

Knocking the Girls Off the Basketball Court: Unnatural Selection through Taste and Unexamined Assumptions of Fairness on an Unsupervised Playground

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Abstract

This paper offers a look inside one school community. It relates the story of a group of athletic sixth grade girls who controlled a central niche on the playground of a progressive elementary school for most of a school year, only to be displaced by a few highly competitive sixth grade boys. Data are from observations of unstructured play included in the school's curriculum. The boys were able to dominate play sites because their taste for large, highly structured, and hierarchical games was implicitly favored by the school's rules for access to sites and activities. The study has implications for understanding gender relations among children, as well as gender and access to resources.

Introduction

Largely missing from the research on child socialization and the interactions and groupings of children are studies of how dominance among groups is reproduced through the actions and developing predispositions of the children themselves, often with lasting effects for the children (Cicourel, 1993). Of course, children's predispositions are developed and expressed

within contexts largely created by adults. It is the combination of children's developing abilities and interests with the unique influence of adults and the adult world on children that make the study of children so interesting and efforts to create opportunities for children so challenging.

This paper relates the story of a group of athletic sixth grade girls who maintained control of a central niche on the playground of a progressive school for most of a school year, only to be displaced quickly and nearly bloodlessly by a few highly competitive sixth grade boys and one of the many school-wide games the boys organized. We believe the story illustrates how domination can simultaneously transform and hide itself through both the developing predispositions of people and their shared assumptions about fair access to sites and activities. Because teachers' efforts to make the outdoor play more inclusive failed to account for the ordering aspects of children's interests and values, they failed to challenge the existing order of the outdoor play. After creating an intellectual context for the problem and describing the school setting and our observational method, we relate the story of the sixth grade girls, the highly competitive boys, and the contested playground.

Girls and Boys within the Ecology of an Unsupervised Playground

Teachers at a highly respected progressive elementary school began to raise questions about what was happening to girls during outdoor play. For 70 years the school, which we will call *Sylvan*, has been committed to allowing its preschool through sixth grade children substantial periods of free, unsupervised and unstructured play on its extensive, wooded grounds. While teachers are always accessible, the school's philosophy dictates that children have time to negotiate and explore the environment, invent their own kinds of games and activities, and develop their social relationships without adult oversight.

Sylvan is set in the woods just outside a major northeastern city. It was founded 70 years ago by a group of progressive-minded upper class parents disgruntled with the class-bound private schools of their era. Today, though *Sylvan* has a predominately upper middle class population of about 150 children (about 20 percent are poorer children on scholarship), the school still reflects its Deweyan progressive heritage. Traditionally, a core aspect of the curriculum gives students one and one-half free hours a day. Most children play outside all year round for at least an hour a day, with little to no adult supervision, regardless of most weather conditions.

The school is set in 10 acres of steeply sloping wooded land that has a small stream running through it. The classroom buildings are scattered about the

central part of the land. Each small building typically houses one or two classrooms. The grounds form a set of varied play sites—a bird blind, paths through the wooded hills, a winding stream, playground equipment in several spots, a wooden frame barn, one large playing field on the school's lower field, a full basketball court below the lower field, a swimming pool, and, at the center of the school grounds, a second, smaller field including a blacktopped, one net basketball court called the "blacktop."

In 1993, teachers became concerned that girls seemed to be missing from the kinds of activities that dominated the central play areas and were viewed by the children as having the highest status. They wondered why the girls were missing and if there were something to teach children about how to gain access to central sites and entry to dominant games.

In the fall of 1993, the senior author began observing the playground during morning break time, when each classroom of students was outdoors for half an hour between ten and eleven, and during lunch, when all the students were out for an hour. As the year progressed, we expanded observations to classrooms, to learn more about the fifth and sixth grade students in particular and to study the possible transfer of status between play and classroom. In June, the observations culminated with videotaped focus groups of the fifth and sixth graders. During the data collection period, both authors discussed the field notes, raised questions about further observations, and otherwise interactively explored how to make meaning of the observations.

In our earliest observations, we were struck by the prominence of a group of sixth grade girls controlling the "blacktop." The "blacktop," a patch of asphalt approximately 20' by 25' with a regulation height basketball rim at one end, was set at the center of the upper field, the main play area for most of the school's students. Ironically, our major assignment from the school had been to observe the "big game" organized by the most competitive sixth grade boys and thought by some teachers and parents to be dangerously rough and exclusive of girls. The big game, involving from 20 to 50 children, swept through the school playgrounds as it transmuted—from football to soccer to speedball to capture the flag to basketball over the course of the year. It involved players from first grade through sixth. Teachers were especially concerned that girls appeared to be missing from this game. But our observations suggested the game of the older girls was a big game, too. Though involving fewer students, it too occupied a central location on the fields, was loud, and sometimes displaced younger children.

We discovered later, when the boys' big game took the blacktop, that, ultimately, even the sixth grade girls were subject to the boys' big game. This occurred less out of brute force than out of the preferences for competition, grand scale, display, and spectacle prevalent among a few boys and as a result of the unintended consequences of efforts on the part of the teachers to extend access to all children.

We came to understand the unstructured play as presenting children with an existential dilemma framed by social influences, including the developing social interests of children and the influence of larger society. The existential dilemma was presented by the large periods of unstructured play and the varied setting provided by the school. Each break period, each student was forced to decide how to spend his or her time and with whom to spend it. The large and varied playground offered an almost inexhaustible supply of niches and opportunities. How children resolved this dilemma had consequences for their access to play sites and the kinds of play that dominated the playground.

Individually and in groups children continually found and developed niches for themselves on the playground. The children, as would adults, made decisions about play with an eye toward and within the constraints of social relations (Giddens, 1984). Though children's interests were central to where and how they spent their time, their interests were, in turn, conditioned by opportunity and their sense of social status.

