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Home Objects and Children's Sociability in the Playground

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Abstract

The research presented in this paper questions the place and the role of objects in the playground, focusing on items brought in by children, whether they are toys or not, playthings or not, permitted or not. The objective is to understand their role in the children's relationships by analyzing their different uses: playful activities, exchanges, discussions or displays. What do these practices tell about the relationships, the material and playful culture, but also the organization of the school space, recess, its games and rules, both tacit and official? Our hypothesis is that objects, the material culture of children, constitute a medium for the construction of relationships that go far beyond play. Our main questions are therefore: What objects are brought into the playground by the children? What are the practices developed by the children from or around these objects? What is the influence of the school context? For this, three Parisian elementary schools (children aged 6 to 11, focused on 7 to 10) with contrasting populations of social backgrounds were selected. In each school, interviews were conducted with the supervisors of the recess, observations were made during recess of school time and lunch time and group interviews of children were organized.

Keywords: Playground, elementary school, sociability, objects, toys, cards.

Trends in playground and recess research

The playground has been the subject of much research and publication. There is no need for citing all of them, but rather of mentioning a few themes. There is a body of literature that defends the value of recess for elementary school children, while some would like to reduce or do away with it in the pursuit of simplistic profitability. The proposed break is essential to the quality of teaching. But without doubt, what marks out the break is that "the recess is one of the only times during the school days when children have opportunities to interact with their peers on their own terms. Children learn social skills, such as how to cooperate and compromise and how to inhibit aggression, by interacting with other kids" (Pellegrini, 2011 [2005], p. 5).

The same author refers to various psychological currents and empirical research to demonstrate the importance of recess. Numerous studies consider the different psychological dimensions of recreation, as can be seen, for example, in the book edited by Craig H. Hart (1993). Other research has taken an ethnographic approach, such as Julie Delalande (2001) in France, who observed, among other things, the peer relationships that develop during recess. These times allow us to study the way in which children construct their social relationships with relative autonomy.

In this context, a great deal of research has focused on the way in which gender intervenes at different levels, such as the occupation of space, types of play and relational modalities, both within the same gender and between genders, such as the famous "boys catch girls" or vice versa game. We might mention the pioneering work of Barrie Thorne (1993), which highlights how each school creates the border between the genders, which may differ from one place to another, and the rules that allow or prevent crossing this border without calling one's gender identity into question.

Other works, or the same ones, focus on the types and themes of play, in particular those on playground folklore, including the famous Opie research. Over a period of thirty years, this famous pair of English researchers published several books on English street and playground songs and games. They produced traditional collections and audio recordings, in keeping with the logic of folk studies, in particular at a school to which they returned regularly over these thirty years.

Contemporary work that follows on from the Opie work includes research that has resulted in two notable books (Burn & Richards, 2014; Willett et al., 2013). They explore modern forms of play and the importance of the media, certainly television, which is nothing new, but also YouTube and, more generally, the internet and video

games. The key issue is the agency of children, their ability to create, to be agents rather than passive receivers. The focus is on the changes brought about by each performance, each child. The aim is to find the sources of these changes, but also to highlight the constant inventions, the culture recycling, what the authors call 'cultural rehearsal' and which could be described using the concept of 'interpretative reproduction' proposed by William Corsaro (1997, 2010). Rebekah Willett (2014, p. 134-135) use the expression of 'remix culture' which takes different forms: "onomastic allusion" (use of names, gesture, music); "syncretism" (text, music, movement incorporated in a traditional game); "mimesis" (imitation or recreation of media content); "parody".

As Jackie Marsh and Chris Richards (2013a, p. 10) put it: "We saw playgrounds as sites where culture is practiced, produced, reproduced, regulated and negotiated". When analyzing recess activities, we need to consider "the forms of regulation, resources and structures on the playgrounds" (Willett, 2013, p. 39). In addition, the relationship with media content is linked to the circulation between different platforms: "Most of the references [of play] refer to multiplatform products (including merchandise, comic books, various kinds of digital games, movies, etc.) and it is not possible to know to which products the responses refer." (p. 45). Finally, Marsh and Richards (2013b, p. 67) write: "[...] playground cultures are distinct in that the playground offers a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) in which home and school cultures merge and children can, sometime, play beyond the direct gaze of adults".

