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Summary

Play as an academic field comprises multiple disciplines, definitions, and objectives and acknowledges a link between play and learning. Historically and in contemporary societies, play has been used as a teaching methodology; this occurs in formal classroom pedagogy as well as outside the classroom as part of informal and improvisational curriculum. Because play generally includes a component of pleasure, as a methodology it compels entry into learning in a way other practices do not. Yet this playful learning can be problematic, depending on outcomes and structures that define the play/learning experience through narrative and power dynamics. Scholars may analyze various aspects of curricular play, including but not limited to narratives provided, students' lived experiences within those narratives, actions allowable, objectives and advancement, and sources developing the narratives.

Keywords: play, games, improvisation, learning, activities

Nature and Ends of Play

Scholars have historically struggled to define play. It is a concept like love or freedom; ineffable, free-flowing. Like Orpheus losing Eurydice as he makes the fateful choice to look back, when scholars believe they have a hold on the term, it slips away from them. It may be easier to define the ends of play, such as mastery of strategy or personal/social enlightenment through metaphorical improvisation. I will, to be sure, examine these ends as part of understanding play's purposes. Nevertheless, the struggle to understand and to define play as a concept has a significant history. For Huizinga (1950) and Caillois (2001), the parameters of play include the following elements:

Play is free (voluntary)

Play is separate from everyday life

Play is without value

To these, I would add that play is *pleasurable*, that it provides players an element of satisfaction and delight (Omasta & Chappell, 2015). I encourage scholars to pay close attention to this parameter; it may seem obvious, but the experience of playing commonly

calls for ideological engagement within emotionally and intellectually seductive experiences. It's perhaps easier to "resist" a nonfiction article versus, say, a stage play that creates a compelling story around the same subject.

Almost immediately, scholars may find ways to dispute the parameters described previously. For example, physical education—play in a K–12 setting—is mandated rather than free. Play may bleed into everyday life; think of a fan fiction writer who spends her time thinking of new storylines, or a child who doodles in class. In addition, to a professional poker player, an athlete, or an actor, play includes (monetary) value.

Even the idea that play is pleasurable is not without nuance. As a child, for example, I was compelled to participate in group sports "because it would be fun," yet my frequent inability to meet expectations on a field or court belied that claim. Being a part of my team's losses was not "fun." Students who are the butt of a joke or in the center of a game of "keep away" may be in a "playful" experience, but I doubt they derive pleasure from it. And so the boundaries of play remain somewhat blurry.

I return to examining the *ends* of engaging in play, asking: What does play *do*? Historically, in many Western countries, there existed a strict divide between work and play. While work was productive, play was frivolous. This philosophy had biblical (Puritan) underpinnings, reflected in the well-known 1 Corinthians 13:11 verse: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways." This Puritan worldview, together with the development of public education during the Industrial Revolution, affected how play was viewed in K–12 education. Children needed to be trained to work, not to play, was the commonly held view. This view still resonates in contemporary educational practice; children are commonly conceptualized as future workers and the mandate of schooling as instilling a work ethic central to the capitalist system (training young people to like and to value work and connect it with advancement). However, theorists such as Froebel (1903) pointed to the necessity of expression linked to play in a child's life: "Play is the highest expression of human development in the child, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul. It is the purest and most spiritual product of the child, and at the same time it is a type and copy of human life at all stages and in all relations" (p. 22). Yet the trope of "growing out" of childhood and play persisted and persists, perhaps due to the association of play with chaos; the drive for logic and mechanical order during the Industrial Revolution period impacted patterns of thought and social conventions. In his introduction to performance studies, Richard Schechner (2013) points out that Einstein asks: is the universe playful or ordered? (Does God play dice?) (1971) Derrida (1994) asks: is society playful or ordered? In addition, Schechner points to the Hindu concept of *maya-lila* as reflecting a religious and philosophical understanding of the world as playful and "unreal"—to an extent, boundaryless and unstable. This link between chaos and play suggests something about questioning order. Whether in linguistics or other social interaction, where are playful spaces that might be exploited for intervention and deconstruction, or possibly in the service of social commentary and change?