Children's interests and the choices they made about play were also conditioned by the on-going social ecology of the Sylvan playground and their own personal and physical development. Even the open Sylvan playground had a history of the kinds of games played and the kinds of people organizing and playing those games. This history conditioned the expectations and experiences of the children. Additionally, individual children had histories. Children did not approach the playground anew each day. Children's interests, competencies, and physical abilities all had histories and were in continuous development, on and off the playground.

Further, children's interests and values were influenced by the larger adult society (Thorne, 1993). In particular, the highly competitive U.S. male professional sports and business worlds certainly reached the playground through the growing awareness of girls and boys. The children were influenced through the media, the values of their immediate family members, peers, and teachers. They also were influenced through their involvement in organized sports, which have now spread to all seasons of the year and to lower and lower ages.

The decisions children made during unstructured play reflected the social desirability of certain kinds of play and reflected upon the social status of the children themselves. Children's play decisions were made in the full view of others and with social ramifications. In a social world (and the unstructured playground at Sylvan was a supremely social world) the predispositions of people, their likes and dislikes, are ranked along with the people themselves (Bourdieu, 1984). The social ranking of people's interests have ramifications for their access to resources. Resources tend to flow toward dominant groups of people. On the unstructured playground at Sylvan, just as is often the case in American society, access flowed toward a small group of highly competi-

tive, sports-minded males.

Our interpretation of play on the unstructured playground suggests that by the time they had reached sixth grade, girls who had long opted out of the big game organized by the highly competitive boys could, by virtue of their age, athleticism and interest, opt for and usually sustain an alternative big game. Yet, as our observations revealed, they could never control a site fully and without challenge, in the way that the boys who ran the big game could. Additionally, many sports playing boys who had long accepted the values of the big game but were not highly competitive themselves, were allowed to switch between the two big games and the types of competitiveness they represented without questioning the core values or dominance of the boys' big game. In fact, the competitive boys' preference for large, loud games was tacitly recognized by all, including the teachers at the school. The teachers instituted progressive rules for access that, because they inadvertently recognized the boys' interests at the expense of the girls', actually provided another set of opportunities for the competitive boys to maintain privilege.

We suggest that by examining both the developing predispositions of the children, as expressed by the styles of their games, and the assumptions commonly held by the students and teachers at Sylvan about what it means to create fair access to sites and games, we can cast light on the workings of gendered school yard dominance. Both the workings of predispositions and the workings of assumptions of fairness played themselves out in the dynamics of what we came to call the "big game" organized by a few highly competitive boys and the "alternative big game" organized by a group of sixth grade girls.

The Two Big Games

The big game and the alternative big game, as these field notes indicate, were startlingly different. They varied as to the display and spectacle involved, the audience to whom the display and spectacle were directed, the relation of the games to the larger social scene, the organization of the games and choosing of teams, the styles of play and talk during the games, and, ultimately, what the organizing players wanted from the games.

This scene, from early December, is typical of the girls' big game:

12:20

Two younger boys are on the blacktop playing one on one. There is talk briefly of a third boy joining, but it does not happen.

Two more boys come out. There are two balls now. Two of the boys are shooting. The one-on-one game starts again. The

two other boys are kicking the other ball.

Judy, Antonia, and Rebecca come down with another ball. "Do you mind if we play?" They set up a music box on the playbarn. Judy tells the boys, "Don't kick the ball, it's really bad for the ball." Quickly, Antonia, Rebecca, and Judy have all three balls.

Molly comes down. The four boys are still there. Judy and Rebecca join them to talk. Antonia joins them.

12:28 The boys have left entirely.

I ask Judy and Antonia what happened. The girls say that they are older and they wanted to play: "We came up and said, 'This is our ball and this is our friend's, and he doesn't like them kicking it around.' They could still use the other one, but, I don't know, they didn't." The girls add, "We can't exclude anyone."

Teams are set. [Instead of using captains, one of the girls, typically Judy, says, "How about me, Antonia and Sally (or some other names)?" and the game starts. Judy calls this "setting teams."]

Here comes Cindy, then Lisa.

Cindy asks, "Can I play?"

"Okay."

"We get Lisa, you get Cindy."

John, Carl, Eli and Carrie, all sixth graders, approach, then sit on the rocks that wall the court. After a bit, they stand up.

"You guys want to play?"

"I do," says John.

The four go out onto the court. The game has stopped; the boys chase after the ball, Carrie stays at the hoop. She gets a rebound, takes it out higher on the court, and shoots. The two groups are separate. The earlier girls are together dancing to music by They Might Be Giants.

Judy says, "Rebecca, me, Antonia and...[continues with more names]. *That's fair* [our emphasis]."

Play restarts with the four new players added. All the players are white, except Carl, who is Asian-American. The regular girls—Judy, Antonia, Molly, Rebecca, Xina, Sally, Lisa and Cindy—all have fairly long hair, at least shoulder length, and they are dressed similarly, mostly in jeans. Carrie often hangs

out with John, Carl, and Eli. John is tall, the others are probably shorter than all the regular girls but Judy, Lisa and Cindy. [At the start of a previous game, Molly had stood in front of Carl and slowly extended a hand from the top of her head straight out over Carl's head, probably six inches between the top of Carl's head and Molly's hand.]

One of the new players fails to clear the basketball after a rebound. Judy says, "You got to take it out, you guys." The game stops, apparently because of the foul call, and a couple of players take shots at the basket. Then the ball goes back and is taken out. A bit later, John has the ball in the corner: "Do I have to take it back?"

Antonia: "Yeah."

The girls' game was about more than basketball. The actual basketball game was inside a larger scene which included music, dancing, eating, and talking. Through further observations on the blacktop, other outdoor areas, and in classrooms, a picture emerged of a group of friends who were among the school's oldest and most dominant students and who shared an interest in highly-skilled basketball, alternative music, dancing, each other, and other sixth graders. During the game, talk would often revolve around the music, usually tapes the girls brought from home. Some of the girls would spontaneously break into dancing on the court. Players would leave and rejoin the game with little notice by the others. Games would continue without even numbers of players on each side.¹

Exclusive Inclusion

While the game was closed to the four younger boys who were on the court before the girls arrived, the game was open to four new sixth graders. Even if the girls said the right inclusive things ("Wanna play?") to the younger boys, everything else about the girls' game—the talking and easy familiarity among the girls, the music in a genre more popular with college and high school-aged students than with pre-teens, and the physical space the girls took in assuming the court—was not inclusive for the younger boys. Similarly, the younger girls never appeared on the blacktop. At one point, the sixth grade girls actively expelled fourth grade girls whom they found playing jump rope on the court. On several occasions, the older girls were overheard talking disdainfully about the younger girls' flirtatiousness and "silliness." From these and other comments, it became clear that the older girls were using level of emotional development and level of taste (in such things as alternative music) as criteria for inclusion.

