game, which meant that he took in and distributed the money in addition to participating in the game as a player. Julio was a player who played the board game but did not have a special role. When kids at winter recess played basketball, the referee was also the player who picked teams while the other kids were players without other specific roles.

*Language use.* When kids engaged in game play, as in The Game of Life example, they often referenced the way things should be done and expected players to participate according to explicit rules. The referee was a role taken on by a game player, and that person enforced the explicit rules of the game. Talk by a referee often took the form of commands that derived their authority from the written rules.

*Hybrid play observed.* Hybrid game-pretend play has implicit rules, explicit rules, and an overt imaginary situation. Hybrid pretend-game play consists of games that occur within pretend play scenarios. Unlike traditional games like basketball or Capture the Flag, these hybrid play activities have not been institutionalized and therefore exist only within the play of the kids who have created them. Similar to game play, the rules are explicitly stated by the players, but the rules are created or established by the players and are more flexible than the explicit rules of game play. Hybrid play is like pretend play in that it involves overt imaginary scenarios and implicit rules.
One example of this play context was a game fifth graders played on the play structure (i.e., a large metal, wood, and rope jungle gym), which I documented during their winter recess. When I created a content log of my videotape, I had difficulty describing this interaction within existing models of play. It was apparent to me that this was not a traditional game, but it was not pretend play either; it was a hybrid. It was a tag game with pretend play elements, such as references to kids taking on various roles (e.g., a giant spider, characters from the Super Mario Bros. video game). The rules were also very flexible, perhaps because the kids could not reference an explicit set of rules for the game.

In four play interactions that I documented during winter recess, a group of four to eight fifth graders engaged in what I describe as a hybrid play activity on the play structure. I refer to this game as “Mario Spider Tag” because the kids used the names of character from the Super Mario Bros. video game\(^3\) while they were engaged in a tag game in which they were pursued by a giant spider. As in other types of tag, one player is “it” and chases the other players, trying to tag someone so that person becomes “it.” In Mario Spider Tag, the person who is “it” is referred to as the “Giant Spider.” Players started at the west end of the play structure and traversed across it while being chased by the person who is the Giant Spider (see Figure 5). When the Giant Spider tags a player, the person who is tagged becomes the Giant Spider. The Spider must always start at the west end of the structure. Additionally, all players must stay on the play structure. When players fall off and touch the ground, they must go to the west end of the play structure and start over. The Giant Spider can only tag players when they are on the play structure, so players sometimes get off the play structure and return to its west end to avoid being tagged.

\(^3\) The original Super Mario Bros. video game from the mid-1980s was the first of many video games released on a series of Nintendo video game consoles. The game is still very popular and has many variations. Other related merchandise is now available and includes lunch boxes, stuffed animals, and tee shirts.
Figure 5. Fifth graders playing “Mario Spider Tag” on the play structure.

The below is a one-minute excerpt from a 15-minute play interaction in which six fifth-grade kids play Mario Spider Tag. At the beginning of this part of the interaction, all of the kids are on the play structure. Christian, Timothy, and Emily are in the center; Amanda has just gotten onto the west end of the structure after having fallen off; and Brianna is getting near Carolyn to tag her.

1. Christian  ((shouting to Carolyn)) She’s behind you! ((to Brianna about Carolyn)) Take her!
2. Carolyn   Who’s “it”?
3. Brianna   Still me.
4. Amanda  ((Carolyn hops off of play structure and starts to walk toward its west end with her hands clasped behind her back. Brianna hops off too and follows her, and she also walks with her hands clasped behind her back. Amanda yells to Brianna about Carolyn)) Tag her!
Christian spoke more often than any other kid who played Mario Spider Tag. He cheered others on, occasionally shouted insults, narrated the activity, and inserted numerous references to movies, television, and other media characters. Here he encouraged one girl while urging another to tag her. As Carolyn was just several feet ahead of the person who is “it,” but she did not realize that. It was not uncommon for the participants to lose track of who was “it” while they were playing.

5. Christian  I’m liver! No not the kind you eat. I’m a liver survivor. Not the liver you eat.

6. Timothy  Who eats liver.

7. Christian  Neither do I.

8. Timothy  I’ve never tasted liver.

9. Christian  Neither have I. (Brianna gets on the play structure at the west end. Brianna stands behind her until she gets onto the structure. Brianna tags Carolyn, and Carolyn squeals when tagged.)) Who’s “it?”

This is the only time I heard the kids speak about liver, and I do not know whether Christian raised the topic because it connects to another idea they had discussed. He says he is a “liver survivor,” which is perhaps a reference to him surviving a liver-related illness. After he and Timothy discuss eating liver, Christian asks who is “it.”

10. Christian  Who’s “it?”

11. Carolyn  I’m “it.” (Brianna jogs to the east end of the play structure and gets onto play structure. Amanda gets off the structure and also goes to its east end)) One=two=three=four=five=six=seven=eight=nine=ten=eleven=twelve. All right guys let’s go.

12. Christian  ((to Brianna))She’s coming back for you.
13. Timothy  

(to Christian, aka Mario)) You’d better run Mario.

To begin her turn as “it,” Carolyn counts to 12. Participants typically counted to ten. The count allowed kids to move some distance ahead of the Giant Spider. Brianna had just tagged Carolyn, and Christian was speaking to Brianna when he said, “She’s coming back for you.” Thinking Carolyn was coming after Christian, Timothy told Christian, who was often called “Mario” in this activity, he had “better run.”

14. Christian  

((to Carolyn)) Are you doing this for revenge?

15. Carolyn  

No.

16. Christian  

Revenge of the Sith.

17. Amanda  

I’m not going to sacrifice myself. I would never make such a silly choice.

18. Christian  

((to Brianna)) This is payback for you throwing her off a cliff. You’re doomed.

In response to question from Christian, Carolyn denied she was seeking revenge on Brianna. Then Christian referenced the name of one of the Star Wars movies that has the word “revenge” in it – Revenge of the Sith. In turn 16, Amanda declared that she was not going to sacrifice herself. Sacrificing oneself is a common practice in this activity. When a participant sacrifices herself, she allows herself to be tagged to save another player from being tagged. The other players sacrificed themselves regularly, but Amanda did not. Here she declared that a “silly choice.” Similar to his talk about “revenge” in turns 13 and 15, Christian spoke of “payback” in turn 17. One character is thrown off a cliff in the movie Revenge of the Sith, and no participant in Mario Spider Tag was thrown off the play structure or pretended to have been thrown. Christian might have been mixing talk of the movie with talk of Carolyn seeking revenge on Brianna for having tagged her.
The Mario Spider Tag hybrid play context is ostensibly game play in that it involves explicit rules. Players of Mario Spider Tag have created rules about how to play the game and tell newcomers, “You have to run from the giant spider.” When players fall off the play structure, others tell them to “go to the end” to start over. The kids also mark when other players break the rules, though I did not observe any consequences for rule breaking. For example, one player announced, “Timothy has broken the rules,” but Timothy was able to continue playing.

Mario Spider Tag is not, however, just a tag game because pretend play is woven into the context by the addition of an overt imaginary situation. Kids use the names of Super Mario Bros. characters and act as if they are those characters, saying things like, “You’re Luigi. I’m usually Mario,” and “Mario. You don’t want to kill your brother.” During one Mario Spider Tag game, the players pretended they were baby versions of Super Mario Bros. characters. They talked in baby-talk voices, saying things like, “Weegee destroy Mario,” instead of “Luigi destroys Mario,” and “Hewp Weegee,” instead of “Help Luigi.”

**Participation framework.** The participation framework of the kids’ hybrid play allowed them both to enforce the explicit rules of the tag game and act as if they were characters from a popular video game. Occasionally, other aspects of popular culture entered into the Mario Spider Tag game. This included elements from Star Wars, such as character names and mention of one of the movies by name. Kids also included talk about the Giant Spider being a “virus” at a time when the H1N1 flu was prevalent in everyday talk. In the school itself, staff member had recently posted new notices about hand washing in the bathrooms, bottles of hand sanitizer had just been placed in every classroom, and teachers told kids those precautions were related to the H1N1 virus. Though the kids’ talk about a “virus” could have been in reference to something else, it did occur at a time when there was much discussion of the danger of the H1N1 virus.
At times, it seemed like the tag game was a way for these fifth graders to engage in pretend play that might otherwise have seemed too childish to them. Perhaps the fifth graders I observed chose hybrid play because they felt too old for pretend play but still want to use their creativity to develop scenarios around familiar scripts. If they had participated in a pretend play sequence involving a giant spider or the Super Mario Bros. characters, they might have felt silly. Pretending with those same characters around a game of tag, however, allows them to create dramatic sequences within what is ostensibly a game of tag on the playground structure. Hybrid play contexts allow kids to play within the structure of a game with rules, but hybrids also give kids opportunities to practice creativity through the improvisation of pretend play.

