Background:

It has been widely noted that significant changes have occurred in Kindergarten programs in the United States over the past decade or more and that these changes have accelerated as a result of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Teachers, administrators and researchers have all agreed that there is less play than in the past. The goal of this study was to explore that observation, seeking both to document some of the details of current classroom life and to elicit the views of teachers and principals about the role of play and its importance for Kindergarten children and their education. While there is a long and very extensive educational and developmental literature on play, very few studies have directly addressed these questions. Play in preschool and Kindergarten classrooms has largely been studied in terms of assessing the level of capacity for symbolic play of individual children, or a mean to other curricular ends. To cite just a few representative examples of recent studies: Shefatya (1995) examined ways of looking at sociodramatic play in relation to varying conceptual frameworks and means of assessment. Hanline, Milton, and Phelps (2008), looked at the relationship of the level of representation in preschoolers’ sociodramatic play and early academic achievement in elementary school and concluded that the ability to think symbolically, as developed in play, is an important factor in later formal academic learning. Very few studies have examined the attitudes of teachers and principals about the importance of play. Devries (2001) is an exception; she examines the relationship of views of play and learning to different educational models, including constructivism.

The Study:

The main question our research addresses is “What is the current status of imaginative play in Kindergarten classrooms?” We explored this via a small-scale, qualitative study of a variety of schools in Westchester County, NY. At each we interviewed the principal, and, separately, one or more Kindergarten teachers, and sent teams of observers into two or more classrooms to observe during the time the teachers indicated freely chosen play takes place. In all, we observed in 14 classrooms in 6 different schools/districts. The districts ranged from small, high income suburban to large, low-income and inner city, with populations that varied from homogenous to heterogeneous on a range of dimensions (including race/ethnicity; socioeconomic class; school size).

The study addresses its central question from the perspectives of three different sets of data:

A. Based on our interviews, we examine what principals and teachers think constitutes “play” in kindergarten, and its relationship to learning
B. From both teacher interviews and the classroom observations we examine the provisions available to the children-- in terms of time, space, materials and teacher involvement.
C. A selection of comparative case studies illustrates similarities and differences among classrooms observed.
Method:

We have taken a qualitative approach to exploring the prevalence and nature of imaginative play in public school kindergartens (in this report the terms “imaginative play” and “pretend play” are used interchangeably; they include but are not limited to what is frequently called “sociodramatic play.”). Qualitative approaches to research in early childhood settings have come to the fore in recent years (Hatch, 1995; Merriam, 1998). The aim of such studies is to gather rich, descriptive material with reference to a question or questions; such material provides a basis for one or more interpretations. While some qualitative studies follow the model of the anthropologist on her own in the field, other studies attend to issues of validity by having two or more observers on the scene. The material gathered is generally considered in terms of categories pre-established or emerging from the observations and/or interviews. Observations are looked at in terms of ‘meaningful units’ or episodes rather than being reduced to countable items. A mode of analysis complementary to the focus on meaningful units is the case study method. While there are several forms of the case study, all focus on one or more entities or events in a real life context and attempt to provide an integrated view and interpretation through the use of detailed description. In the comparative case study approach, two or more cases are viewed in terms of a constellation of factors or dimensions. Such comparisons contribute to conceptualizing how parts are related within a whole, as well as generating questions for future inquiry.

Our approach to gathering data had two parts: observation of activities in kindergarten classrooms during “choice time” and interviews with principals and teachers. We selected 6 public schools in Westchester districts that ranged from small, high income suburban to large, low-income and inner city, with populations that varied from homogeneous to heterogeneous on a range of dimensions. In each school, we observed in more than one classroom, yielding a total of 14 in which the full period of “choice time” was observed.

Observations: Two observers took detailed field notes in each classroom. Most teams were comprised of a principal investigator and a graduate student; the students had received training as observers. Prior to the beginning of the study proper, a set of categories was developed through observation and discussion of play activities in the Sarah Lawrence College Early Childhood Center (see Appendix i). In addition to observing play activities, each observer noted: (i) amount of choice time; (ii) arrangement, number and furnishings of centers; (iii) how children are directed to centers, (iv) aspects of the teacher’s role. (See appendix i)

Following each classroom observation, the two observers met and audiotaped their observations, using the occasion to discuss and corroborate what they had seen. The audiotapes were subsequently transcribed in full. These transcriptions provided the material for subsequent analyses (see sections B and C below).