We can also refer to historical studies, particularly those that show the efforts made by adults to control children's activities. Philippe Ariès (1965), for example, mentions gambling in Jesuit schools, while in New Zealand, Brian Sutton-Smith (1981) describes the substitution of sports games for traditional games for boys, which were considered violent and harmful.

Lastly, there is a great deal of research into the equipment and devices used in playgrounds, such as the one we carried out on the "Scrapstore PlayPod" (Besse-Patin et al., 2017). However, there doesn't seem to be any research into the objects that children bring from home to the playground and the meaning that this may have at least at primary school level, the question being different at pre-school level. This may have more to do with the marginalization of material culture in a number of research studies, which is undoubtedly something that toy research suffers from more generally.

While our research is in line with the above-mentioned research, it focuses on objects brought into circulation by children from home, which raises the question of the relationship between home culture and school culture. What objects for what

uses? What can we learn from this about the role of objects and children's culture and values?

Research methodology and institutional framework

The research, conducted with Master's students specializing in game/play studies¹, involved setting up three groups, each covering the monograph of an elementary school in Paris with contrasting populations of social backgrounds: one disadvantaged (we call it Les Lilas), one intermediate (we call it Les Bleuets) and one rather favored (we call it Les Iris). We shall see that this last point does indeed have a very strong impact on research data.

In each school, observations were made during the various break times for a total of 11 days. During these observations, photographs were taken to feed the inventory of objects brought in by the student, authorization given on condition that children are not photographed. Interviews were conducted with the two people in charge of this time – on the one hand, the three school headteachers, and on the other, the three REV (*Responsable Educatif Ville*) in charge of extracurricular activities, including the lunch break. Finally, focus groups were conducted with children (39 children in 9 group interviews). Elementary schools receive children aged 6 to 11, and we specifically targeted children aged 7 to 10, to avoid experiences that can be markedly different at the two age limits with preschool and middle school. Informal interviews with the children also took place during the observations.

The organization of the three schools is based on two short breaks of 15 minutes (in accordance with national regulations) each half-day, with the headteachers pointing out that their responsibility is for duration and safety. The rest is left up to the children. However, there has been a tendency to exceed 15 minutes. No activities are organized during this time, with the teachers assuming a more or less rigorous supervisory role.

Play, however, is also in other times more than just to these short breaks during school time. Extracurricular activities, during a lunch break of almost two hours (including the meal in the canteen) could be a time for free play, which partly is, but it is also marked by the tradition of organizing play activities, a culture of children's leisure organization: "but we're not going to adapt to their toys. We set up activities, we don't look after the objects. [...] But after that, our job is also to organize real

¹ The full report (in French) on this research is available at <https://sorbonne-paris-nord.hal.science/hal-04516412>

events and activities" (REV Les Iris).

It is in this context that we find the many restrictions on the use of objects: in every school, rules prohibit or limit the presence of external objects: they must fit in the pocket, fit in the hand, not be of value or cause conflict (Fig. 1). Objects that seem to be acceptable according to the rules then appear and are banned because they are considered dangerous or cause conflict between the children: "yes, if it's not dangerous, yes, if it doesn't cause conflict" (Headteacher Les Iris)



Figure 1: An example of an object which fits in the hand, Les Iris²

The rules vary from one school to another, with one essential factor being the social background of the students. Schools with economically disadvantaged pupils opt – in our sample and beyond, according to what we heard – for prohibition. "They bring a lot of them to this school because things are going well. In fact, there are schools where they prefer to stop right away. I mean, they don't bring anything back because then there's abuse, theft and loss, breakage and all that" (REV Les Iris). "So here, we have a policy where they don't bring anything, we don't bring anything to school to avoid any dealings that might become a bit... fraudulent" (Headteacher Les Lilas). Note the lack of pedagogical reflection: prohibition is supposed to be the best way of solving a problem, whether it's a total ban in difficult schools (defined as those attended by disadvantaged children), or partial bans when objects cause conflicts or thefts.