In terms of formal education, scholars such as Dewey (1933), Montessori (1912), Holt (2017), Eisner (2004), and many others have articulated how much children learn from play, even in the context of early classroom-based education. Viola Spolin, creator of early theater games, studied with Neva Boyd at Chicago's Hull House, tying an improvisational performance

methodology to Boyd's progressive education through creative expression. Boyd's writings secure play's place in young learners' development: "Play involves social values, as does no other behavior. The spirit of play develops social adaptability, ethics, mental and emotional control, and imagination" (Simon, n.d.). Montessori, although not labeling her method as "play" per se, nevertheless suggests that education should mirror (as in mimesis) outside life: "Considering the method as a whole, we must begin our work by preparing the child for the forms of social life, and we must attract his attention to these forms" (p. 121). In Dewey's "Utopian Schools," he describes teachers as follows: "In setting creation, productivity, over against acquiring, they said that there was no genuine production without enjoyment." Here are echoes of play as a source of pleasure and delight. In today's kindergarten, students might learn how to cut paper, count beads as they string them, and climb steps to a slide. Holt (2017) describes children learning to play instruments: "At one extreme, we try to make our muscles play the tunes, other people's or our own, that we hear in our minds. At the other, we let our hands move on their own, and listen to and think about what they bring to us. It is when our muscles, hands, and fingers can improvise with the least conscious control that we are most truly improvising and have the most natural and effortless control of our instruments" (p. 26). Improvisation and play are intrinsically linked; recall that "free" was a part of play's definition to early scholars. Yet, at the same time students of around ages one to five engage in play, there is an expectation that they will stop playing and start working/learning. In contemporary schooling, transitional kindergarten (TK) through first grade ostensibly serves the purpose of phasing out play and phasing in work. And so the Puritan trope continues into the current moment; the idea that play's goal is chaos or frivolity and thus incompatible with education persists into development of curriculum and methods of delivery. In addition, the early capitalist tropes of building workers persist in the public school system; curricula tends to focus on outcomes rather than exploration, on real-world applications rather than imagination and metaphor. It is perhaps worth noting that even "free play" in schools takes place *in schools*, that is, within a context of seriousness, learning, and achievement.

Schubert (2014, p. 79) counters a mistrust of play at the center of education, writing (following Dewey): "Too often, even play is distorted by imposition of purposes in most Earthling schools. Without such imposition, play is likely the source of the greatest Earthlings learning, though too often Earthlings designate it as mere leisure pursuits, and thus do not value the role of play in learning. Children know that play is the most worthwhile kind of work." Here, Schubert acknowledges the "serious" nature of play, its utility and function in regard to building an educated citizenry. Play belongs, Schubert suggests, in a teacher's repertoire. It is an essential tool for preparing the way for new knowledge, or for deepening existing knowledge.

There are, of course, other "ends" or goals of play, including socialization or personal exploration, seeking dizziness or a "rush" (Caillois's *ilinx*), and bodily or mental exercise. Many of these ends may be connected to the twin concepts of competition and victory. Whether games of skill (*agon*) or chance (*alea*), the goal of playing, especially playing a structured game with rules and conditions, is often to win. Whether measuring skill or chance, winning may lead to monetary gain, the acting out of aggression, or "bragging rights" (Omasta & Chappell, 2015). It may also lead to nonmonetary gain, such as "leveling up" or "unlocking" portions of a video game. Such moments of victory suggest the arc of a play experience, the value of returning to play over and over again, and engaging in learning as a central part of that play experience or even as a "fringe benefit." My daughter "played"

with the online program Khan Academy as part of her math education. She engaged in challenges and gained levels. Striving toward mastery in the way this program calls for may be pleasurable for some students, but it frustrated her! I acknowledge here that this kind of play differs from many others, but as an example of play toward rote learning, I include it.