Interviews: In most cases, the principal of the school, and one or more kindergarten teachers were interviewed separately, using the protocol set forth in Appendix ii. With the permission of the principals and teachers, the interviews were audiotaped; the tapes were subsequently transcribed, providing material for the analyses in Sections A and D. (see appendix ii)

Material gathered from observations and interviews provided the basis for the case studies reported on in Section E.
Findings

A. The relationship of play to learning as expressed by principals and teachers

The view we are espousing in this research project, that freely chosen imaginary play is the core of learning for young children, is clearly a minority point of view. One of the findings of our interviews is that even when teachers and principals told us they think play is important, or that play leads to learning, they were usually referring to an understanding of play as a highly scripted, teacher directed activity.

We found that principals and teachers vary considerably in what they actually think constitutes play—including teacher organized activities such as planting a garden, playing organized games, recess, as well as child initiated free play. The responses to our questions about “what do you see as the role of play in kindergarten?”, “what kinds of play take place in kindergarten?”, and “how is play related to learning?” constituted a wide range. These responses fell along a continuum from a view of play as separate from learning (and incidental to it), to a view that play is integral to learning.

We have characterized these views in the following four categories, and include representative examples:

1. Play is a way of making learning fun

Play is being considered here as an attitude of “playfulness” which can be brought to any activity, even traditional learning content. It is exemplified by a teacher’s attitude toward her own teaching, or the choosing of games which children enjoy playing.

Examples:

Children are “playing with manipulatives to understand math”

“They are playing these games with dominoes, they were certainly talking numbers, they were certainly counting, they were certainly interacting with their partner. Everybody was engaged—it was fun. I think if you asked them they thought they were playing”

2. Play activities are the vehicle through which children learn academic content

This view places the focus on children’s play as an activity, but sees it as an instrument of a prescribed curriculum. Play consists of activities chosen by the teacher to be carried out during academic learning periods, and the play activities are chosen by the teacher to complement the content being learned. The children are being guided through an activity together as a group.

Example:

“They’re developing self esteem, language, and it is quite obvious that play is alive and well throughout the classrooms…They’re playing through the literacy, when they do read aloud, acting out the characters, and the children make the mask out of lollipop sticks or ice cream pops, they’re learning all their curriculum through play.”

3. Play emerges from and intertwines with the curriculum, with opportunities for longer projects.
Teachers, in this view, are valuing play experiences in their own right. They are flexible enough to take note of children’s questions, and encourage these to develop into classroom activities which allow children to explore their own interests. These play activities emerge out of formal learning experiences, and take on a life of their own.

Example:

“We did a shared reading, and the kids started asking a million questions about ducks and where do they live and what do they eat...and this came from a fictional story. From that we created a whole project, which incorporated life cycles, animals, which are all things in the curriculum. You have to interpret it and twist it so that you can involve their curiosity…”

4. Imaginative play IS the medium through which children learn. Learning emerges from imaginative play.

This is a philosophical position about the centrality of play for how children learn about themselves and their world. We heard aspects of this view in a few of our interviews, but it was only partially articulated, and never fully differentiated. No one we interviewed differentiated imaginative play from the other forms of play, in terms of the functions it serves. Several teachers and principles addressed aspects of this view by highlighting the importance of children choosing and planning as essential components of play.

Example:

“Thematic play is kitchen areas, activities where kids are more involved...or morph into a store....It’s different than the shallow kind of play. Math games tend to really be shallow… Play has some really specific components to it…play in a general sense means that there are others that are playing; that the dynamics of that play includes understanding the rules of engagement, making a plan, delineation of job or role, some specific tenants of content that need to be understood by those playing. Play is a very deep activity that has everything to do with the real world.”

In summary, our findings in this area suggest that:

- Most teachers refer to free choice time or center time, and do not actually call this “play”. They often do not bring up the topic of play in the context of our questions about “free choice” time until we bring it up.
- What principals and teachers mean by play varies, as they generally do not distinguish imaginative play from other activities which include manipulatives, games, gardens, centers.
- The relationship of play to learning is rarely articulated by principals or teachers.
- Principals and teachers within the same school often differ in how they talk about play—in emphasis, allotment of time, priority, urgency, degree of conflict with other activities.

B. Provisions for play in the classrooms

*Provisions for play* refers to time, space, materials and teacher involvement in play activity. We were interested in looking at aspects of the physical and social environment that could affect children’s pretend play. Drawing on the interviews and the observations, we noted the time in which imaginative
play could take place, the children’s role in making choices, materials available, and the teacher’s role. (See appendix i for categories pertaining to the teacher’s role).