**Roles.** In each instance of hybrid play, one kid took charge and acted as the *supervisor* of the play activity. One fifth grade boy, Christian, was the supervisor within Mario Spider Tag. Christian had the responsibility of introducing and authorizing new characters. Sometimes he introduced new characters by telling the other players which Super Mario Bros. characters they were, such as when he told Timothy, “You’re Luigi cause you got green on.” Other times, kids sought Christian’s approval to introduce a new character. Kids often asked him directly to authorize their ideas. Carolyn asked if she could be Mario saying, “Can I be him?” but Christian told her that he was usually Mario. One girl, Amanda, was especially eager for her idea to be approved: “Christian. Christian! You know that- Christian! Christian, you know that orange toad dude?” Christian’s role as supervisor meant that the kids’ attention was often focused on him so he could assign them a Super Mario Bros. character or authorize their idea for a character (see Table 2 for a summary of the leaders’ responsibilities).

While one participant acted as the supervisor of hybrid play, the other kids took on roles as assistants within the play activities. Within Super Mario Bros. Tag, Christian acted as the
supervisor and managed the introductions of new characters (e.g., Mario’s brother Luigi) while the other kids who acted as assistants took on the character roles that he assigned. In an instance of hybrid play at summer camp, the boy who was the supervisor decided what to build and how to build it while his assistant retrieved the appropriate block pieces. Assistants followed the directions of and played under the management of their supervisors.

Summary

While the idea of kids’ play types existing along the spectrum presented by Nicolopoulou et al. (2010) seemed theoretically useful and most play research uses two categories, conceptualizing kids’ play as having three categories or types is more consistent with my data. For example, in Super Mario Spider Tag, the kids were engaged in play that involved explicit rules from the game of tag and overt imaginary scenario of the kids as characters from the Super Mario Bros. video game. Thus, I created a third category of play, hybrid game-pretend play, to capture the play interactions I observed.

Understanding play in this way (i.e., kids’ play as having three categories) is valuable in that it describes all of the play interactions in which kids engaged during my data collection. Prior to creating the third category of hybrid play, I could see that some of the kids were engaging in play that was creative and fun, but I could not explain it using the existing categories. Categorizing the kids’ play activity allows me to contrast what the kids were doing across the three categories of play.

Each of the three play contexts offers different opportunities. Pretend play offers opportunities for kids to practice disciplined improvisation. Game play offers opportunities for kids to practice playing with and playing within rules. Hybrid play offers both improvisation and practice with rules. When kids engage in pretend play, they are practicing conversation
disciplined conversation or talk around scenarios that have a rough script. Games with rules provide enable kids to witness the consequences of not following the rules, plus games give kids opportunities to negotiate new rules and to change rules.

In naming the boss role for each play context, I chose the terms director, referee, and supervisor because the terms are familiar to my adult readers and the roles are familiar to kids. Those terms carry associations that help adults understand, for example, what a kid does when she takes on the role of the director as the boss of pretend play. Additionally, though the kids themselves did not use the terms, they are roles with which the kids are familiar. Kids play sports in physical education class and often outside of school as well, so they are familiar with the role of referee. Particularly because most of my participants from both summer camp and winter recess attended charter schools with Core Knowledge curriculums, their classroom time was managed by teachers who act as directors who closely managed the students’ academic activities. Thus though the terms might not be familiar to the kids, the roles are. In the following chapter, I will describe the ways the kids, especially the ones in charge, sustained their play and worked through breakdowns in communication within each of the play contexts.
CHAPTER 5: Sustaining Play with Directors, Referees, and Supervisors

If play is useful for development, then we want kids to be able to continue playing: sustaining play is important because play is important (Vygotsky, 1978; Pellegrini, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to show that kids sustain their play in different ways within each of the three play contexts that I introduced in the previous chapter: pretend, game, and hybrid play. By engaging in play in different contexts, kids are learning how to sustain interactions in a variety of situations. Within their play interactions kids practice negotiating, taking on leadership roles, and expressing disagreement. Though kids today have increased access to interacting in highly structured and supervised settings, their opportunities to use a repertoire of roles within their peer spheres are diminishing (Lareau, 2003).

As detailed in the previous chapter, the kids I observed engaged in play within three different play contexts. Within each play interaction, the child in charge of the play interaction had an important role in that this individual’s actions helped to organize and sustain the group’s play. The individual in the position of boss directed the play (in the case of pretend play), refereed the play (in game play), or supervised the play (in hybrid play). The kid who was the boss managed and controlled the interaction in a way that helped the group navigate through breakdowns, or trouble spots, in the group’s communication during their play. The other participants in the play interactions – supporting characters, players, and assistants – followed the leads of the child in the role of the boss (see Table 1). Each of the three play contexts was unique because of the differences between the participation frameworks that were created within the interaction.
Table 1

*Kids’ Roles in the Three Play Contexts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Boss</th>
<th>Other Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretend Play</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Supporting characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Play</td>
<td>Referee</td>
<td>Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid Play</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Assistants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I did not set out looking for children who were in charge or in the boss position in my video recordings. Instead, I examined play interactions looking for breakdowns and elements essential to navigating conflict, which sustained the play. I noticed that one kid in each interaction was significant to sustaining that interaction because she/he led the other kids in play in such a way that they were able to continue playing together. I identified and labeled kids as bosses when they were doing most of the conflict-resolving talk that followed breakdowns. My analysis, therefore, focuses on the children who took on this leadership role because they consistently played an important role in sustaining play.

The child who was in charge of each play context was well-established within each play interaction and each group of kids. In other words, when the same group or a similar group (at least half of the same kids) played together on different days, the same kid acted as the boss of the play context. For example, Christian was the supervisor of all four hybrid play interactions that I documented, and Andy was the director of all three pretend play interactions in which he was involved. The kids did not explicitly determine who the boss was through any kind of decision-making process that was evident to me. Occasionally, other kids seemed to vie for the role of boss, such as when a kid who was not the boss tried to provide direct a pretend play
interaction, but I did not observe instances in which the boss role was taken on by different kids within the same context. The kids played in different play contexts on different days, which gave them a variety of opportunities to practice navigating breakdowns. Additionally, most kids who were bosses in one play context were not bosses in the other play contexts. Thus kids who were sometimes in charge of play activities also practiced not being in charge. Most likely, interactions beyond the playground contributed to kids being able to gain the role of boss. The boss might have been a kid whom other kids found to be especially fun or charismatic, or the boss could have been a bully or a popular kid. My documentation is not extensive enough for me to be able to know how bosses gained their role, which is a limitation of my study, but my video recordings are detailed such that I was able to determine how the position of boss was initiated and ratified within each interaction (i.e., I studied the talk and action of the kids following breakdowns to ascertain who did most of the work toward resolution).

In this chapter I explain the work done by the child in charge to sustain play. In pretend, game, and hybrid play, the individual acting as the boss made different moves to sustain the play interaction. Mediation, the idea that we interact with objects and ideas indirectly, was an element of the kids’ play in all contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Within each play context, I also describe the intersubjectivity that was created in interactions and how breakdowns were navigated.

**Pretend Play: The Role of the Director**

In the pretend play that I documented, the kid who directed the play sequence sustained the play interaction by dictating the way the play proceeded. The kid in the pretend play boss role, what I refer to as the director, created an overt imaginary situation and corrected other kids when they did not participate in ways that aligned with his or her vision. Unlike a film director who might have a script that is shared with the cast members, the pretend play director did not
explain the scene or share ideas with the other kids ahead of time. Instead the director privately held an idea or direction for the way the pretend play should be carried out. Directors implicitly shared their ideas by correcting the supporting characters when they acted in ways that did not fit his or her idea of the scene. Because the other kids did not know what they were supposed to do, they took guesses. This meant that they often took actions or talked in ways in which the director did not approve.

The imaginary situation was overt in that the director would name what they were doing, but directors did not provide additional information about the situation or how to enact it. Most often, the director plunged the other kids into an imaginary situation without asking. For example, Andy began a pretend play sequence by pointing to the ground and saying, “Toxic waste. This can help us mutate,” Another way a director could begin pretend play was by making a statement such as when Alexis said, “We are going to play dinosaur family now.” The directors did not offer specific details about their vision for play, nor did they give reasons for it or justify it in any way. Once a director, instead of dictating, asked, “Hey do you want to have a cannon battle?” This occurred only one time, however, and the other kids readily agreed to the idea. In all other instances of pretend play, directors told and did not ask other players about the scene they were creating.