The sixth grade girls had another criterion. Throughout the year they were intensely interested in including older newcomers, including the three boys. In fact, holding together the sixth grade, which had been split that year into two 5th - 6th grade classes, was a project of these girls, Judy especially. The previous spring, when they learned that their fifth grade was being split in the fall into two 5th - 6th grades for their last year at Sylvan, the girls were among the leaders of an unsuccessful student protest. As sixth graders, the girls were conscious of trying to maintain solidarity among the split sixth graders. Throughout the school year, fifth and sixth grade boys who played the boys' big game joined girls' games and played largely in the girls' style. John, who had joined the game in this set of field notes, and another sixth grader, Asa, switched often between the boys' and girls' games. Other fifth and sixth grade boys also played sometimes with the girls. And, in April, when the girls had been displaced from the blacktop and were plotting to take it back, it was with the understanding that the fifth and sixth grade boys would then play with the girls.²

"Setting" Teams

An especially distinctive characteristic of the girls' basketball game was how they made teams. In these field notes, Judy twice "set" teams in a half hour period. Nearly every other game we observed, besides the girls' big game—almost all organized by boys and all involving boys in the process—involved choosing captains, shooting fingers, and then picking teams. When asked if the girls ever used captains, Judy, speaking over the question in anticipation, said: "Never. Because two captains never think the same and the teams aren't fair." Of course, it is arguable whether one captain can pick teams any more fairly than two. Boys, however, often complained about unfair teams. Sometimes they would give up on one sport and switch to another out of frustration over creating fair teams. We never observed a girls' basketball game broken up because players complained of unfair teams. There were complaints from Judy and others about the length of time it took the sixth grade girls to start a game, compared with the boys, because of a meticulous concern among the girls for fairness. However, in our observations, the boys' games actually took longer to start, partly because of their lengthy team picking process.³

The only time we observed the boys setting teams was in one otherwise typical boys' big basketball game in April. Here, Jake, the leader of the boys' big game, was actually modifying the traditional picking process toward something apparently more like setting, but with results vastly different from the girls' game. Jake "set" the teams, but apparently in order to stack his team. As a result, the game was lopsided, one of the captains quit, and the players decided that the game could not continue:

10:40 Lower Court

[A full basketball court. This court was underwater earlier in the spring when the blacktop court was contested.]

Jake has just arrived and the picking of teams starts immediately. He sets up Daniel, Isaiah and Rick as captains against him and Samuel, with him and Samuel getting the next pick.

[All the boys are sixth graders. Jake is a short Caucasian boy, dressed in basketball shorts. Daniel is African-American and tall; he wears glasses. Isaiah is African-American and short. Rick is Caucasian and one of the taller boys. Samuel is African-American and medium height. Jake and Samuel are often contrasted by others, because they are seen as the two best athletes and the two organizers of the games. But Jake is considered "competitive," because he brags, and Samuel is not considered "competitive," because he is quiet and does not tell people how well he has done unless he is asked.]

Daniel complains. "How come it's always you two?"

James, an African-American fifth grader, says to "go on." He says Daniel is "good for rebounding and Isaiah good for ball handling."

Jake is arranging teams now, something like Judy does. All the players left to select are white; mostly sixth graders with a couple of fifth graders. "Stephen, do you want to be with Thomas?"

Stephen says he does.

"Ok, then you two with them, and we'll take... [mentions other names]."

Then Jake says, "I'll go get Rick," and leaves.

Daniel: "Why does it always have to be Jake and Sam or Jake and Ryan or Jake and Rick or something?"

Isaiah: "No one would ever get boards." [boards are rebounds]

Each team takes an end of the court for practice.

Stephen, Thomas, Cameron, Daniel, Isaiah and Rick are against Jake, Jeremy, Asa, Sam, James, and Adam. Jake has completely arranged the teams.

Jake and Rick come down. Jake is yelling, "Changing teams. Jeremy, Adam, and Cameron are on my team and . . ." Then, it's, "Stephen, Thomas, and Cameron are on my team, Jeremy, Asa, and Adam are on your team."

Daniel: "You have the better team. They have the better team."

Sam: "Daniel, whenever we play, you always say..."

The game starts.

Asa makes a bad pass to Jeremy and the ball is turned over. Rick yells at him, "Asa, don't telegraph your passes." The next time up the court, Jeremy tells Asa, "It's okay."

This is a dribble and pass game with players tending to dribble until they are stopped, and then passing or shooting.

Eli, Carrie and Carl walk up from below. Eli has a bag of gummy bears and gives me one, then he's on the court and the game stops while people get gummy bears. There's some complaining about the game breaking up, but then everyone is getting candy.

The game starts again. Jake is the star—full court break aways, steals. His team is killing Daniel's team.

10:57

Now, Simona, Lisa, Josh, Carrie, Carl, Eli, and John are all on the periphery. Simona picks up a ball. She dribbles and shoots at the free hoop, while the ball is at the other end.

Rick quits. Other people complain they have to start all over.

Simona says, "I'll play," a couple of times but no one responds.

Rick says, "I'm not a sore loser," then, "if you want me to finish this game, I will." This repeats a couple of times. The game has broken up. People are throwing at baskets.

As the players walk up the hill towards class, some of them talk about playing speedball tomorrow. Jeremy tells me that they are bored with basketball. The teams have gotten too big and unfair. Speedball can take more players and have fair teams.