When involved in play, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that we enter a state of "flow," a mental "zone" where all our focus goes to the game/activity. We are both caught up in and hyperaware of the play we're engaging in. Often, this flow is beneficial; it helps players focus and stay in the creative or playful experience. Standing (1962) points out that Montessori envisioned students in this state, repeating tasks such as cleaning classroom items in order to master those tasks. However, there is, as recognized by Bentham (2019), Geertz (2017), and Schechner (2013), a "dark side" to play as well, which flow may partially enable. *Deep play* is risky, all-consuming, and woven into culture. Gambling is an excellent example of deep play. *Dark play*, by contrast, is cruel, hidden, and rebellious. Bullying, for example, might be considered dark play. K–12 institutions strive to eliminate dark play from students' lives, to create safe spaces inside and outside the classroom. They also strive to limit deep play, to eliminate risky behavior within the formal schooling experience. Some of this problematic play may indicate a transfer of power, a sense of who is "on top" and who may be challenging that position. Geertz's (2017) watershed observations of a Balinese cockfight masterfully depict and explore this concept.

These attempts at definitions of play and explorations of ends of play begin a conversation about the presence of play in our lives; they indicate on a basic level how we as a society might think of and experience play. And yet they do not take into account the objectives of the playmakers, that is, the institutions that structure play. In some cases, play is ostensibly free of "outside influence." A child on a playground may, for example, think of herself as a fairy as she "flies" on a set of swings. She follows no leader, pursues no victory condition, enacts no scripted narrative. However, if we examine her play more closely, we may discover that it has latent social and cultural underpinnings. What does the girl think of when she imagines herself as a fairy, for example? The Disney fairy characters? The fairies from Daisy Meadows's *Rainbow Magic* book series? Or perhaps wilder fairies created by an artist such as Brian Froud or Amy Brown? The girl, after all, did not conceive of the idea of "fairy" in a vacuum. What is it about flying that is attractive? How is the girl combining Caillois's *ilinx* with mimicry (role play)? Is becoming a fairy wish fulfillment, a break from her regimented, "grounded" school day during which she can be a creature separate from herself? And how does the back-and-forth movement of the commercially produced swing set influence and limit the experience of "flying?" These structures and the presence of cultural influences suggest how learning/curriculum may intersect with play. Although perhaps not immediately apparent, they are nonetheless present, definable, and deserving of analysis. They are, if I may paraphrase Shakespeare, the stuff that dreams are made of.

Learning (Academically, Socially) Through Play

In order for play to be efficacious, to "teach" something, it must have an objective beyond participation or "winning." Such educational play is defined through its objective, that is, its intent to (for example) teach a math concept or explore a moment in history. Learning through play has strong historical roots, despite the Western work–play divide. Theater, in particular,

has long been used to teach both implicitly and explicitly. Aristotle (2013) suggested that humans learn through mimesis, imitation. Stepping into the role of a character and "becoming" that character for a period of time creates a strong sense of self-as-other that persists beyond the playing of a role. Medieval churches taught Bible stories through the use of theater. It is important to understand that those in the audience were not the only learners in this methodology; the citizens who played the parts were reinscribing their roles and sense of communal morality as well. Later, in parochial schools, children would play roles in order to understand the lives of both biblical and everyday people. These plays continue into today; countless didactic pieces of theater aimed at K–12 classroom use proliferate and teach concepts such as ecosystems, antibullying, and the lives of historical figures. Even the familiar U.S. "Thanksgiving feast" dress-up and role play that occurs in thousands of classrooms yearly teaches through the playing of roles, even and especially roles that are removed temporally and culturally from students' own experience. Imagine, for example, an African American child called upon to play a "Pilgrim," or a multiethnic child cast as a "Native American." Self-as-other indeed; how and why do educators replay this *scenario*, described by Diana Taylor (2003) as "a paradigmatic set-up that relies on supposedly 'live' participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) 'end'," as an educational experience? What's the schematic plot? What exactly are students called upon to internalize, to remember? And what are they being asked to consign to the past?