Kids who took on the role of director did, however, provide guidance by using words that reference cultural scripts. Cultural scripts are “generalized knowledge” (Stigler & Hiebert, 1998, p. 4) about events or activities. These scripts mediate kids’ interactions with imagined ideas and thus guide behavior and expectations; cultural scripts let the supporting players in on the implicit rules of the context. The ideas toxic waste, mutate, dinosaurs, and family all hold meaning and point to particular ways of acting. When Alexis said they were going to play “dinosaur family,”
the kids took on roles such as “baby” and “mama.” The mother dinosaur disciplined the baby, telling him that he was “grounded” and could play with his brother. One boy, however, interjected scientific information about dinosaurs: Andrew repeatedly said things like, “This is a plant eater, you know,” and “This one’s a herbivore,” while holding a dinosaur figure close to Alexis’s face. After hearing Andrew’s information eight times in 32 seconds, Alexis said, “We know.” The other two kids ignored Andrew and continued to play “dinosaur family.” By referencing ideas they expect the other kids to understand, directors relied on others’ familiarity with cultural scripts. They announced what was going on and expected the other kids to understand and take up their ideas by enacting them.

The kids who had supporting roles within pretend play interactions sometimes volunteered ideas, but the kid who directed the play sequence rarely took up the ideas of other kids. During one winter recess interaction, Ashley announced, “If you look close enough, guys, you can find mini friends in the grass,” and another girl asks, “You mean mini mice?” Neither Ashley, in the position of director, nor any other kid responds to or acknowledges the “mini mice” contribution. Like Ashley, directors of pretend play did not take up all the ideas offered by supporting characters, and every director ignored at least one attempted contribution to the imaginary situation.

Because the pretend play centered on the ideas of the director, s/he was always at the center of the action. That is, the other kids watched and followed the director’s lead to figure out how to participate, and directors provided corrections as well. When third-grader Ashley was in charge of a pretend play interaction with Lauren and several other third-grade girls, the interaction started with four girls sitting on the field. Then Ashley put her hands to the ground and started to crawl. Lauren and Sarah started to crawl and followed her.
1. Ashley You got to act like an animal.

2. Lauren Moo, moo.

3. Ashley ((turns to Lauren and laughs)) Not a cow! They don’t have any cows, okay?

4. Lauren Okay. Ruff! Ruff!

5. Lily ((poking around in the snow and yells to Ashley and Lauren)) Guys, I found a marker? ((Sarah stands up and walks over to Lily))

6. Ashley ((said to Lauren at the same time Lily is yelling)) They don’t have any dogs either. They only have snakes, a lizard, cats, and lions.

7. Lauren Rawr!

8. Ashley Sssss

9. Lauren Rawr!

10. Ashley Sssss ((Ashley drops to her stomach and wiggles across the field. Lauren is giggling. She is behind and to the side of Ashley. Ashley and Lauren move southward on the field.))

11. Lauren Rawr!

12. Ashley ((turning and looking at Lauren)) Okay now you can stop now!

13. Lauren Okay fine. ((Ashley stands up and runs to the south soccer goal. Lauren follows her.))

Ashley did not provide any specific information or even an overview of her ideas to Lauren. She started crawling and announced, “You got to act like an animal.” Lauren went along with the idea. It was as if the children were picking up a conversation that they had started earlier. Almost all of the pretend play interactions began in this way, however, and it is unlikely all aspects of the imaginary situations were extensions of previous play. Lauren pretended to be a
cow but was told by Ashley that cows were not part of the scenario, saying, “They don’t have any cows, okay?” She later says, “They don’t have any dogs either.” Ashley did not tell Lauren who “they” were or provide information about the setting of the imaginary situation. Instead she enacted something that was in her mind, and Lauren followed her lead and accepted her corrections.

Given that directors’ ideas about what the imaginary situations were and how they should be enacted were not explicitly shared with others, the kids’ pretend play was remarkably smooth. That is, pretend play interactions did not end because kids became upset due to their limited ability to contribute to the pretend play vision and left the group, argued until an adult playground supervisor became involved, or rebelled by forming a coalition with other kids who also wanted to do something different. None of those things happened during any of the 22 pretend play interactions recorded at summer camp and winter recess. Only four pretend play interactions contained disagreements, and only two kids left following disagreements (see Table 2).

Disagreements were substantial breakdowns in interactions with direct verbal conflict. Most breakdowns were smaller, less noticeable communications such as when a supporting player did something unexpected, the director redirected the supporting player (perhaps by ignoring the supporting player’s attempted contribution), and the player went along without protest. Like smaller breakdowns, disagreements were repaired or resolved by the director, and the same kids who left returned to the activity later. Kids also did not talk to other unsatisfied players and then leave the group together. There were no disagreements that lasted more than a few turns of talk. The longest disagreement occurred when a supporting character offered an idea, the director told him no, the supporting character asserted his idea, the director walked
away, and then the supporting character ran to catch up with the director to continue the play activity. Thus even the longest disagreement lasted just 15 seconds and resulted in sustained play and the director maintaining his role as boss.

Table 2

_Pretend Play Frequency Counts_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summer camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total interactions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions in which disagreements occur</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting characters who left and did not return</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting characters who left and returned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Intersubjectivity.** To sustain play with each other, the kids had to develop some degree of intersubjectivity, or coordinated communication. They engaged in play that was highly improvisational in that the supporting characters were following the lead of the directors as they enacted the imaginary situation. The kids had to follow closely the talk and actions of the director, who was also acting as the lead or central character. While improvising in the pretend play interactions, breakdowns occurred within the pretend play interactions, but kids continued to play together. Breakdowns occurred when one of the supporting characters had a different idea about how the play should proceed. The breakdowns were evident in that the kid would try
out her idea and no one would follow along with her. Alternately, some players voiced their ideas and were ignored, redirected, or told they were wrong by the kid acting as the boss.

**Navigating breakdowns.** Most often, the director facilitated the navigation of breakdowns by coming out of character to give a command or direction as the director, as opposed to speaking as a fellow character in the imaginary situation. I first noticed this when one boy broke character and instructed another boy not to spoil his pretending. This occurred within a summer camp activity, in which the kids were making seasoning sachets (dried herbs and spices tied up in small pieces of fabric). The kids who chose to do this activity soon turned it into a pretend play interaction when fourth grader Ben announced in an accent that he had special spices from India.

Approximately two minutes into the activity, Ben finishes adding spooning spices into the center of a square of fabric. Four other boys are sitting at the same table.

1. **Ben**
   
   「Ben gathers up the corners so the spices form a round bulge in the middle. He holds it up as he stands up and moves off the bench on which he had been kneeling.」) This is seasonings. 「(walks around to stand next to sixth grader Caleb and speaks in an accent)」 This is spice you cannot find anywhere else. 「(leans in toward Caleb)」 I got this from India!

2. **Caleb**
   
   「You got it from 「(looks to the center of the table)」 that little dish over there.」

3. **Ben**
   
   「(speaks while smiling, laughing slightly, and still in an accent)」 No, I got it from India. 「(drops accent)」 Don’t ruin my pretend mellow man! I got this from India.

Ben was in charge of the interactions in both of the videos I have of Ben in pretend play, and he often made announcements to begin pretend play interactions. The other kids had always followed his lead and pretended along with him. This time, however, when Ben announced that
he had foreign spices, sixth grader Caleb told him, “You got it from that little dish over there.”

Ben first protested this in his accent, but Caleb did not respond. Ben then came out of character and said, “Don’t ruin my pretend.” Again Caleb did not respond. Thirty seconds later, an adult counselor was standing near the table waiting to retrieve some of the yarn one of the boys was using, and Ben spoke to him:

4. Ben (spoken to counselor in an accent) I got this spice from India.

5. Caleb (pointing to the center of the table) No, he got it from the little dish over there.

6. Ben (spoken in a quieter, non-accented voice while looking at counselor) I got this spice from India.

7. Owen (turns to face counselor and speaks in an accent) It’s from India! No mine’s from Europe. No. Mine’s from China. They make ramen in China.

8. Caleb They make everything in China.

9. Ben (counselor has just leaved down to smell his sachet) I know it smells horrible! But these make the best soup ever.