Another way of dealing with this issue is to provide children with objects for their playtime. However, this equipment, which refers to functional play and

² All photographs were taken by students at the various schools.

traditional playground games, is not identical to the stuff that children want to bring with them. Whether schools allow it under certain conditions or forbid it altogether, objects brought from home can be found in all three schools.

Items brought by the children

The research is based on object tracking. To do this, we classified the objects into categories designed to bring together things of a similar nature, so as to deduce the influence on their use and the resulting sociability. So, we found:

- *Stationery*, various materials for writing or drawing (Fig. 2)



Figure 2: a notebook with blank pages at Les Bleuets

- *Books* (children's literature, comic strips or manga) (Fig. 3)



Figure 3: Two comics (*Adèle* at Les Bleuets and *One Piece* at Les Iris)

- *Jewelry* (in particular fancy bracelets) and watches (Fig. 4)

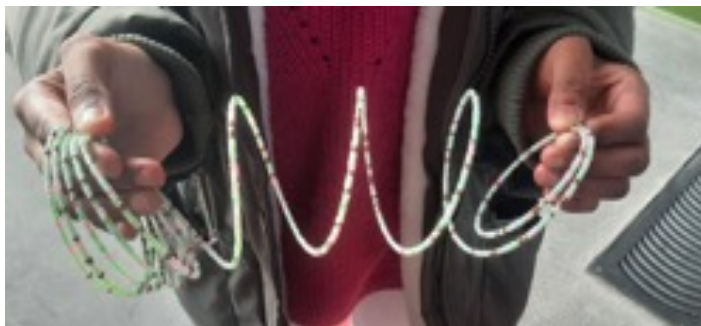


Figure 4: Spring Bracelet at Les Bleuets

- *Clothes*, those bearing the imprint of mass-market children's culture or those separated from their owner and diverted from their usual use (Fig.5)

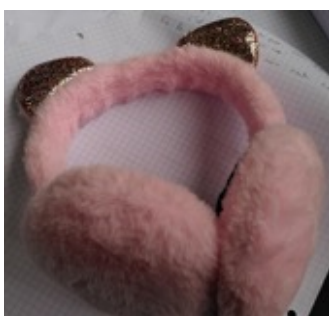


Figure 5: Pink cat-eared ear muffs at Les Bleuets

- *Toys*, especially stuffed toys and figurines (Fig. 6)



Figure 6: Stuffed animals and figurine from Lego Ninja at Les Iris

- *Trading cards and playing cards* (Fig .7)



Figure 7: Soccer cards and cards game *Défis Nature* at Les Iris

- *Objects for sports or physical games* (balls, skipping ropes) other than those made available by school to children (Fig. 8)



Figure 8: Skipping rope Hello Kitty and foam ball at Les Iris

- *Marbles* (Fig. 8)



Figure 8: Marble bag at Les Iris

- *Beauty and care products* (Fig. 9)



Figure 9: Hairdressing kit at Les Iris

- *Creative items* i.e. hobby items not associated with stationery (for example origami or scoubidou) (Fig. 10)



Figure 10 : Scoubidou at Les Iris and a paper casserole at Les Lilas

- *Anti-stress objects* (Fig.11)



Figure 11: Anti-stress objects at Les Iris

We find functional objects similar to those offered by the school (balls, skipping ropes). Brought in by the children themselves, they complement those provided by the school or replace them when they are forbidden to do so; they can also highlight their difference, such as the Hello Kitty skipping rope (see Figure 8 above).

Other objects can be seen as ersatz to compensate for what is missing or forbidden, such as gloves or caps used for ball games. It's a question of diverting the use of an object to maintain "The 'traditional' repertoire of the school playground" (Burn, 2013, p. 136).