Such didactic play also exists in technology. At any given moment, new apps are being developed to teach children concepts through the playing of games. Here I define a "game" as a playful experience governed by rules and with a clear victory condition. Whether in or out of school, games are a ubiquitous part of children's lives; they provide a medium for learning that contrasts with the teacher-led, communal pedagogical experience of a traditional schoolroom. In addition, games that are not intended to explicitly teach a concept serve to transfer knowledge and ideology as well; think of Monopoly (mechanism of property-related capitalism) or Risk (state boundaries; impact of war) or The Game of Life (Western middle-class acquisition of wealth). In all these games, something is being taught and players are being socialized, learning the rules of the society in which they live, through the pursuit of victory and the playing of carefully constructed roles and actions.

I want to pay closer attention to the learning modalities employed in these games, following the work of James Gee (2007), who defines "good games" as those in which deep learning may occur. Gee suggests that such games should "situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities of the modern world" (p. 48). For Gee, there must be a space in which students-as-players draw connections between their gaming personae and their in-real-life (IRL) selves. I see this possible connection as a challenge to artmakers (game developers, designers, curriculum authors, teachers). How might the inside–outside duality be made manifest? How might players look at the digital road they walk and question the path ahead and its meaning both locally and globally? To paraphrase the playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht (1964), how can games make the familiar strange?

Part of the joy in gaming comes from the ways in which games grant a measure of power and control. Think of the game of Operation, for example. How satisfying it was for my young self to pretend to be a doctor! How grating to hear that buzz as my hands weren't quite steady

enough! Or Risk, where I stepped into the role of military commander, sending (plastic) troops to their deaths to defend my borders and awaiting reinforcements from my seemingly endless supply of soldiers. This was power I did not have in my everyday life. I was shuttled from home to school to activities I often did not choose. How lovely to be the one taking action! How satisfying to hold lives in my hands! In role playing games (RPGs), the notion of power and control manifested in a less abstracted but more imagined fashion: I was a player character (PC), a hybrid of myself and fantasy archetype ready to do battle and do good. Weapons, spells, gold to spend! Such were the pleasures available to me and the pleasurable ways of being I coconstructed with those who designed the game experiences.

Another aspect of joy (or satisfaction) is derived from a drive toward mastery, winning through learning to play well. To succeed, to best others, to gain knowledge of a game's mechanisms and apply that knowledge to one's performance over time: this is the outlook many players adopt. In a capitalist society, we are groomed to win, socialized to be "our best." Many games allow players to level up as they solve puzzles, defeat villains, learn from successes and mistakes. This pursuit of mastery, of being the best at the table (or in the classroom), creates a hierarchical structure in which players/students understand themselves in relation to their peers as well as their own potential. Satisfaction and pleasure are derived from playing well: applying deep thought, kicking a ball strongly and accurately, or adroitly using one's fingers on a controller.

Researchers might apply a number of analytical questions to this play-as-learning strategy in order to deconstruct and study it from a critical standpoint. Here I will widen the conversation beyond structured games to playful scenarios, encompassing games, creative pursuits, scripted plays, improvisational activities, and any other pleasurable guided experiences. I suggest the following questions for analysis as researchers consider curriculum writ large and small:

> Who are you while you play, and how are "you" represented?
>
> What is your objective? How does it reflect real-life objectives?
>
> How do you "perform" as you play? Actions/choices, meta-level thought (competition, etc.), impact of chance?
>
> What did you learn from playing?

Each of these questions, or spaces for analysis, will be addressed.

Who Are You While You Play, and How Are "You" Represented?