Ben continued to talk about his spices being from India and also told a counselor who walked over to the table. Caleb again said the spices were from “over there,” gesturing toward containers in the center of the table. Ben again said the spices were from India, but he spoke in a quieter voice and without the accent he had been putting on. Another boy, Owen, then spoke loudly and began pretending that the spices were foreign, though he first said India, then Europe, and then China. Caleb then said that “they make everything in China.” The counselor did not speak but bent down and smelled Ben’s sachet.

Ben and Owen then spent the next eight minutes pretending that they were being chased because they had spices from India. Two boys and a girl joined their pretending. At the end of
the play interaction, Caleb began to pretend and told the other kids that he stolen his spices from his mom’s spice cupboard. In this interaction, Ben did not get Caleb to pretend the spices were from India, but four other kids engaged in the imaginary situation with Ben. Ben first tried to convince Caleb to pretend with him while he was in character, but by breaking character he was successful in convincing Caleb not to “ruin it” for him. That is, Caleb did not leave the activity, continue to protest, or try to convince other kids of his opinion about the situation.

Another common way for the director to navigate breakdowns was to stay in character while responding to other players. For example, six third-grade girls were crawling across the soccer field during winter recess, following the lead of Ashley who had announced that they had to get to Air Grid Five to “escape ‘cause there’s an escape hatch that leads to the outside.” One girl stopped crawling, sat up, and waited. Ashley said, “But we’re not at the hatch yet,” speaking as one of the characters who was enacting the imaginary situation. The girl who had been waiting joined the group in crawling again until Ashley said, “Here it is guys, the hatch,” and stood up. The other girls then stood up too. In this instance, Ashley stayed in character to give directions about how to proceed within her imagined situation of getting to an escape hatch in Air Grid Five. The breakdown was subtle – a girl stopped crawling though the others were still moving and following Ashley’s lead – and Ashley navigated it in a more delicate way than breaking character to give an order. She chose to stay in character, as indicated by her tone of voice and use of the word “we,” which showed she was one of them and not talking to them from outside of the activity. Ashley gently indicated that to stop crawling did not align with her ideas about the imaginary situation. The other girls continued crawling with her, and the play interaction was sustained.
Game Play: The Role of the Referee

Kids who acted as game play bosses, whom I call referees, sustained play interactions by deciding the fair or right way to play so that play could proceed. Decisions were based on explicit rules about the game. Instead of dictating how to play, as in pretend play, game play bosses gave some explanation for their decisions and acted as referees. Multiple kids offered input and voiced their opinions during disputes, though the referees managed disagreements and typically made the final decisions. Because there were reasoned explanations and deliberations by referees, there was a sense of fairness or a just way of doing things that characterized game play interactions.

A disagreement about the explicit rules of the game was the most common form of breakdowns in game play. Because rules of established games such as basketball and The Game of Life are explicit, players had expectations about how the activity play would proceed. That is, a shared understanding of the explicit rules guided game play by limiting and making public the possible moves of a player. When players acted in ways not permitted by the rules of the game, other players voiced their objections. Referees listened to what the players had to say and then announced a decision about how to carry on with the game. Game play referees acted similarly to referees in sports. In a football game, a referee watches the action on the field and makes decisions according to football’s explicit rules. In my video recordings, I observed the kid referees participating in and watching the game action, and then considering how to make decisions and resolve disputes in accordance with the explicit rules of the game.

Kids’ game play interactions were mediated by explicit game rules and by the objects used to play the games. In her study of girls’ recess play, Goodwin (1995) found that the hopscotch grid and the rules of the game mediated the players’ interactions. The girls interpreted
actions based on a player’s body in relation to the grid and their understanding of the game rules: stepping on a gridline was interpreted a violation and meant the end of a player’s turn. The rules identified valued movements, and the grid was an artifact that marked the space and allowed those movements to be accomplished. When kids played cards at summer camp, the cards and the card game rules mediated their interactions. The rules define what it means to win a game, which shaped kids goals and expectations within a card game. When a card was missing from a deck, for example, the game was affected. The objects used to play games, such as cards in a card game or the ball in basketball, were artifacts that mediated interactions and affected how kids played together.

Unlike the relatively smooth interactions around pretend play, game play interactions were not always sustained. Perhaps because game play carried an expectation of fairness, players who were dissatisfied occasionally left the activity following breakdowns and did not return (see Table 3). In the 13 game play interactions in which disagreements occurred, twice kids left and did not return. Game players did not storm off without explanation but instead argued about how the game should be played and then left when not satisfied by the referee’s decision. For example, Kayla left a basketball game when she disagreed with the way the referee was sorting players into teams. She and three other kids had been playing basketball, but then two new players wanted to join the game. Kayla wanted Tanner and her, the team captains, to take turns choosing players. She started the player selection by choosing Camden, a boy that Tanner also wanted on his team. Tanner disagreed and said, “I’m playing with him,” as he pointed to Camden. This caused confusion. Tanner, acting as the referee, announced that all players would be divided so that it was “boys versus girls.” Kayla expressed her dissatisfaction with dividing teams by gender by announcing that she was not going to continue playing the game:
1. Kayla I’m not playing.

2. Camden Okay bye.

3. Tanner ((said at the same time as Camden speaks)) Gregory can be on your team.

4. Gregory I don’t care.

5. Camden ((to Kayla)) You’re not playing because I’m not on your team?

6. Kayla ((said while crying and walking away)) How could you?

7. Camden So what? You can pick another person. It doesn’t really matter dude.

8. Tanner ((to the kids who remained)) Okay, who’s second captain?

Here one player had an idea about a way to divide the kids into teams, but she was not acting as the referee and the players did not heed her ideas. Tanner was in the role of referee, and one goal of his was to get Camden on his team. Strategically, Tanner said, “Gregory can be on your team,” thus moving away from gender-based teams but offering Kayla a weak male player who often missed shots and failed attempts at defending against opponents. The other players went along with Tanner, and Kayla left the game unsatisfied. As she walked away, she cried and said, “How could you?” It was unclear whether Kayla was speaking to Camden or to Camden and Tanner when she indicated that she felt slighted. As the referee, Tanner worked to sustain the game play interaction despite the breakdown. He had offered a token compromise by offering Gregory to Kayla, and then he moved the game forward after the breakdown by asking who would then take on the role of the second team’s captain.
Table 3

*Game Play Frequency Counts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Summer camp</th>
<th>Winter recess</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total interactions</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions in which disagreements occur</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting characters who left and did not return</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting characters who left and returned</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though players did leave games in 2 of the 13 interactions that involved disagreements (i.e., significant breakdowns), more often referees tried to soothe or comfort unhappy players and tried to convince them to stay and play. The soothing or comforting was evidenced in a change of speaking tone to one that was softer and more measured and by their words that seemed intended to reassure players. The comforting typically included a reference to the rules of the game. During one card game, a boy cried because he thought the game was over and he had won. Max, acting as referee, told him, “I have five. You have one less than me. So you’re technically still beating me.” In this example, Max tried to make the other player feel better by citing the rules of the game. Because the player who uses all his cards first is the winner, Max was able to tell the other boy that he was in fact closer to winning because he had fewer cards. In other instances of players who were unhappy, referees drew on the explicit rules as a source of comfort.
and explained to the unhappy players either how they were winning the game or how what happened was indeed how things ought to be.

**Intersubjectivity.** Game players developed some degree of intersubjectivity with each other, which helped them navigate through breakdowns. Much of the talk within games was about explicit rules. Whether kids were in agreement or not about interpretations of the rules, they shared the idea that the explicit rules of the game had great influence over decisions. The rules acted as a meditational tool that affected the way kids interacted and made decisions. This was evident in that referees gave explanations for their decisions that were based in game rules. To create and maintain the intersubjectivity that helped kids sustain their game play, referees navigated breakdowns by explaining how the rules applied within the particular misunderstanding.

**Navigating breakdowns.** Sometimes the referee navigated breakdowns by explaining that the rule actually had been followed. This occurred in the basketball game that Kayla left. Later in that game, Gregory challenged an action taken by referee Tanner. The ball had gone out of bounds, and Gregory disagreed with what Tanner had done and said, “You didn’t even pass it in.” Tanner replied, “Yeah I did. I passed it in.” Tanner, acting as the referee, did not tell the player that the rule was not important to the game or that the rule did not apply in the situation. Instead Tanner told the Gregory that he had followed the rule to in-bound the ball. Justifications were commonly given by the kid acting as the boss of games to answer the questions and accusations of game players. In pretend play, kids did not question the director or tell the director she/he had done something wrong, perhaps because there were no explicit rules or shared plan for the play interaction.
Breakdowns were also navigated by referees through the use of demonstration to show that a player had an incorrect understanding of a rule. When playing the card game Garbage, first grader Laura acted as the referee and repeatedly showed that players were participating according to the rules. The game begins with each player placing ten cards face-down on the table (see Figure 1). Each pile represents a number, one through ten. The goal is to end up with cards numbered one through ten facing up on the spots that begin with the face-down cards. Face cards can also be used and are considered “wild.” A turn starts with a player drawing a card from a pile in the center of the table. If a number card with, for example, a value of three is drawn, the card is placed face-up on the table in the three spot. If that face-down card is a six, it is picked up and placed on the spot for a six.