However, we're going to take a closer look at other objects that don't fit into these two categories, and which are more closely related to the penetration of home culture (or even mass children's culture) into the school. The most common are small

toys (stuffed toys and figurines), cards, jewelry, anti-stress objects and marbles in their aesthetic diversity and not just for their functional dimension. These are very personal objects, sometimes toys. It is these types of objects that are banned in whole or in part, depending on the school and the period.

These objects are characterized by their portability, a theme highlighted by Marc Steinberg (2012) in relation to stickers. They accompany children from home to school, but also throughout recess, when children are constantly on the move. Lastly, they are pocket-sized objects (just as the Pokémon that have left their mark on this field are pocket monsters), which meets a constant regulatory requirement. Some are shaped like key rings and can be attached to clothes, another way of following the child's play activities. Before being used, they are simply there, carried by the child.

To sum up, these are objects chosen by the children (and explained by them for books that differ from those offered by the school), to which they are often particularly attached, and which allow a wide variety of actions.

What do they do with these objects?

Monstration

The first activity with a new object, especially if it's the first time, is to show it off. This allows the owner to play a role: these (de)monstrations are often the occasion for discussions that play an important role, if the children are to be believed: "Léa calls the owner of the purple book and another little girl to show her something in the green book, and other children come to look" (Observation Les Bleuets). Through display, a solitary activity becomes collective and one can create a social group.

This first function is sometimes the only one, especially if the prohibitions mean that it has to be done discreetly. If you can't exchange cards or play with them, you'll show them furtively to your friends. The playground is the ideal place to show others what you have. These displays can be linked to play. The children show and present the object before choosing who to play with.

Circulation

These objects can circulate between children. In this way, the object becomes part of a network of exchanges, loans and even gifts. However, this is sometimes made

difficult by the fact that such activities are often forbidden and can lead to conflict. Parents can also take care to avoid unequal exchanges.

Any exchange, however, raises questions and may turn out to be too unequal afterwards. There is play in the sense of gambling in these aspects "I trade them, never, because I know it's a scam [...] Yeah, because I think it's scam every time because every time, because at the beginning we say to ourselves 'Oh but that's too good!' then afterwards we say to ourselves 'no, why did I do that!'" (Child Les Iris).

One particular exchange is that of the circulation of marbles in at stakes games, which can generate conflicts and therefore prohibitions. What is the value of a marble? Is there no cheating? Losing marbles in what children call a "bet" is not always a pleasant experience. It's worth pointing out that the traditional nature of this type of game enables it to be more acceptable, despite the regular tensions between children, unlike trading card games, which can operate on the same principle of playing cards.

Objects are also lent, immediately to make it possible for several people to play so that everyone can participate. There are also long-term loans that lead to taking home an object belonging to your friend and these loans can be integrated into pretend plays: "Ah yes, yes. For nights or weekends also sometimes. Or a vacation too. I kept Louise and Margaux's doudou [comforter] for the honeymoon, I kept them for two weeks, because it was their honeymoon" (Child Les Iris).

Bringing objects to school involves risks that lead some children to give them up. The three main risks are loss, theft and confiscation. The children are inexhaustible on the stories of confiscated objects, forgotten by the teacher and never returned. This is all the more present as children have a feeling of arbitrariness in the application of the rules, which makes confiscation always possible. There is also the fear of "losing" what is brought to school (such as Pokémon cards), which often appears as a euphemism for talking about theft.

Play

Many games, both with the school's own equipment and with material brought in when authorized, allow for the development of classic playground games: marbles, ball games including soccer, but also dodgeball, skipping rope and bungee cord games. If we leave the functional or traditional game to look at what is played with these objects, we perceive original game that are often short but which are based on the characteristics of the object, starting with its mobility, which we have already mentioned.