Representation matters. The persona a student/player is compelled to act out makes a difference not only in the experience, but in the traces of the game/lesson that will be left on that student. Derrida (1994) calls this phenomenon a "hauntology," asserting that a thing (object, experience, story) creates its own way of being unique to the person interacting with it, but also and at once is defined by how it was made and used. Thus, if a student/player is defined as a soldier during the U.S. Civil War, the haunting will be different from if that same student/player is defined as a capitalist baron. Actors know that to invite a character in is to become, for a time, that character. And I argue that this phenomenon extends to education as

well. Are the personae students/players are asked to become congruous with their own lived identities? Recall the African American child called upon to play a “Pilgrim” during a Thanksgiving pageant. If incongruous (or even if congruous with a child’s own heritage), what data do students have to understand and build their characters? How will these characters “haunt” their understandings of the curriculum under study as they play through narratives as part of a lesson and even into their future education?

What Is Your Objective? How Does It Reflect Real-Life Objectives?

Objectives hold power. To be is to want and to need, and objectives make manifest the inner lives of both characters and people. To pursue an objective when playing a character is to share the attitudes, values, and beliefs of that character, to “buy into” the most compelling parts of the character’s identity and story. If we learn from mimesis, as Aristotle asserted thousands of years ago, then certainly performing the goals of a fictional character suggests that perhaps they should be our goals as well. Tellingly, such character objectives tend to line up with larger social goals, such as acquiring wealth and power. These objectives must come under scrutiny in the cold light of day: would we really want to decide the life and death of soldiers, for example? Would we really bankrupt people in order to gain property and cash? And if not, why are we asking students to adopt that objective? What is gained or learned about what students should want by playing roles such as the ones assigned by those games, or even by playing, say, Rosa Parks in a grade school pageant about great Americans? If Parks’s objective was to play a part in desegregation, how can that objective be brought into the present day? How can students understand the objective not only as a part of history, of Parks’s story, but also as an overarching human rights pursuit, still present and unfulfilled?

How Do You “Perform” as You Play? Actions/Choices, Meta-Level Thought (Competition, etc.), Impact of Chance

Of course, games are defined by their rules and the actions those rules allow. In so-called sandbox or open world games, much is possible; students/players may move about a world interacting with nonplayer characters (NPCs), gathering resources, and choosing quests as they desire. These games offer a relative freedom of choice that many players find engaging and refreshing. Rather than following a traditional narrative arc, they have the opportunity to build the narrative as they see fit, creating (in theory) a unique experience. Many playful experiences, however, define the parameters of player actions. Players may only do so much in a turn, or within a given screen, or in a script, or on the way to a master objective. This linearity keeps the narrative controlled, and students/players must confront one puzzle or challenge or moment, giving it their full attention, before moving on to the next. Thus, the experience controls the player’s focus, meaning it (the scenario) can reveal information or scale difficulty as appropriate to the playmaker’s ends.

Another element of performance is the impact of chance. Chance moves a scenario from a predictable series of actions into a space where anything may happen, allowing space for tactics to come into play (as situations change), as well as space for new players to challenge veteran players. Although too much chance creates a messy, random experience with no real choices, the impact of a small amount of chance (card draw, dice rolling, unexpected choices) challenges students/players to think on their toes, to be ready for the unexpected. This

thinking will prepare them to make in-moment decisions, with the benefit of acquired knowledge, and to feel secure in those decisions. There is much in life that is out of students' control, and they must adapt to conditions both in and out of the classroom. Rehearsing tactics, unexpected moments, and problem solving in the face of the unexpected at its best allows them to navigate life's moments with more confidence and wisdom.

What Did You Learn From Playing?

Here I arrive at the heart of analysis around students at play. Central to the outcome of the education process is the transfer and/or construction of information and knowledge. In a way, play is uniquely suited for this purpose. It typically includes objectives, it challenges players to retain information and use that information to their benefit, and it offers rewards. Pavlov could scarcely have developed better teaching tools! Thus, the question: what did you learn? To give two examples: first, imagine an app that challenges students to solve algebra equations in order for their avatar to progress along a road. Correct responses are rewarded with forward progress as well as a cheerful sound effect. Such an app is a simple demonstration of training, establishing in a student/player's mind the importance of progress and the repetition of skills. The app tests not the student's conceptual understanding of algebra but their ability to efficiently apply skills of logic, memory, and computation. Therefore researchers may rightly ask: what is truly being learned? And how does the app define the space in which that learning occurs?