*Figure 1. April and Laura playing the card game Garbage.*

During one game, fourth grader April believed that Laura had been putting cards on the wrong spot (kids refer to these spots as piles, though only one card is ever in the spot at a time), so she spoke:
April ((shaking her head)) That’s not a four.

Laura ((while pointing to each of the cards in front of her, she says the number value of them)) One two three four five six seven eight nine.

April Oh, you’re doing it the other way.

Laura ((nodding)) Uhm, hmm. ((April reaches to the center and draws a card from the draw pile to take her turn))

April, believing Laura was making a mistake, said, “That’s not a four.” Laura then showed that she had been using the correct spot by taking time to point to each of the cards in front of her and saying the number value of them. April, understanding that Laura had numbered her piles right to left instead of left to right and satisfied that Laura was following the rules, then said, “Oh, you’re doing it the other way.” Laura nodded and said, “Uhm, hmm.”

Approximately four minutes later, the girls were finishing playing a second round of the card game Garbage. April had just placed her last card on the table, put her hands down on her chair, and scooted herself back in her chair.

Laura You didn’t win ((stretches right arm all the way out to the side, palm up, with her hand open and outstretched)) because you didn’t saaay? ((slides arm off of the table and leans her head forward))

April Garbage.

Laura Or, or you can say “in a garbage.”

April In a garbage.

April won the round, and she sat and waited for Laura to notice. Because the game rules call for players to announce they have won, Laura prompted her saying, “You haven’t won until
you say,” and then waited so that April could say, “Garbage.” After April did so, Laura also explained that “in a garbage” was another way to announce that she had won.

In the role of boss in this game, Laura acted in a way analogous to how NFL football referees announce their decisions and offer detailed explanations for the ways the players did or did not follow the rules. When April thought Laura had played incorrectly, Laura counted her cards aloud to show she had been correct. When April did not announce she had won, Laura prompted her and offered two ways April could announce her win. As a referee, Laura did not merely state that a player was right or wrong but used demonstration to establish and explain how the rules had been or should have been followed.

**Hybrid Play: The Role of the Supervisor**

The kid in the leadership position during hybrid play, which has elements of both pretend and game play, sustained play interactions by regulating which characters were permitted to be part of hybrid play activities and whether the game rules were being followed. The hybrid play activities were loosely framed by the game play aspects of the activity, while the pretend play aspects provided space in which they kids were creative and collaborative. A main role of the boss of hybrid play, whom I call the supervisor, was to introduce and authorize the introduction of new characters. Kids worked together to sustain their play by improvising together and offering new ideas, and the supervisor had the role of regulating which ideas were permitted to be part of the interaction. Supervisors also enforced explicit rules in ways similar to game play referees.

Hybrid play occurred at winter recess and summer camp. The Mario Spider Tag winter recess activity was one hybrid play context, and I documented four instances in which it occurred that each lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. In those instances of hybrid play, four to eight kids
played a tag game in which they tried to escape from a giant spider while they acted as various Super Mario Bros. characters. During summer camp, I documented a ten-minute hybrid play context in which kids played with shape blocks. In this interaction, a first-grade boy and a second-grade boy played together. The boys played a game that involved creating pictures from small colored wooden blocks of various geometric shapes. The shape block game has printed cards that show things that can be made from blocks. For example, one card shows a boat, and blocks can be laid down on a flat surface, such as the floor, to look like a boat. Typically, the game is played by kids racing each other to copy the pictures using the blocks. In this hybrid play instance, the two boys worked together to use the blocks to make copies of the pictures. While engaged in the shape block game, they also pretended to be part of the pictures, and they created imaginary situations from the pictures. I determined this was a hybrid play context because the kids were engaged in a game with explicit rules (i.e., making copies of the pictures from the shape blocks) while also engaged in pretend play with an overt imaginary situation (i.e., people swimming around an island).

The supervisor of the hybrid play interactions sometimes acted like the directors of the pretend play interactions that I documented. This occurred when the supervisor stated decisions about the imaginary situation and gave no explanation for those decisions. The kids who were bosses of hybrid play sometimes rejected ideas outright by actually saying “no” to other kids’ ideas, and some rejections were more subtle and involved ignoring or redirecting their peers. In the shape blocks interaction, supervisor Sean rejected the ideas of his playmate, Malachi, several times. Some of Sean’s management of the play interaction was subtle. For example, when Malachi said, “We need guns,” Sean ignored this suggestion and instead started talking about
how they would create the people they were trying to build out of green blocks. Shortly after,
Sean took a more bold approach to rejecting an idea of Malachi’s:

1. **Sean**  
   ((holding a green block, that represents a person or a part of a person, and  
hopping it along the floor and on some red and orange blocks near the white  
blocks that are between Sean and Malachi)) Whee whee! Whee! Jump. Whee!  
   Jump. ((returns green block to white blocks))

2. **Malachi**  
   Okay, he’s on the island! Now let’s build it. Oh, that’s ((touches white blocks on  
floor)) like the raceway where they can race. Like ((picks up green block that is on  
the white blocks)) la la la. ((hops the green block off the white blocks)) Oh!  
   ((leaves green block on the floor next to the white blocks, leans back, and then  
leans forward and reaches to pick up the green block again))

3. **Sean**  
   No! ((reaches his hand to the blocks and scrambles the white blocks that are set  
up between Malachi and him)) Here. This isn’t- this won’t work at all. We have-  
   We have to like- Well we only need one yellow. ((moves off-camera)) We only  
need one yellow to start it out. ((returns with a yellow block))

When Malachi tried to add a “raceway where they can race” to the island, Malachi  
exclaimed, “No!” and reached over and mixed up the blocks that Malachi was using to build. For  
Sean, a raceway was not part of the imaginary situation and would not “work at all.” Sean guided  
the interaction so that the boys enacted his ideas about the imaginary situation, the pretend  
scenario they were creating (Lloyd & Goodwin, 1995). That is, hybrid play supervisors  
sometimes directed the way the play would proceed without input from peers, just as pretend  
play directors did.
The supervisor also sustained play by enforcing rules, as the game referees did. Disagreements about rules sometimes occurred, as in game play, but in only one of the five hybrid play interactions did a participant leave the activity (see Table 4). When Mario Spider Tag players violated the rules of the tag game, the supervisor insisted that the rules ought to be followed. During one game, a girl ran on the ground instead of traveling across the play structure, and referee Christian yelled, “Cheater! Start over! Cheater!” The girl then walked to the end and started again. When another player started to move from east to west across the play structure, which is opposite from how the game is played, Christian yelled, “You can’t do that!” and the player turned and headed back in the other direction. The supervisors enforced the rules of the game, as referees did in game play, and players complied with the rules after such prompting.

Table 4

*Hybrid Play Frequency Counts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Summer camp</th>
<th>Winter recess</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total interactions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions in which disagreements occur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting characters who left and did not return</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting characters who left and returned</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Artifacts mediated both Mario Spider Tag and the shape block activity. In Mario Spider Tag, concepts from the Super Mario Bros. video game were integrated into the tag game. For example, video game players must start over when their video game character falls off the surface they are traversing, such as platforms, ledges, and walls. In the kids’ tag game, players returned to the beginning of the play structure when they fell off of it or accidentally touched the ground. The boys’ hybrid shape block activity was also mediated. Knowledge of cultural scripts about islands, such as the inclusion of ideas like boats and swimming, helped the boys play together and understand each other. The shapes and colors of the blocks, the cards with pictures, and even the flat surface of the floor were artifacts that mediated their play.

**Intersubjectivity.** The kids who acted as bosses during hybrid play also provided more information about their ideas around the imaginary situations, which helped players to develop some level of intersubjectivity in this context. Participants in pretend play closely followed the talk and actions of the kid in charge to figure out what to do next. In game play, participants could rely on their knowledge of the explicit rules of the game to provide a rough agenda for game play. In hybrid play, explicit rules were present, plus the kids in charge provided some information about the imaginary situations.