The objects are supports for developing mini-games that differ from those mentioned in the literature: "But what we love to do with our stuffed animals... is ride around... we hang three stuffed animals, we wedge them between our fingers. And hop there, we do the merry-go-round" (Child Les Bleuets). These are small and quick make-believe games, suitable for short breaks: "They come telling me that their stuffed animals are sick" (Observation Les Iris). We can then speak of a symbolic pocket game. Another observation: "Girls and a boy handle stuffed animals on the low wall near the staircase. They pile them up" (Observation Les Iris): "We make stories with it, we do *The voice*, we do marriage too" (Child Les Iris). We see how the stuffed animal is a sufficiently open object to receive different roles and to be included in a wide variety of scenes (Fig. 12).

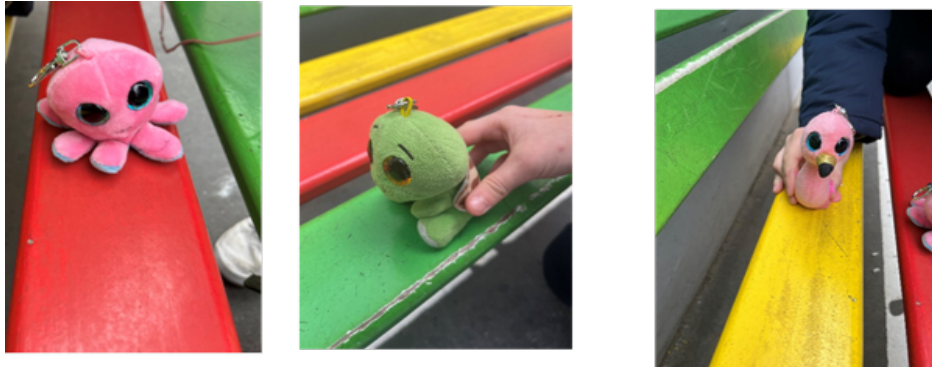


Figure 12: Scenes with stuffed animals seen at Les Iris

Beyond monstration and circulation, some card games are the subject of quick war (battle) games. All you have to do is take your game out of your pocket and you quickly get started with a short game. This is all the more valued when the children mention the absence of a partner at home, for lack of peers and in the face of parents who lack availability.

Substitute object

The scarcity of legitimate objects and recurring bans lead to a search for substitutes, particularly for balls when these are in short supply or banned during certain periods. On several occasions, pieces of clothing, rather small accessories such as gloves or hats, are used as ball substitutes. This practice can even be encouraged by adults. We've also seen a "soccer marble." Children replace the forbidden ball with marbles they have brought along.

There are also substitutes made of paper by children, such as a shuriken. The dual characteristics of being paper and self-made make such an object acceptable,

which would not be in the form of a plastic toy. One cannot imagine a world without objects: one catches what one finds, or makes one's own.

Some lines of interpretation

Crazes and participation

In the ordinary discourse on playgrounds, as in that of the adults and children we met, there is talk of fashions that arrive very quickly, only to disappear just as quickly. As the headteacher of Les Iris put it: "At some point, they all have the same thing." These "fashions" concern both new objects with an intense but sometimes brief media presence, and traditional games that involve objects (such as marbles), thus calling into question the idea that they are driven by marketing.

The notion of fashion doesn't seem appropriate for a complex phenomenon that concerns a diversity of objects, not all of which are the medium of marketing aimed at playgrounds (but some are), which may develop in a single school, come back regularly, whose *raison d'être* may refer to wider media phenomena (such as footballer cards at the time of the World Cup). We prefer to speak of a craze that may be limited to a single school, or refer to a broader phenomenon supported by the media or different forms of marketing (such as that based on social networks). For example, the REV of Les Iris emphasizes the local dimension of the phenomenon, even if it is supported by external factors: "There may be a fashion effect, and advertising too. And then there's an atmosphere, I think; there's a group effect."

At the time of the survey, there may have been no craze, but we're told of past crazes that remain very present in the memories of children and adults alike: "In first grade, it was Pokémon cards, then Pop It and then and then it was spinning tops, cuddly toys, marbles and everything. And now it's a bit of everything, especially *doudou* [comforter] and *Défis Nature* [Nature Challenges]" (Child Les Iris).