The second example involves a board game called Puerto Rico, one of many games that use history as a backdrop for players competing against each other for "victory points." This game (which does exist, and which has inspired countless other games in its style) calls players to establish a personal colony on the island of Puerto Rico, including plantations (really) and town buildings. The ultimate goal is to collect goods such as corn, indigo, tobacco, and sugar, and to ship them back to Europe, whereupon players are rewarded with victory points. Researchers may well ask: what is learned from playing this game or others like it that use scenarios from history as in-game narratives? To define player objectives? Imagine that playing this game was a young person's first exposure to Puerto Rico's history. Indigenous peoples are absent from the in-game narrative; the closest equivalents to people in the game are small wooden discs called "colonists." These discs both work the plantation tiles and serve in the buildings. "Learning" here focuses on the Spanish presence, the building of infrastructure, and the primacy of trade. The game captures a moment in time and becomes the first step on a path of understanding colonial history without counternarratives that offer multiple perspectives on the moment chosen to engage with.

Scholarship around the design of games, apps, and other playful experiences designed to teach may assist in laying bare the assumptions and objectives of the playmakers, those institutions that develop the script, app, game, or scenario in question. Just as textbooks include bias and bow to commercial interests, so too do playful scenarios. Scholars cannot afford to take the "rightness" of play at face value, given its capacity for ideological transfer and even manipulation through given narratives and actions.

As mentioned previously, it is the pleasure of play that creates a drive for students to return time after time to an educational app or rehearse a didactic script. Such experiences typically create a specific narrative and reward behavior that corresponds with a learning objective.

Scripts offer the opportunity to be someone else and to take pleasure in watching one's peers act silly, as well as to perform before an audience of parents and schoolmates. Emotional and intellectual engagement are central. As Mary Poppins taught us, a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. It's the role of scholarship to define and critique both the medicine and the sugar.

Not Putting Away Childish Things

Although commonly considered and constructed as an activity for children, play is by no means limited to those younger than college age. Indeed, with the advent of escape rooms, theme parks, cosplay, fan fiction, LARPing, and video games (among may other activities), contemporary Western adult society is playful indeed. We learn our entire lives, and that learning can and often does take the form of play. Like young people, adults experience knowledge and ideological transfer as they play through constructed experiences. As with K–12 curricula, playmakers curate experiences for adults that define and facilitate experiences both in terms of playable actions and in-game curricula. Play is all around us, whether in sports, games, dressing up, painting pottery, book clubs, or any number of consumer activities that call out to us. Woe indeed to the adult who feels that he or she has "put away childish things!"

In a larger sense, societies define themselves in and through the games that their members play. According to Huizinga (1950, p. 173), "ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. . . . We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play … it arises in and as play, and never leaves it." What, then, do societies hope to gain from this play, and how does it square with the Puritan work–play dichotomy? If a society is, in part, the games it plays, how does it legitimize that play in the name of social maintenance?

Joseph Roach (1996) notes that societies tend to perform dominance and cultural power, even and especially in playful ways. Think of the British Crystal Palace displays of artifacts from empire brought to the center of the imperial unit in the time of Victoria. Or the Olympic Games, grand displays of national pride, unity, and strength focused around a set of competitions. Here, as Roach notes, communities perform excess and engage in waste in order to demonstrate that they have so much that waste is possible and even necessary; that they have access to bounty and are worthy players on a large stage. This occurs in games as well: players collect more tokens, victory points, or play money than they need in order to win, and win by a lot. This drive to accumulate wealth, whether real or fetishized wealth such as play money, is taught to Western children from the beginning of life. This is how to accumulate power and ensure life choices, the thinking goes. One must learn to play to win and display the spoils of competition in a lifelong arc.