When Sean and Malachi played with the shape blocks, Malachi did not always anticipate how Sean wanted things done. Sean explained his ideas about what they would build to Malachi while pointing and gesturing at the shape blocks: “We could just have like an island? And there are other islands. And see how like this and stuff?” This provided Malachi with some information about what to do next. Malachi then tried to add another yellow block

1. Malachi  

   (holds in his hand the only other yellow block that he and Sean have and then pushes it near the blocks Sean is now arranging)  

   Hmmm.
2.  Sean  

((pushes Malachi’s yellow block away from the blocks he is arranging)) No. No.

((Malachi puts two fingers on the yellow block and flips it end-over-end back toward him)) See how this kinda looks like the top of a trophy?

To help Malachi understand his idea, Sean explains further and describes that they are making something that “kinda looks like the top of a trophy.” Providing additional information is part of the coordinated communication that is intersubjectivity. Although Sean and Malachi were not always in agreement, they were having an interaction around the shared topic of building an island from the colored shape blocks.

During Mario Spider Tag, it was not uncommon for the kids to forget or be confused about who was “it”, so this was a common point of breakdown. At one such time of confusion, kids were questioning each other about being “it”:

1.  Brianna  Timothy are you “it”?
2.  Timothy  No.
3.  Christian  Amanda are you “it”?
4.  Amanda  No.
5.  Christian  Newcomers are “it.” That’s Cameron. Cameron’s “it” because he’s the newcomer.

The kids were confused about who was acting as “it” or the Giant Spider. Christian, in the role of supervisor stated, “Newcomers are “it”. That’s Cameron. Cameron’s “it” because he’s the newcomer.” Here Christian explained a way for determining who should take on the role of being “it” in this situation, and he explained this in a way that kids could use this as a way to make future decisions too. Offering this additional information was similar to how referees
offered explanations within game play, but no pretend play director provided extended information to other kids about their ideas.

Navigating breakdowns. Overall, the supervisor role was unique to hybrid play because s/he allowed other kids to have input into the situation but still maintained a regulatory position within the play interaction. Thus the kid in charge of this play context took a different approach to sustaining play. Players were permitted to offer input into the imaginary situation, which was sometimes taken up and extended by the supervisor. Players were also supposed to play according to the explicit rules, which were enforced by the supervisor. Because of the combination of these characteristics, hybrid play interactions were imaginative and also rule-regulated.

The hybrid play bosses collaborated with their peers to sustain their play through improvising in a way that I did not observe in either pretend play or game play interactions. They acted collaboratively and took up the suggestions of others, making use of the improvisational move referred to as “yes and” (Lobman, 2003, p. 136). That is, kids made use of the suggestions of others and extended them by adding new ideas of their own. This happened both in Mario Spider Tag during winter recess and in the shape block interaction at summer camp. Supervisor Christian allowed the introduction of the role of a virus into the Mario Spider Tag imaginary situation. When one kid referred to the person who was “it” as a virus, Christian said, “It’s not a virus. It’s like a virus. It attacks everything in its path.” Christian did not automatically take up the virus idea, but he allowed it into the imaginary situation with very little modification. Two minutes later, Christian mentioned the virus again and referred to the person who was “it” as the “giant spider virus.” Taking up and extending ideas offered by other kids occurred regularly in hybrid play but very rarely in pretend play.
Unwritten Rules

In all three play contexts, kids’ interactions involved unwritten rules, or the implicit rules of behavior (Goodwin, 2006). One unwritten rule was that the boss was the manager of the play activity. Across all three contexts, one kid took on the role of the boss and then managed the interaction such that play was sustained. The kid in charge worked through breakdowns so that the interaction could continue. The other kids in the interaction – supporting characters, players, and assistants – followed the lead of those acting as bosses. If the role of the boss were not an unwritten rule, or an agreed upon way of interacting, their play would have been organized differently. Instead the kids interacted as though they expected one of their peers to manage their play interactions.

Within each play context, participants generally adhered to unwritten rules and behaved according to them as a code of behavior. Within pretend play, this was apparent in the way supporting characters did not disagree with the orders of the directors. In only 4 of the 22 pretend play interactions did participants have disagreements, demonstrating that most of the time supporting characters complied with the ideas of the directors.

The boss role of game play was distinct from that of pretend play because the kids looked to explicit rules to guide their game play activity. In pretend play, directors created the imaginary situations and did not explicitly make their ideas known to others, so participants closely followed the moves of the director to participate in the activity. While pretending, the kids followed the lead of the director and worked through negotiations by allowing the commands of the director to take precedence. In game play, referees managed disagreements, but the activity was structured by the rules of the game and not by the whims of the referee. It was not uncommon for game players to challenge referees, and the referees then justified their actions by
referencing the explicit rules of the game. Pretend play directors never justified their decisions about what was permitted within their imaginary situations.

The hybrid play supervisor acted like a supervisor in a collaborative work environment. The supervisor made decisions according to predetermined guidelines (i.e., the explicit rules of the game), regulated the flow of ideas (i.e., he managed the imaginary situation), and allowed for collaboration (i.e., using the “yes and” move from improvisation). The supervisor of hybrid play was a boss in that he had the largest role in navigating breakdowns, but he did not command others like the director of pretend play, and he was more collaborative and creative than the referee of game play.

In game play, rule-referencing was an important unwritten rule. It was not unusual for players to question the referees about their actions or the actions of another player. In response, referees depended on the explicit rules of the game to make decisions and guide interactions. Though directors did not have to justify their decisions in pretend play, referees were expected to situate their decisions within the explicit rules of the game.

During hybrid play, kids played a game while also being immersed in an imaginary situation. Assistant participants offered ideas for new aspects of the imaginary situation, such as suggesting introducing the character of a “virus” into Mario Spider Tag. In hybrid play, the kids did not transition to playing the game without the imaginary situation, and they did not abandon the game to engage fully in pretend play either. One unwritten rule of hybrid play was to balance the components of the hybrid activity and to play the game embedded within an imaginary situation.

All play interactions were guided by unwritten rules. The kids had ways of doing things that created expectations for the ways activities would proceed. Bosses managed interactions,
and the other kids followed their leads. Play was sustained because the kids who acted as bosses effectively navigated breakdowns and because unwritten rules created additional structure for the interactions.

**The Role of Emotions in Play**

Feelings infused all the kids’ play activities. Because I looked for breakdowns in their interactions, my transcripts highlight instances of slights and negative feelings. Most likely, positive emotions were also present throughout the play I observed, but my focus on breakdowns contributed to my analysis not featuring those positive emotions. Though emotions were not a focus of this study, outbursts or remarks that exposed feelings were conspicuous enough to warrant mention here.

In each play context, kids said something that revealed their deep feelings about themselves and what they were doing. This occurred in pretend play when Ben was pretending that he had special foreign spices and Caleb was insisting that the spices were simply from “that little dish over there.” Ben told Caleb, “Don’t ruin my pretend.” Ben did not want his imagining to be ruined by Caleb’s realism. During a game play interaction, Kayla was upset about the way teams were being created and that a particular basketball player was not on her team. She said, “How could you?” as she cried and left the game. Kayla was hurt that other players were not choosing teams fairly. In hybrid play, Amanda had been trying to get Christian’s attention and tell him about a technique she had used to advance in playing the Super Mario Bros. video game. The technique Amanda used was not a risky move but a safe way to progress in the video game, and Christian insulted Amanda by telling her that his brother “does that when he’s scared.” She handled this slight by ignoring it and drawing attention back to the game by shouting, “Who’s going to sacrifice themselves? Not me!” Though Amanda had been repeatedly trying to get
Christian’s attention, she gained only negative attention from him when he attacked her video game competency, which she tried to deflect by changing the subject.

Vygotsky (1971) believed that imagination, thinking, and understanding are motivated by emotion. Like thought, he believed that emotions were a function that were first experienced between people and then inside the individual. Though his writings on emotion were brief, Vygotsky (1986) was clear that emotion and thought should not be separated for study because of their close relation and should instead be studied jointly. The processes of imagination and thinking were part of the kids’ play that I documented at summer camp and winter recess. Their imagining of future possibilities can be found within their play, whether envisioning the end of a game and the moves required to get there or conceiving a new character in pretend. Related to imagination, research linking the expression of emotions and play focuses on creativity (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003; Russ & Kaugars, 2000). In a study of young elementary school children, participants with more intense emotions produced more original responses to problem-solving (Russ & Kaugars, 2000). Children were more creative when they experienced more affect, whether it was negative or positive. Moran and John-Steiner (2003), based on the work of Vygotsky, explain that “creativity makes the emotions of the artist and audience public” (p. 72). Though kids playing together are not artists displaying their work, they were at work being creative in their play together. Creativity is evident in pretend and hybrid play when kids enact small dramas about “mini friends in the grass” and Giant Spiders chasing them on the playground. The kids who took charge of play sessions also used creativity when navigating breakdowns to sustain the play activity.