The boys' big game was fairly obviously about status and the demonstration of prowess. As these field notes indicate and further observations revealed, the organization of the games, style of play, talk about the game, and the spectacle surrounding the boys' big games all were pervaded with the recognition and ranking of people based on their display of skill. But, because of the hierarchical organization of the boys' big game, the style of play may not have represented the interests of a majority of the boys playing (Bourdieu, 1984; Thorne, 1993). Only a few core boys organized the games and drew most of the benefits of the display of status and skill.

“Competitiveness” and the Uses of Captains

Organizing games with a system of captains provided the older, highly competitive boys opportunities to display prowess, attain status, and maintain dominance over playground sites. Status was conferred through the display involved in choosing captains and picking teams. The use of captains also ordered everyone else in the game. All players were reminded of their status each time teams were picked. The older competitive boys who were picked early because of their age, gender, athleticism and friendship with other competitive boys gained prestige directly at the expense of those picked later. The more players who could be included in a game, the higher the top players rose in comparison. The additional players served both as placeholders at the bottom of the ladder and as audience to the higher status of the older boys. Further, success at playing the game was more easily assured by controlling the rules of the game.

Being a captain was not the highest status position in the boys' big game, but rather a temporary ranking that reflected a player's status or his acceptance by others of higher status. That was reserved for the boys who selected the captains, then were picked first, and then who controlled action on the field. For instance, though Jake was not always a picking captain, he was always observed to be acting as captain on the field (i.e., positioning players on the field, giving instructions, disputing and negotiating rules and goals). Amidst the milling around and gathering of people preceding a game, a couple of boys would be recognized as captains. Sometimes they were players of high status impatient to start a game, sometimes the first players of high status to get to the field. Often they were chosen by players of higher status. On one occasion we observed James, a fifth grader and regular player, at first name himself and another boy captains of a game of mostly fifth grade boys and girls and fourth grade boys. Then, only a few moments later, he would name two other players as captains and take the role as overall organizer for himself. In this instance, Penny, a fifth grader who consistently played soccer whether it was the current big game or not, called out to be captain (“I’ll be captain”) when others were calling, but was not even recognized.

In Penny's case, as in the case of Simona's half-hearted offer to join the basketball game in the above field notes, and in other cases in which girls unsuccessfully tried to start big games by calling, “Let's start a game,” the act of gaining recognition fell upon both the person seeking recognition and the recognizers. People who gained recognition, either to be captains or to turn the milling around into the start of a game, often called loudly, demanding a response. However, those people also tended to be higher status big game boys. Often, players were looking to one of those people to make just such a statement to start a game. To demand a response risked a negative response.

Given girls' experience in the boys' big game, it was not surprising that girls seldom called forcefully. Girls were not even recognized as fully as some younger boys. If being captain was not the highest honor—choosing captains was higher—then the captains at least reflected the values of the dominant big game boys.

The domination of the big game boys also was expressed through their control of the rules of games. So, for instance, girls who played big games such as capture the flag complained (when asked by the researchers) that the competitive sixth grade boys could ignore being caught by others. Also, goals were regularly disputed in the boys' big games and decided through the negotiation of captains and other leaders—the organizing boys. The very act of negotiation is an exercise and display of power and status. The captains system helped the dominant boys to control games and afforded them the display of their status and prowess.

Style of Play and the Talk

The boys' style of playing basketball (the only sport in which we can really compare the big game boys and big game girls, because the big game girls played only basketball) was markedly different from the girls' style and consistent with the boys' conversion of individual skill to status. The girls' game was marked by rebounding, long passes that opened up the court, and defense. The boys' game was marked by dribbling and shooting. The girls tended to pass more often. The boys would often dribble until they were stopped, then shoot or pass. The boys' style of play combined with the talk of the boys' game to make for on-going establishment and recognition of status.

The girls talked about music. The boys talked about the game—but in very personal tones, and in a way that named and recorded the on-going status relationships of the boys. In the above field notes, Daniel complained from the start about the teams. James reassured him by telling Daniel that he was a good rebounder and Isaiah a good ballhandler—the emphasis was on the roles the players took and how good they were at the roles. Rick, the captain, yelled at Asa (who shifts between boys' and girls' games) about a bad pass. Jeremy, the would-be recipient of the pass, reassured Asa. The boys' talk in games—about bad passes and good passes, about who was good and bad at what, or who was playing well or not well, instructions to other players, and among some players frequent bragging and challenges directed especially at the other dominant players—reinforced and interpreted the events of the game, monitoring and marking who was doing what and what it meant. The boys used the talk to transfer success on the court to status. The talk of the boys' game was about the game, but more importantly it was about the relationships of the boys—relationships established through performance (including talk), and then ratified through talk. The boys' talk about the

game was as meaningful to the relationships of the boys as the girls' talk about music was meaningful to their relationships. But, of course, their talk and behavior had very different implications for the nature of the games.

Inclusive Exclusion

In contrast to the girls' game in which the basketball game was but a part of a larger spectacle oriented toward themselves and woven of basketball, music, talk, and dance, the boys' big game was a spectacle centered on the organizers, the picking of teams and the game itself. The spectacle of the boys' big game was oriented outward. The same display that characterized the play of the game, the bragging and taunting of the most competitive players, and the use of captains to pick teams and negotiate the rules was apparent in the big game boys' desire for large games as well. Large games with many players and spectators raised the stakes for players, enhanced the status of the oldest boys with the insertion of lesser players from lower grades, and added audience for the performance of the better players. The large games also helped sustain the influence of the boys' big game through socializing the younger players and spectators. In general, the large games were expressions of dominance that lent legitimacy to the values of the core players (athletic prowess, hierarchy, winning, and display of power). The size and spread of the game demonstrated the status of the game's organizers.⁴ The engagement of spectators, however, was not as close as the boys imagined. Further, many of the display aspects of the big game repelled the players and spectators the boys wanted to attract. The big games' domination of sites left some nonplayers with difficulty filling their time.