On the flip side of this argument, how might play be used to counter dominant social narratives? Could play be transgressive or even revolutionary? Although there are existing models for this, including Augusto Boal's (1993) Theatre of the Oppressed techniques (influenced greatly by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originally published in 1968 and in English in 1970), there is room for growth and development. How might pedagogy change, for example, if instead of repeating the First Thanksgiving trope year after year, students joined tribes in their areas for a celebration? Or what if they rehearsed ways to

respond to situations such as unwanted attention when they encountered them in real life? This “rehearsal for the revolution,” as Boal labeled it, has meaning in students’ lives. It prepares them for situations both in schools and out of school, fosters critical thinking, and develops strategies for creating positive change in a communal, collaborative format.

Critical Analysis of Play and Further Considerations

Schubert (2014, p. 167) points to educators Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, Erik Erickson, and Fred Rogers as influences on his approach to play in/as curriculum as educational researcher and teacher. He writes: “I found it easy to capture interests and pursue needs with elementary school students as a teacher early in my career in education, because of my fortunate legacy of imaginative play. I guess I simply considered it natural to teach about prehistoric times by being a prehistoric man, or to survey world religions by conversing as advocates of different sets of beliefs.” Here, Schubert points to the ubiquitous nature of play both in childhood and throughout life; the Puritans may have attempted to institute a play–work divide, but ultimately the play instinct seems to have proven itself to be stronger than the sociocultural pressures that pushed against it. Schubert’s influences draw the map for this metaphorical learning. Froebel’s gifts demonstrate the usefulness of manipulatives or toys in training children for the adult world as they turn them, put them together, and so forth. Montessori’s commitment to child-centered learning and rehearsal for the world through playful tasks paved the way for further openness in curriculum. Fred Rogers emphasized the role of imagination as a metaphor for emotional development; the land of make-believe brought many of us as children into a space where we could manage our feelings in the fashion of X the Owl or Daniel Striped Tiger. We learned as they did, and we still do. We play throughout our lives, whether through formalized games or improvisatory activities. He also points toward the “assumed” or “natural” space of play in children’s lives, the readiness to “jump in” to a playful experience. Paired with this impulse is the teacher’s readiness to lead that play, to create the space in which scenarios can live and work.

Yet how can we study this play? Erik Erikson (New York Times, 1994) was quoted in his obituary as saying: “You see a child play, and it is so close to seeing an artist paint, for in play a child says things without uttering a word. You can see how he solves his problems. You can also see what’s wrong.” Perhaps this offers a structure for research: observation and a knowledge of the pursuit, an understanding of the theoretical and practical origins of the play experience. How else could scholars learn “what’s wrong” apart from having a sense of “wrong” for the player and for society more widely? Although Erikson may be most well known in educational circles for stages of development, his work on childhood play and its relation to social belonging serves as a support to the work of theorists such as Huizinga and Caillois. In addition, play has meaning outside the classroom; contemporary questions of physical education or being in nature as beneficial for young bodies call for new research and scholarship. As I write this, the Covid-19 pandemic continues to “ground” young people from much outdoor play; I anticipate further research on the changes and challenges to play resulting from the pandemic.

Given the universal presence of play as well as learning in the lives of students, it’s gratifying that scholarship has begun to address its impact on curriculum, both formal and in daily life. If we are the games we play, we should examine those games in full and question the play we

engage in. Only through curiosity and critical engagement can we truly understand what we are being asked to do. As escape rooms call upon groups of people to collaborate to solve puzzles, so too can we build understanding around the playful aspects of our lives. Creativity is the building block of progress, and play is at the heart of creativity. And so must creativity be the building block of scholarship as well, of calling curricular experiences into question and proposing new methodologies for approaching the intersections of teaching and play. To question content but not method of delivery is, I believe, inadequate. And preservice and in-service teachers must be called upon to understand these nuances as well. If they will be reading scripts to judge their appropriateness for classroom use, they must know what they are looking for in terms of narrative and performance.