In play, kids act as though they are a “head taller” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102) than themselves – they behave in more advanced ways – and they are interacting within a space that
offers new and great possibilities. When a peer intrudes with a slight that causes hurt feelings, it is as though the hurt child is cut down to regular size and the bubble is burst around that space of possibility. Kids’ expressions of hurt feelings revealed the emotional investments they had made in their creative play activities.

Summary

The role of the boss was important to all play interactions, and bosses used different techniques to sustain play in the three play contexts. The kid in the leadership position organized the play interactions and managed the interaction in ways that sustained the play. When breakdowns occurred, the individual acting as the boss made decisions and guided the other kids about how to proceed. Directors commanded the supporting characters according to their privately held ideas about the imaginary situation. Referees regulated players by making frequent references to the explicit rules of the game. Supervisors managed the other kids by making use of rules and by collaborating improvisationally. Thus the role the boss assumed in each play context provided distinct ways for navigating through breakdowns. Additionally, kids played in different contexts on different days, so they had opportunities to practice navigating breakdowns in a variety of way. Most kids who were bosses in one context were not bosses in the other two contexts, so kids who were sometimes in charge also practiced not being in charge. Practicing how to sustain play in different play context is important because kids learn experientially how to navigate conflict in different ways. The kids acting as bosses and the kids who followed them had the opportunity to practice different types of leadership and conflict resolution skills.
CHAPTER 6: Discussion and Implications

Play is often cited as being important to children’s development (Pellegrini, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and has been described as a “right” due to children (Makman, 2004). And yet, Goodwin (2006) has noted that the “procedures by which children organize and make sense of their activities in a given social context are not themselves analyzed” (p. 23). That is, as much as play is researched and discussed by people interested in children and childhood, studies often fail to examine closely the ways that kids accomplish their play. In response, this study sought to answer the question of how children sustain their play interactions.

Findings from this study revealed that kids worked to sustain their play interactions by creating a participation framework in which one participant was in charge of the interaction. The kid in charge played the role of the boss and managed the play activity. The other kids followed and took on support roles. In addition, findings also revealed that unwritten rules around social interactions were important to the ways kids interacted with each other. Unwritten rules included the ways kids had for sorting themselves into teams and for deciding arguments, for example. I found that play activities were made up of nuanced communication that was evidence of the work kids did to sustain their interactions. Kids ignored each other, used hand gestures and body movements to indicate their reactions and emotions, and used cues such as popular culture references in their communication. These nuanced communication strategies helped indicate ideas and expectations and allowed kids to create the various participation frameworks within their interactions.

In this study, I drew on a sociocultural theory of learning to examine children’s interactions and learning in an out-of-school setting. Sociocultural theory assumes that learning occurs within interactions with people, objects, and ideas. According to Rogoff (1990) learning
occurs as new understandings are constructed, and this approach emphasizes how learning occurs through participation in socially and culturally organized activities. I drew from this perspective to help me examine and explain what was happening in play interactions during children’s summer camp and winter recess activities. I found that kids learned to sustain their play by participating in interactions, taking on particular roles that involved trying out new understandings, and practicing working through breakdowns in their play. Based on my analysis, I argue that sustaining play is a developmental task. I begin by explaining briefly the importance of play and of being able to sustain it.

**Play and Sustaining Play**

According to Vygotsky (1978), children play because it fulfills needs to do or be something that cannot occur in real life. In play, “unrealizable desires can be realized” because play takes place in an imaginary situation, whether overt or covert (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 93). Children play that they are swimming when they cannot go to the pool, and they play at games at least in part because of a desire to understand rules. Play is important to cognitive development because children learn to separate meaning from perception through play (Vygotsky, 1978). To communicate and work, people must be able to disconnect thoughts from objects and actions. Play thus acts as a bridge between young children’s concrete and observable world and the world of older children and adults who can imagine and understand things unseen. This enables thinking about the future and the understanding of things that are unobservable or are presently unobserved. For young children, a block is only a block. At approximately the age of three, children begin to be able to imagine and then can see a block as representing a tea cup during play. Children engage in play for years and learn to represent ideas with objects before they are able to think and speak proficiently about ideas without physical objects. Because of this, older
children and adults can have a conversation about a tea party without seeing a tea cup or
something that stands in for a tea cup. Through play, people come to be able to separate thoughts
from objects and actions, and to act on symbolic representations, which is an important cognitive
accomplishment.

Sustaining play is important because sustained interactions allow peer relationships, and
the learning opportunities that emerge from them, to develop (Jackson et al., 2003). Working to
sustain interactions beyond a simple initiation-response pair of turns of talk helps develop peer
relationships (Jackson et al., 2003). Play that is continued due to the development of
intersubjectivity, as in this study, leads to interactions far beyond simple initiation-response
exchanges. Because of the intersubjectivity they developed, the kids I studied were able to
sustain their play together and venture far into imaginary worlds or play consecutive games.

Play enables cognitive and social development in that it allows development to occur in a
social and interactional environment that is familiar to children. I propose that learning to sustain
play be considered a developmental task because of the cognitive and social relational skills that
are accomplished through it. Developmental tasks, according to psychologist Erik Erikson
(1959), are endeavors that people work on as they age and develop, accomplishing one before
being able to move on to the next. Examples identified by Erikson include infants learning to
trust their caregivers and adolescents gaining autonomy from parents. The idea of developmental
tasks has expanded far beyond those Erikson identified, however, and I recommend that learning
to sustain play be considered a developmental task because of the importance of play and of
sustaining play.
Opportunities for Play

Kids are especially free to work on sustaining play when they manage their own interactions with their peers. Though kids can work on sustaining interactions within structured activities such as in school classrooms and during structured play like adult-managed sports and games, less closely supervised play environments offer kids a freer space. Summer camp and winter recess were examples of less closely supervised play environments, or “peer spheres” (Dyson, 1993, p. 3). In my observations in those settings, kids were allowed to interact within peer spheres and were only rarely directed or interrupted by adults. Though adults were nearby and could be summoned easily by kids, the adults did not intervene in kids’ interactions unless property damage occurred (e.g., marker ink on clothing), there was a good deal of yelling (i.e., longer than an argument with just three turns of talk), or one of a few particular rules were broken (e.g., no throwing gravel, boots required for the snow). By managing their own play activity, kids worked to sustain interactions without the guidance of adults in the moment.

Because of changes in the priorities of American families, space for peer spheres is diminishing and kids have less time to work on interacting with their peers on kid-identified pursuits. Activities around adult-created goals are the focus of most of the school day (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Paley, 1992; Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). Out-of-school pastimes for middle-class kids, including the kids I studied, are typically intended to foster interest and competence in activities valued by their parents (Lareau, 2003). These activities, including music lessons, sports teams, and math leagues, are intended to prepare children to be middle-class or upper-middle-class individuals, according to Lareau. The reduction of opportunities for peer sphere interactions means fewer occasions for kids to work on the
developmental task of learning to sustain play, which has potential consequences for social growth.

**Unwritten Rules**

In this study, I found that all kids’ play involved unwritten rules. This is contrary to the idea that only pretend play has unwritten or implicit rules (Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sá, Ilgaz, & Brockmeyer, 2010). Unwritten rules are those unspoken agreements between people and are unnoticed until breached. For example, kids have ways of choosing teams for games or deciding arguments that are embedded within their play and are not explicitly discussed unless they disagree about the rule or whether to follow it. In Chapter 5, I included the instance of Kayla leaving a basketball game when she disagreed with the way the referee was sorting players into teams. Two new players had arrived, and sorting them into teams resulted in a disagreement over who chose a player first. In this example, the unwritten rule that saying a player’s name first meant the player joined that team had been part of the implicit understanding of the game. When choosing players, no captain or player said, “Whoever says the player’s name first will have that player on their team.” This unwritten rule only became apparent in the course of the disagreement about sorting players into teams.

Learning about unwritten rules is important because such rules guide social interactions (Elman & Kennedy-Moore, 2003) While the rules have flexibility, they also serve to govern everyday behavior. For most people, understanding and acting according to unwritten social rules comes easily. People interpret subtle cues (e.g., tone of voice, facial expressions) based on their understanding of implicit rules of social interactions. In this way, unwritten rules serve as a “hidden curriculum” (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004) for people with social-cognitive learning disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorders, because interpreting social cues is a
great challenge. Social rules aid us in our interactions with others by helping us know what to expect of others and what we ourselves are expected to do and say. The reading of social cues and understanding expectations within interactions are important aspects of learning about unwritten rules.