The organizing boys and many of the students in general sought out large games. The older boys would announce games during all-school assemblies and invite younger players to join. If a game that required or could accommodate many players was being played, players would call out, "Capture the flag! Capture the flag!" or "Soccer! Soccer!" to gather people. Some literature suggests that over the years boys have moved out of sports that girls have joined (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1971). Our experience was that the boys sought out girls and younger players to make their games more momentous, to establish their prowess as organizers, and to show off their skills through performance. The boys spoke in the language of camp counselors, mimicking the authority they observed attending camp in the summer.

However, many of the characteristics of the competitive boys and, by extension, of the boys' big game were repellent to others, especially to many girls. Few girls played in boys' big games at all and only one girl played consistently. And, though many boys regularly played the big games, their attachment to the games varied. Among the second grade boys especially, those just beginning to organize their own soccer games and sometimes play

in big games, we observed boys struggling over how big and competitive they wanted their games to be. Still, even among the second grade soccer players, we observed only one girl playing at all. As noted previously, some fifth and sixth grade boys switched between the boys' and girls' games. And the attachment of all the players to the big game varied.

Though some big games attracted many spectators, the engagement of spectators tended to be limited and probably was not as imagined by the performing boys. As in the above field notes, there were often spectators hanging around the game, coming and going, half-watching, sometimes watching and rooting for particular friends who were playing that day, eating, and talking amongst themselves in small groups. Through the June focus groups, it became apparent that while the big game boys tended to know little about what other students were doing during break time, nearly everyone had some experience with and opinions about the boys' big game and particular boys who played (such as Jake and Sam).⁵ The nonplayers' impressions of the boys' big game and even those of some of the players tended to be negative.

Through our observations, it was apparent that the lack of access to sites and varied resources were felt by many children. Although we did not track the whereabouts of nonplayers very closely, it was clear that everyone was somewhere and was *doing* something (Erickson, 1986). If they were not playing in one of the big games, they were not relegated to spectator status—but they were relegated to less access to major sites, to minor niches, and to fewer playground resources geared toward their own interests. Moreover, they had fewer opportunities to pursue social standing, at least during play.⁶ Nonplayers frequently complained of boredom during break time. Also, after the dominant players left a site younger students often filled the space, as if sucked into the vacuum left by the older boys' departure.

The core of organizing boys was successful in creating large games, the largest and most well-known games on the field, and dominating access to sites. They were, in a sense, the only game in town (the girls' basketball game being less visible despite its central location and the loudness of the music). Their values were the established values of the playground—at least those most highly rewarded, in terms of access to play sites. Based on the observations of students and ourselves, it is likely that only a quarter of the boys shared the competitiveness of the organizing boys. But many more played the game regularly. The basic form of the big game was rooted in years of Sylvan tradition. The only sports alternative, except for the older girls (and only most of the year for them), was to not play. Though the boys sought inclusion, the form of their games and the coincidental personality of some of the players were unappealing to many others. But because these boys dominated to the point of defining the big sports, the only alternative for many people was to exclude themselves and find small niches in which to pursue

quieter activities such as going to the library, walking along paths, or hanging out in the bird blind.

Knockout and Knocking Out the Girls

The introduction of a variant basketball game called “knockout” brought the big game boys to the blacktop and led the sixth grade girls to leave the court. In the spring, when the ground began to clear of snow and the boys, as well as the girls, renewed their interest in basketball, it seemed that the big game would become the girls’ big game. In fact, we observed one game that started with twelve players on the blacktop (the most players we had observed in any basketball game) and grew, played by all the big game players and arranged by and played in the fashion of the girls’ big game.⁷ But that combined-big game was not to last.

The following excerpt describes a typical knockout game:

4/8/94

10:35 Blacktop

A group of 5th - 6th grade boys, including Jake, come to the court. Jake has a ball. Younger kids are playing horse⁸; the game continues. Jake, John, Carl, Eli and another boy are off to the side. They have a boom box for music.

They tell the 1st-2nd graders their bell has rung, then say, “Line up if you want to play knockout.”

I ask Eli, “What is it, like horse?”

He explains, “You play with two balls. If the other person makes two before you make one, you’re out. If the first person misses the first shot, you can shoot from anywhere.”

Ryan says, “Why don’t you watch it and see if you want to play?” Ryan is a Caucasian fifth grader who is often mentioned as next year’s successor to Jake [in fact, later in the year, Jake names Ryan his successor].

When the game starts, people call out, “I’m last,” “I’m second,” “I’m fourth.” The winner of the previous game goes first. A person’s first shot is always from the foul line, but then you can take the rebound and shoot from anywhere. If a player behind you in line makes a basket before you, you’re knocked out. Otherwise, you take the rebound off your successful shot, pass it to the next person in line and go to the back of the line.

In the second game, Ryan knocks out Jake immediately. “See you Jake.” Then, “Now Jake’s mad at me.”

Jake says, "No I'm not."

Ryan, a bit later: "Everyone's out to get me."

Jake: "No, I'm just out to get you."

There are some words and Jake is directing or commenting from the side.

Ryan: "I'm nailing them."

Ryan wins. In the next game, Ryan is riding Jake. Jake successfully makes it through his first turn. Eli has been out early three games straight. He looks embarrassed. James is out again. Jake is out again. Jake calls for Adam, the fourth grader, to win. Ryan wins again: "Four for five."

Knockout proved the perfect game to break the girls' grip on the blacktop, though the big game boys seemed unconscious of the effect. Few of the girls initially knew how to play, and a series of interviews with the basketball-playing girls indicated it was not at all attractive to most of the big game girls. Molly especially was vocal in her dislike of knockout. She and the others would complain that knockout was boring, "More than half the time you're standing around . . . all you do is shoot;" players get knocked out and they can't play. Basketball meant playing all the time: passing, stealing, keeping score. In knockout, people won or lost. In basketball, teams won or lost. According to the girls, the attraction of knockout for the boys was "they get to knock people out. They get to get people out of the game."