To this end, I proposed a concept known as “colonizing the imaginary” (Chappell, 2010). This concept uses “colonizing” and “imaginary” deliberately. As in the historical process of imperial powers bringing spaces and peoples under their control through both physical force and ideological control (Althusser’s process of hailing, Taylor’s [2003] acts of transfer), so to do playmakers and curriculum developers seek to control the bodies and minds of students and/or young people outside formal schooling. At this very moment, writing in a café, I heard a mother tell her group of children, “I didn’t want to sit with you savages anyway” after they chose a table away from her that did not include room for their mother. Playful? Yes. Colonizing? Yes. And a direct reference to the idea of the “savage” as young, unformed, and frightening. What do the mother’s children learn from this hailing, about themselves, about their place in society, about indigenous peoples? A simple moment of playful banter, likely one of many. A throwback to the mother’s memory of Aesop’s fable “The Fox and the Grapes”? (Those grapes were sour anyway!) These simple moments, these hailings, these definitions that reinscribe, build a childhood and a lifetime of understanding the self through the eyes of others, a colonization of childhood.

In terms of the deliberate use of “imaginary,” I nod to the line between real and constructed worlds. How much of children’s lives exists in the realm of imagination? How much of adults’ lives? It could be argued that we (in contemporary Western society) are the most “playful” or “imaginative” population in history. We live our lives in spaces defined and constructed by screens, by commercial spaces, by theater and role play, by podcasts and audiobooks. Think of a simple device with a home screen. This is an imagined space in which a “desktop” contains “folders” that are “opened” by our avatar presence: an arrow points at the item with which we wish to interact. Imagination as a simulation of a workspace. It is this imaginary space which is the “way in” to the colonizing process as it relates to information and self-concept. My theater students study the lines between actor and character, between (as Schechner notes) me, not me, and not-not-me. Curriculum defines these lines for students. Are they historians? People in history? Literary critics? Mathematicians? Scientists? How much do these imagined roles and expectations define and inform students’ work? How are they themselves, the character in a story problem (for example), and not-not either of those in the moment of “solving” the problem? How do young people form their understandings of both childhood and adulthood through these imagined worlds, as well as their IRL lives?

Lastly, how can this process be questioned, interrupted? What kinds of interventions can students make, and teachers? To use a well-worn phrase, where do we go from here? Of course, the first step is awareness. Curriculum studies courses beautifully examine the meaning and impact of narratives and structures on the lives of students. Yet studies on the

performative or playful aspects of learning seem scarce. Peter McLaren's (1999) *Schooling as Ritual Performance* stands as a groundbreaking exercise in drawing attention to these daily life aspects of school as lived/performed experience. Yet this book and the performance studies articles that follow it utilize a serious, ethnographic lens. I propose the following challenge to scholars: meet both students and playmakers on their terms. Engage in play as part of a research methodology that examines games and other playful experiences from the inside, taking nothing for granted. Learn how and why students play, and how they might be playing resistantly, remixing or reframing the narratives and performances called for by developers. These understandings will open new doors both for students and for curriculum developers. They will allow educators to truly pull back the curtain on how children are asked to be the other, to both estrange themselves from their lived identities and welcome in other—often hastily understood—characters or historical figures.

Beyond this, the playmakers, students, and teachers may bring play to their own socially conscious experiences. Ethnotheater (developing scripts based on interviews and other research), developing counternarratives, the employment of Boal's forum theater (in which scenarios are replayed while solutions are tested), arts-based responses that engage with cultural narratives—these are all ways of being resistantly playful. Perhaps educators and students can use the tools that have been used to transfer ideology, to colonize minds. But to do so will take a commitment from credential programs, individual teachers, parents and other family members, and students themselves. It will require universities, K–12 institutions, and curriculum developers to work together as they create the next generation of learning experiences. Since there are multiple voices in any given development experience, such a working together will be difficult, it will require struggle and some level of consensus on what can and should be taught, and especially how that teaching should occur. Universities and K–12 schools, in particular, must agree on the role of research and the place of social justice in curriculum and in the lives of young people. Still, if we are born with the desire to play, and if a society is partially defined by how it plays, such an approach may prove to be one of the keys to an educated populace dedicated to the intersection of scholarship and citizenship.

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