The most prominent unwritten rule that I identified was the rule that one kid was to take on the role of the boss and then manage the interaction such that play was sustained. The kid in charge worked through breakdowns so that the interaction could continue. The other kids in the interactions – supporting characters, players, and assistants – followed the lead of those in charge. Each of the three play contexts had a set of implicit rules as well. The unwritten rules of play created the play contexts in which the kids participated in their play activities. These three contexts are identified by their participation frameworks, which were created by interactants and made up of their participation statuses.

Kids created rules within interactions while they played, and some rules carried over to other play interactions while others remained within that instance of play. That is, while some rules are known to accompany activities (e.g., kids know from previous experience that turn taking is an implicit rule of conversation during hybrid play), rules can also be created during a play activity (e.g., new characters can be introduced to the hybrid game Mario Spider Tag with the approval of the kid who is in charge). During play, kids also learn to play with rules in the sense that they are engaged in figuring out the flexibility and limits of rules (Garvey, 1990). Rules are often treated as “resources to be probed and played with” (Goodwin, 2006, p. 36) within kids’ play. Thus, through play kids are practicing determining how to negotiate new implicit rules and changes to existing implicit rules. Though kids could work at negotiating implicit rules in other settings, play is a unique arena in which to practice playing with unwritten
rules because it is a relatively low-stakes venue (Garvey, 1990) and is less closely managed by adults.

By gaining insight into the work kids do to sustain their play, this study attempted to understand how kids organize their world (Goodwin, 2006). Qualitative methods, particularly video recording, enabled me to uncover the nuanced communication that kids made use of to negotiate through breakdowns and sustain play activities. I was able to discover the participation frameworks kids created to sustain their play, such as the role of the kid in charge who managed an interaction.

Limitations

As in any study, there were limitations to this analysis. First, I did not know the participants outside of the summer camp or winter recess environments. This is a limitation to my study because additional information that could have given me insight into the kids’ play interactions. One girl was a participant in both the summer camp and winter recess data collection periods, so I knew her in multiple environments. I had little to no information, however, about the kids’ lives beyond the play interactions that I recorded. Many other factors could have influenced the ways they engaged in play and could have added depth to my understanding of their interactions. Children’s interactions with their siblings, parents, and others influence how they view the world and construct understandings (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, information about school programs that could influence their communication strategies, such as anti-bullying or group counseling programs, could have informed my work. Not knowing about the kids lives outside of their summer camp and winter recess play prevented me from fully understanding what they drew on to create and make sense of their play interactions.
A second limitation was that I had a small number of recordings of each group of kids. I worked to collect video of a variety of kids so I could analyze how different kids interacted during play. I also wanted to videotape the same kids on different days to be able to describe ways they sustained (or failed to sustain) play across multiple interactions. I managed this tension by taping a variety of kids during my first three days at each site and then seeking out those same kids to document their play repeatedly on my following visits to each site. Kids’ presence and play activities, however, were constrained by circumstances I could not control that included absences from camp/school, missing recess due to school fieldtrips, kids not having boots to play at winter recess, and kids at summer camp not being able to participate in the study (which limited my video recording of them and the kids with whom they played). The number of days on which I was able to collect data was hindered by the schedules of the summer camp (due to activities such as a camp show, all-camp fieldtrips, and then the end of summer camp) and the school (due to Thanksgiving and winter breaks and then standardized test preparation and testing). Ideally I would have chosen focal groups and then videotaped them for several play sessions of similar lengths. As it was, I collected video of two to four play activities of each focal group, which took place over 16 days of summer camp and 10 days of winter recess. My preference would have been to record five recordings of each group at play over a longer time period. My approach to analyzing the video revealed something important, but having more video of each group would have increased the validity of my findings.

Finally, my analysis was affected by the video that I collected. Twice I found that play interactions I had recorded could not be transcribed because I could not hear most of the words that one participant spoke. This was because kids spoke very softly or there were loud background noises interfering with kids’ words. I had been able to create content logs because I
could hear enough of what was said to create a rough outline of the interaction, but I later found that I could not hear enough of the kids’ words to create a detailed transcript of the talk. Occasionally, the video angle also hindered the analysis process. This did not occur in the winter recess video because I had been holding the camera and could move around with it while recording. The summer camp recordings, however, were made with the camera on a tripod and kids sometimes moved off-camera. That meant I did not know what facial expressions, hand gestures, or other actions they took. This affected inferences I could draw about their affect and sometimes meant I did not know to whom they were speaking. Despite these limitations, I was able to analyze my data and draw conclusions that include an expansion of play theory and insights into how kids organize their world.

Conclusion

This study is a window into children’s play activities in their peer spheres and what kids do in environments that are less closely managed by adults. I was interested in having a greater understanding as to how kids manage their play and worked to answer the question: How do kids sustain interactions with each other during play? Through my analysis I found that a similar hierarchical structure existed in all play contexts, and the kids who took charge made moves to sustain the play activities. My first sub-question asked what kids do when there are breakdowns in their interactions, and another sub-question asked what the unwritten rules were that shaped kids’ negotiations following breakdowns. I found that the participants created different participant frameworks, and the frameworks supported the ways they navigated through breakdowns. Primarily, breakdowns were navigated through the guidance of one kid who was the leader and managed the interaction, the unwritten rules of which varied by context. My final sub-question asked how intersubjectivity was evident in kids’ interactions. In all contexts, I
found that the kids coordinated their communication and thus were able to work through breakdowns to sustain their play.

In addition to answering my research questions, I found that emotions had a role in kids’ play interactions. My focus on breakdowns brought negative emotions to light, allowing me to notice those feelings and that they affected play activities. While play is supposed to be a space in which kids can explore possibilities, participants were sometimes cut down to size by their peers. Some kids expressed their unhappiness when they were rejected by their peers, and one boy expressed how he did not want someone to “ruin” his play. These emotional displays revealed how invested the kids were in their play and how important it was to them.

In this dissertation, I have shown that kids were learning to negotiate through breakdowns while interacting in peer spheres. I found that play was a vehicle that enabled the kids to work on the developmental task of sustaining interactions. The kids created and made use of participation frameworks that assisted them in sustaining interactions because the frameworks helped kids create intersubjectivity within their communication. The frameworks did not force interactants to behave in particular ways, but they aided the kids in aligning their talk and expectations so they could coordinate their communication.

Surprisingly, the interactions of the kids I observed were always sustained and no interaction suffered a complete breakdown in which all kids left the play activity. I viewed kids’ sustaining play as a good thing because of the value of sustaining interactions (Jackson et al., 2003). The merit of sustaining interactions, however, could be debated. I found that kids navigated breakdowns due to the guidance of a kid who took charge and steered the interaction. A similar hierarchical structure was evident in all three play contexts, though the kid in charge of
pretend play was not also the leader when she/he was engaged in game play (i.e., the kids took on different roles in different contexts).

Another interpretation my data could consider, from a more critical perspective, what the kids were learning in these play contexts; it is one that I entertained in my analysis, but it was not the focus of my research. More specifically if a researcher investigated how hierarchy, power, and status mediated children’s play, she could analyze the discursive moves the kids made to position themselves as leaders and followers in play activities and in interactions beyond camp and recess. This type of analysis would require the collection of data beyond what I considered for this study, such as information about what kids did in the classroom or at home. Within the data set I did collect, an emphasis on the interplay of hierarchy, power, and status could have entailed a closer study of kids who were routinely marginalized or positioned as followers whose ideas were never taken up within play interactions. As an example, when fifth graders Christian and Amanda interacted on the play structure during Mario Spider Tag, kids sometimes ignored her. At other times, they made moves that reduced her status, such as when Christian said “my brother does that when he’s scared” in response to Amanda talking about the way she played a video game. I could have focused my analysis on the interactions Amanda had with Christian and others, following how the kids positioned her in a way that marginalized her contributions and lowered her status. This type of analysis represents an excellent next step building from my close study of how kids sustained their play. From such an analysis, we could ask questions investigating issues such as the consequences of sustaining play through potentially limiting participation frameworks and the impact of play in peer-dominated spheres for kids who could benefit from the gently mediation that could be provided by adults. It is my hope that my
dissertation findings could help launch a further analysis into these issues that are so pressing and emotionally-charged for kids.
References


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