Knockout was a very popular game for many boys, and expressed the most aggressively competitive aspects of the boys' big games: it was all about prowess and status; players could taunt each other and have immediate and clear satisfaction; the game drew lots of spectators, boys and girls, because of its novelty, central location, status as a big game, the warm, sunny, spring weather; and, not least, the game's capacity to create chances for winning and losing.

Once they left the blacktop, the girls began spending breaks in their classrooms, the garden above the classrooms, or in the library, in groups of two or three:

4/11/94

11:00-11:10

Molly, Rebecca, and Xina are sitting in the classroom talking. Judy and Sally and three other girls are working in the garden above the classroom.

I ask Molly, Rebecca and Xina, "You're never going to play basketball again are you?"

Molly: "Not while they're playing knockout." They say they may play down on the lower court if they can get a ball or a couple of balls. "They [the knockout players] need, like, five balls for knockout."

Up at the garden, I ask Judy why she isn't playing basketball. She says she doesn't like knockout.

I ask how knockout got started and she says there weren't enough people to play basketball one day, so they started knockout. She and Jeremy wanted to play basketball, but when knockout started Jeremy played and Judy didn't. A lot of people had work to do lately, also, so they weren't there to play. Then she says, "The boys in this school are competitive. I'm sorry to sound sexist, but they are."

Later the same day, a plan to bring balls of their own gained strength. At lunch, most of the big game girls' sat in the sun on the basement stoop of the music building, watched knockout, and talked about taking the court back for basketball. They talked about bringing a ball in the next day, getting to the court early, and playing. They thought that if they got into playing basketball, the boys would get out of knockout. The plan was not to displace the boys, but to end knockout.

The girls did not wait until the next day. They tried to take the court later that day. The next day, Molly, Rebecca and Xina reported that in the afternoon they had gotten down to the blacktop first and started playing basketball, but other people came down and just started playing knockout, "because all you need is a bunch of people who can make a line." Once knockout started, balls were "just flying everywhere, bouncing off your head." Molly got hit on the arm so hard that she later needed to ice it. The knockout players laughed. Then, the knockout players left, calling, "Oh, alright, let them have the court." But of course, the basketball players had the court in the first place. The girls won the skirmish, but at a huge cost. The ordeal was so trying they did not attempt again to take the blacktop.⁹

The day after trying to take the court, Molly, Rebecca and Xina joined a lunchtime game of knockout:

4/12/94

12:20 Library

Rebecca, Molly, and Xina come into the library and go to the board. They're talking about something that happened, and setting up a hangman game.

The fourth grade assistant teacher says, "Girls, we're not quite clear yet. Can you come back at 12:30?"

The girls leave the library and go to the blacktop. People mill around, shooting baskets. It seems a basketball game, not knockout, is going to start, but then a knockout game suddenly begins: Adam, Asa, Daniel, Rick, Xina, Molly, Rebecca, Samuel, Ryan, James and Jake.

Asa, while in line, yells encouragement to Rebecca; he jumps up and down. The game seems to have slowed for Rebecca, Molly and Xina, because the girls don't know the rules.

As people are knocked out the line gets smaller. Rebecca and Xina are out. Molly knocks out Daniel. She is in the final three. Then, Molly is in the final two, with Asa. The final two is taking longer than usual. Molly does not really know what to do and Asa is not taking advantage. To win, one of them must make two in a row before the other makes one. They're shooting and missing, getting rebounds, making shots. But no one finishes the other off. When Molly makes a basket, she doesn't realize that she should rush back to the line and make another; she waits for Asa. Asa knows to rush, but slows so as not to take advantage of Molly. A group of losing players shout encouragement and instructions. Daniel is telling Molly what to do; Rick is yelling for Asa.

Molly has an advantage but doesn't realize it; she's up a basket and has shot once from the foul line, but seems to think she has to keep shooting from there. Ryan yells, "Molly, no. Just go in and shoot."

She does and wins. But then, instead of taking her position at the head of the new knockout line, she, Rebecca and Xina walk off the blacktop and into the library. The knockout players are disoriented for a minute, but then Asa takes the head of the line. [Later I asked Asa about the game. He said, "Molly won, but they said I won, because she left."]

12:50 Library

Molly, Xina and Rebecca are playing hangman. I ask Molly how come they didn't stay at knockout.

Molly: "Oh, I just wanted to see what it was like. I never played before. But I don't like it."

I tell them I had thought basketball was starting and then I turned around and knockout had started.

"Because nobody wanted to play basketball."

[They tell me about trying to take the court the afternoon before and the clash with the knockout players.]

Molly: "Today I didn't want this to happen, so we went down and I wanted to see what it was like to play. And it was boring."

"Wasn't it exciting to win?"

Molly: "No."

Rebecca: "Molly?"

Molly (mock): "Yeah! Wow. I won!" and flushes. "No."

Even though the girls knew how to occupy the site—get there early, have the right equipment, have the people—they could not take the court back. Even though Molly could win at knockout, she had no interest in playing. She would rather play hangman.¹⁰ The girls' seemed to have all the necessary tools—age, athleticism, size, organization, status in the school, and a great deal of knowledge about how to gain access to sites—yet they were unable to sustain their grip on the blacktop. This poses a serious problem for possible interventions to help the majority of children—including older girls and non-competitive boys, as well as younger children—to gain access to sites and activities during unsupervised play.

Working Rules of the Playground as Opportunities for the Dominant

The rules for access to sites and activities—some implicitly recognized by students and teachers and others introduced by teachers in an effort to open access to more students—and the strategies of the big game boys and girls illustrate how rules that are known and shared by all and intended to even the playing field can actually serve to extend the influence of dominant groups and hide such dominance as "natural."

The rules of access to sites at Sylvan best suited the dominant, big game boys. Furthermore, because teachers' attempts to modify the rules in order to increase access failed to challenge the tastes of the dominant boys, the boys remained in the best position to win the competition for sites. In fact, because the interventions were intended to increase access, the boys' continued dominance lent the boys additional legitimacy. Their domination seemed natural, the result of their own higher levels of interest and better organizational ability.