However, in the most privileged school, Les Iris, the research revealed a craze for a card game: *Défis Nature* (Fig. 13). It associates the collection of cards that are both humorous themed around biodiversity, which is simply played like a battle/war game. It is part of a marketing strategy aimed at playgrounds, but is totally absent from the other two schools. We can see how the craze in one school is linked to a national phenomenon, but also how the conditions are not in place in all schools to make this craze possible. It presupposes the conjunction of regulations

and local context to ensure that a product driven by a commercial rationale aimed at school playgrounds actually finds its way into a specific playground and becomes the object of a collective craze. In this case, it's worth asking whether they're not a substitute for banned Pokémon-type cards. The affluent environment makes it possible to buy them very quickly, all the more so as adults seem sensitive to the educational dimension of the product, which is, however, more appearance than reality.



Figure 13: Cards from the game *Défis Nature* at Les Iris

Behind the craze we can see a logic of participation and therefore sociability. As Steinberg (2012) showed with regard to franchises, we discover in a broader way, because not all objects come under a franchise, that the object brought makes it possible to participate in the activity of the playground by showing or exchanging, by proposing a game or being able to participate in a game by possessing or borrowing the object which makes it possible to enter a game. This is particularly true in the context of crazes.

Sociability

It is undoubtedly sociability which is at the center of the use of objects brought from home, whether it is a question of play or other activities, starting first with showing, demonstrating the object, that the child brings, which requires at least one other person: When a girl says during a focus group “Me, if I bring something back, I’m obliged to tell my friends.” Another confirms: “She’s always obliged to say: ‘Ah,

look! I've brought this back!'" (Les Bleuets).

The children's interest in objects is reflected in the way they participate from a distance, simply by observing others: "We're watching a game of marbles in the playground at the foot of a tree. Four boys are playing, including an organizer of extracurricular activities. As many as nine non-players have simultaneously observed the game, including two girls" (Observation Les Iris). The objects arouse groupings and discussions, including around their solitary use such as reading. The circulation of objects (loan, exchange, gift) is essential to the construction of sociability, hampered by the rules proposed by adults.

Play is an important part of this sociability, all the more so as the playground has an essential characteristic: it is a pool of partners of the same age, enabling them to share the same tastes for the same games. For example, children talk about the absence of a partner at home to play *Défis Nature* or another game: "My mother has too much work" "I play alone, my brother doesn't want to and my parents have too much work" (Children Les Iris). So, it's a question of bringing along objects that aren't so easy to play with at home, for lack of a partner of the same age.

These objects can either develop new relationships, enrich sociability, or be part of pre-existing sociability that they thus nourish. Lending, giving, exchanging and sharing property are all ways of creating relationships between children, or making pre-existing friendships visible.

Identity and agency

To show an object is to show oneself as the possessor of the object, it is to highlight oneself and to stage oneself when it comes to using the object. It's showing and saying something about oneself, often gendered (stuffed animals on the girls' side, footballer's card on the boys' side), but not always, some objects can be gender free (like the card game *Défis Nature*). This dimension is reinforced by the affective dimension attached to certain objects. This results in a dilemma, these objects only play their role if they are shown, but the risk is to see them disappear (destroyed, lost, stolen) on this occasion.

It is also a way of carrying a different logic from that is proposed by the adults who regulate recess. Admittedly, as mentioned by Willett (2014), games, produced from varied contents and without objects, allow, through recycling, interpretative reproduction to show an agency, a power. This is also the case through these objects in their different uses: a proposal from the children but often countered by regulations that never bear witness to an educational reflection. It is forbidden to

avoid inventing other solutions. The agency of the children is then expressed in the circumvention of prohibitions.

Conclusion

Not all objects are toys, some are or are diverted to be used for play, but if they do not always have a playful function, they share the same logic, which refers to fundamental dimensions that we have tried to present: participation, sociability, identity and agency. It is probably appropriate to examine other objects, other situations, but also toys with regard to these dimensions. Owning a toy is not simply being able to play, it is participating in a children's culture, producing social relations, saying something about oneself and developing the status of an agent.

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