Rules of Access

The way you get access to the site is by getting there first, having the right equipment and having the people to play.

Everyone at Sylvan—teachers, students, staff and parents—implicitly accepted this rule and tacitly adhered to it. The rule expressed a commonly held notion of fairness: if you have the interest to get to a site and organize it before others, you deserve it. However, alternative rules of access, such as alternating who gets access to sites or, as is the common practice on public basketball courts, allowing the people excluded from the current game to form a team to play the game's winners, also would have been fair—and might have had quite different results in terms of access to the Sylvan fields.

The big game boys used this rule of access to begin the knockout game on the blacktop. One day, in the absence of many of the basketball playing girls, boys started a game of knockout. The boys were on the court, they had the two balls required to play, and they had enough players to play the game.

The big game boys, generally, had organizational advantages over the girls and young boys at Sylvan. First, they had years of experience, both at Sylvan and through outside organized sports, in organizing games. Second, the older boys at Sylvan traditionally were looked to by others to organize games. The boys' big game was the only play activity with an oral history. Fifth and sixth grade big game players would talk about legendary organizers from the past who could make enormous, all-school games. A couple of fourth grade boys were so aware of their impending role as big game organizers that in June they organized a soccer game for younger players, so that the fourth graders could rate the younger players and therefore be more prepared for their role as captains of the big game in the fall.

The interests of the big game playing boys are developed within the continuity of a boys' big game. Likewise, girls developed their interests in activities within the continuity of a playground dominated by a boys' big game. Most boys were playing organized soccer games of their own on the upper field as early as first or second grade. During our observations, a couple of second grade boys regularly played the big soccer game. A successively higher number of third and fourth grade boys played. No girls played in the big games with any consistency until fifth grade.

The girls did know how to use this rule. They tried to use it in their attempt to regain the blacktop from knockout. They got to the blacktop before the knockout-playing boys, they brought a basketball, and they started their basketball game. However, as we shall see below, the girls' efforts failed because of a second rule of access—ironically, a rule instituted by the school to expand access to sites.

Multiple games can be played simultaneously at a site.

Ideally, the rule would allow more players at a site and allow people who did not want to play the more competitive game an opportunity to play another game. In practice, however, the rule provided another opportunity for the more dominant players to move others off a site. The basketball-playing girls built their whole domination of the blacktop on this rule. The girls were almost never the first to the blacktop. They assumed the court with their music, their age and sense of privilege, and the physical space they took up by playing basketball—walking, talking and dancing. Younger boys would sometimes continue to play by themselves, or enter the court and play by themselves around the girls, but seldom for long. After the girls lost the blacktop to knockout, a few of them tried to reclaim the court using the “get to the site first” rule. But the knockout players used the “multiple games” rule to discourage the girls from trying it again. Knockout was more disruptive to basketball than basketball was to knockout. The sixth grade girls were more dominant than the younger boys and had played a more disruptive game, displacing them. In turn, the sixth grade boys played a more disruptive game than the girls, displacing them.

Anyone can join a game as long as he or she brings a player of equal ability (the “no-exclusion” or “matching” rule).

Building fair teams was a major issue at the school. This compromise rule, which did not “ruin” teams and ideally allowed access for anyone wishing to play, seemed to make sense. It was used frequently. Ironically, however, it also played into the domination of the older organizing boys.

First, to invoke the rule successfully, new players (usually in twos) would need a certain amount of social standing. So, while older boys were nearly always welcomed into games or, when not welcomed, could forcefully invoke the no-exclusion rule to get into a game, younger players and girls sometimes simply were not recognized. Second, captains of the big games, the judges of “fair” matches, were always boys representative of the older, organizing boys. The rule provided another opportunity for the male captains to order people and express status. And, the captains’ skill at judging ability (as opposed to other characteristics, such as gender, age and popularity) was questionable. Their difficulty in picking fair teams in the first place makes dubious the proposition they could pick matches. Girls, especially, would express the feeling that they were underappreciated and even humiliated in the matching process: sometimes, they were forced to match two or three girls to a single boy. Furthermore, joining through matching increased exposure: in front of the whole, suspended game, a potential player was measured against another, by two captains with the vocal help of the rest of their teammates.

Conclusion

Our analysis of our field observations now enable us to answer the initial practical questions the teachers asked. **Were the girls missing from the dominant games?** Yes. Only one girl consistently played the boys' big game. A group of about six older girls held the blacktop for a substantial portion of the year, but were ultimately displaced by the older boys.

How did it happen?

Four main findings emerge from our observations. First, there were gender differences in the sixth graders' preferences for games. The boys' big game was a spectacle turned outward, intended to create and display a hierarchy of athletic prowess. The organizing boys tried to involve as many players and spectators as possible. They monitored and reported the status of players continually through the picking of teams and through commentary during and after games. The girls' alternative big game was a spectacle turned inward. For the organizing sixth grade girls, the game was one part of a larger scene that included talking, dancing, and the maintenance of relationships among the sixth grade girls and boys. The boys' big game was consciously age inclusive, as the boys eagerly added spectators and less accomplished players; and it was unconsciously gender exclusive, as many girls disliked the boys' style of play and competitiveness. Further, girls who did attempt to join these games often were ignored or discounted. The girls' big game was consciously gender inclusive, as the girls sought to include boys in their games and discussions; and it was consciously age exclusive, as the girls' music and discussion were too developmentally sophisticated for younger children. There were also differences among boys in their preferences for games. Only a core group of sixth grade boys organized the big games. An ever-changing group of second to sixth grade boys played in the boys' big game. And a few sixth grade boys switched often between the boys' and girls' big games. They were comfortable in both styles of games.

Second, these gender differences in game preferences were learned through socialization inside and outside of Sylvan. The boys and girls were influenced by larger societal values concerning boys, girls, and sports. They also were influenced by their years of experience on a Sylvan playground that had a tradition, complete with an oral history, of a large, competitive boys' game but no tradition of a girls' big game. Further, the games were linked to the developmental levels of sixth grade boys and girls. Much has been written about the role of organized sports in boys' development (see Lever, 1976). However, the girls, whose big game included a larger scene of talking and progressive music, were clearly using it to work on their developmental tasks, as well.

Third, the boys' and girls' preferences for games had consequences for the control of major spaces on the playground. The big game boys' preference for such games helped them to secure central locations. The boys were motivated to organize large games and often had considerable practice, in school and outside of school, in organized sports. Their large games tended to dominate the outdoors. On the other hand, the girls' interests were more insular. With fewer regular players, they could more easily lose control of valued spots on the playground.

Fourth, unexamined assumptions about fairness, and the rules of access to sites and games developed from those assumptions, were grounded in the style of games favored by the dominant boys. The rule that allowed Sylvan children to claim sites by arriving first and then initiating a game favored big game leaders. The efforts of the big game leaders were supported by an oral tradition in which older boys organized big games. They had more practice in initiating games, and prospective male players tended to follow them, when they would not follow older girls.

In an attempt to avoid complete territorial control by one group of children, Sylvan had another rule which allowed children to play more than one game at a time in the same location. In practice, this rule compounded the advantage of the big game leaders. Because they marked their prowess by organizing large, boisterous games, they could easily overwhelm a site, making it practically impossible for another game to survive. As the knockout example showed, it was much harder, given the girls' favored style of game, for the girls to play on the same footing, in the same place.

Finally, in an attempt to enable individual children to gain entrance to existing boys' big games, current players had to accept pairs of newcomers "matched" for competence. Once again, this rule privileged the game organizers, as it required the game to stop while the leaders publicly discussed the abilities of the newcomers. Often young girls were asked to provide another girl to match up "fairly" with one boy. Further, this rule was of no help to the big game girls, who had no interest in joining the "knockout" big game. Not surprisingly, almost no girls ended up playing in the big games. Thus, these rules, intended to expand access, actually tended to contribute to the dominance of a relatively few boys.

Are there teachable ways or interventions to help more girls gain access to central sites and dominant games?

We believe there are. First, the rules allowing multiple games at sites and requiring new players to join games as matched pairs did not effectively extend access to girls and younger players. The multiple games rule allowed dominant, disruptive games to be played over the top of smaller games. The matching rule placed newcomers in difficult positions, as their skills were

judged publicly by the big game leaders. Many big games were sufficiently large that additional players did little to imbalance teams. The basketball-playing girls actually played with uneven sides and managed to maintain successful games. These two rules should be eliminated.

Second, the faculty needs to re-examine their underlying assumptions about fair access to games and how these assumptions interact with the developing interests of the children. They need to ask what values are privileged on the playground and which people those values represent. Then, the whole issue can be raised for discussion at the school level.

As part of this discussion, teachers can help students unravel notions of fairness and opportunity. Helping children pierce the discourse of fairness and develop a meta-view of fairness, dominance, and preferences could empower children in the current context while giving them a powerful tool to use in dissecting future social experiences.

Here, the lessons for Sylvan teachers are really lessons for teachers in all schools. While the rules for fairness will vary, as well as the games and activities favored by children, issues of dominance, fairness, and access to resources are perennial human concerns. Helping children learn ways to approach these issues in school will help them develop tools for dealing with such issues throughout life.

Footnotes

¹ This is consistent with the swirling pageantry of girls' games so richly described in Beresin (1993).

² As Thorne had (1993), we found considerable overlap in the behavior of boys and girls who did not fit into ready-made gender stereotypes. Further, Thorne's (1993) warnings about the ease in which research can be skewed by focus on dominant people helped us to see the large numbers of kids slipping in and out of games and styles.

³ As in Gilligan (1982), we suggest the differences in picking teams reflect differing moral notions between these girls and boys rather than differences in the complexity of the games (see Lever (1976) for a differing assessment).

⁴ This contrasts with Lever's (1976) interpretation of boys' large play groups. As had Lever, we found the boys' tended to play in larger groups, their games requiring more players, and containing more age heterogeneity. However, Lever links these large games and age mixing to higher skill ceilings in boys' games. Because the games require extended skills for mastery, the boys do not tire of the games, even as they get older; girls, though, play simpler games and grow bored with them as they age. Besides being condescending and privileging boys' play, we believe Lever missed essential aspects of gendered play. We suggest that the boys' desire for large games and age mixing at Sylvan was involved with their desire for status and the exercise and display of power. Further, it may be that the basketball playing girls did not allow for age mixing because the skill floor in their game was too high for the younger boys. Certainly, the entire spectacle of the girls' big game involved a complex tapestry of developmentally appropriate activities. Because their game included talk, music and dancing, the skills and knowledge required may have been too much for the younger boys. Basketball itself, of course, demanded equal skill whether it was played by boys or girls.

⁵ This is consistent with Beresin's (1993) experience in which girls, when asked "What is played here?" replied with a list of the games boys played, rather than their own activities.

⁶ Beresin (1993) in her study of an urban schoolyard found a lack of props and stimulation for girls, especially.

⁷ The game started with five girls, seven boys. It was played in the girls' big game fashion, so players came and went. At one point, there were about 15 players. It was able to accommodate all 15, because the girls, unlike the boys, played basketball games with odd numbers of players.

⁸ Horse is a basketball game in which players, as many as want to play but usually two or three, take turns trying shots selected by one of the players. Players pick up letters (h, h-o) when they miss a shot made by the player selecting shots. Players who reach h-o-r-s-e are out. If the player whose turn it is to select shots misses, then the next player in turn gets to select the next shot.

⁹ Within two weeks, the lower basketball court, which was full court, had dried off for the spring, and, as is the way of the big game, the boys left the blacktop to play full court basketball. The girls went back to basketball on the blacktop but never controlled as completely again. As if pulled into the wake of the older boys, younger boys sometimes played knockout when the older girls were not on the blacktop—something that had not happened all year.

¹⁰ A Freudian might not think it an accident that the girls, displaced from their beloved court, immediately chose to play this game.

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