The aspects of provisions we looked at included:

1. Choice or station time – This is a designated period in which children can engage in a range of activities, only some of which are designed for imaginative play (e.g. housekeeping area).
2. The arrangement, nature and number of “centers” or areas/activities available during choice time
3. How children select or are directed to a center, and the rules governing their activity there
4. Aspects of the teacher’s role in relation to the children’s activity

1. Choice or station time: how many times per week and duration
   • Ranged from once every six days to five times a week; the majority of classrooms had choice time every day
   • The amount of time varied from 20-30 minutes to 1 hour a day. Two classrooms provided less than 30 minutes of choice or center time, and only one provided 60 minutes, with the majority having 30 minutes allotted. With time for getting started (i.e. including children’s choice or assignment to a center) and clean-up, the actual time for children’s activities was less than the scheduled time indicated above, sometimes considerably so.
   • In most, but not all, of the classrooms, individual children or small groups could be called away for other activities—either reading or testing/assessment.

2. Arrangement, number and nature of centers; arrangement of room

Centers were arranged either (a) in a large circle, sometimes with one or two of the tables for activities toward the center, sometimes an area for reading group toward the center; or (b) around the edges of the classroom.

   • The number of activity centers ranged from 5 to 12.
   • There were tables in all the rooms
   • The amount and variety of equipment varied from very sparse to ample. Almost all classrooms had blocks, housekeeping corner, and one or more computers. Also prevalent were: play dough, drawing and/or painting materials, puzzles and games; “library” or reading/book table. One or more classrooms had: Lego, easels, puppet set-up, and/or sand table
   • Specific materials available at centers in different classrooms varied greatly, e.g. from well stocked housekeeping corner to barely furnished; from good-sized collections of blocks to very few blocks.

It must be noted that the only centers explicitly designed for pretend play are blocks and housekeeping (and puppets when available) but children pretended with other materials as well.

3. Choice selection and rules regarding the use of centers
   • Degree of choice ranged from zero to open. In one classroom, children were assigned to a center without any choice on their part; in 6 classrooms, children could make a selection within
limits prescribed by the teacher (e.g. where they played yesterday, whether there was room at the selected center, etc.); in 7 classrooms, children could make a free choice and move around freely (e.g. “Everything is open, go where you like.”)

- Number of children allowed at each center ranged from a specific limit enforced –e.g. 2, 3 -- to no apparent limit on how many could be at a center.
- Some classrooms had a specific requirement to stay at a given center for the entire period, or to move at half-time; in others, there was no requirement to stay at one center -- children could move about freely.
- At clean up time, most classrooms required that everything be picked up; in a few classrooms, some things -- such as block structures -- could be left in place.

4. Teacher’s Role

In schools visited, teachers have at least some role in setting up their classrooms and a decisive role in establishing “rules” for how many children can play at a given center. In addition, we looked at whether teachers initiated activity, responded either by helping the play proceed or limiting it, commented with interest, helped resolve conflict—and whether there was any discussion after the play or free choice period (see appendix i). We found considerable variation.

None of the teachers initiated play activities directly but some asked “What would you like to do?” Intervention in the play was minimal. Several teachers are described as “accepting” but not particularly involved, rather as “floating around” the classroom. Some of the teachers took a more active role, circulating in the room, responding to questions and praising children (“You are playing well together”). One of the teachers was actively engaged in encouraging literacy activities rather than play; nonetheless, some play occurred in her classroom. In several classrooms, teachers called children for reading sessions (conducted within the classroom), leaving an assistant teacher to respond to the children’s play. Clean-up time was initiated and managed in several ways but in no case was there discussion of play or other activities at the end of choice time.

C. Level of imaginative play observed in the classrooms

To examine possible relationships between provisions and imaginative play, we established criteria for global assessment of the level of imaginative play. The global assessments of “high,” “medium” and “low” are based on coding specific aspects of the observational records (see appendix i) and additional material contained in the observational records, such as indications of sustained play. “High, “medium” and “low” categories refer to variations within our sample; that is, ratings are relative rather than absolute. Nonetheless, as evident in the criteria stated below, placement in the “high” category represents a level of pretend play activity that would meet most criteria for developed pretending.

The criteria may be phrased as questions:

- How much pretend play is occurring in the classroom?
- Is the pretend play fragmentary or more-or-less sustained?
- Do the children who are involved in pretend activities seem engaged?
- Is verbalization used effectively to establish play (“Let’s pretend”), take on roles (“You be the mommy”), negotiate (“Well, we COULD have two mommies”. No, let’s have one mommy and one babysitter”) and construct scenarios (“We could be pirates and go rob another ship”)--?
- How prevalent are pretend play sequences or scenarios? Are scenarios developed?
• Is there evidence of imaginative transformation, such as role taking or the transformation of props (e.g. a plastic cup held up to the eye as a telescope)--?

Using these criteria, we found the following pattern:

High – 3 classrooms
Medium – 9 classrooms
Low – 2 classrooms

We did not find an association between our rankings of classroom play and socioeconomic characteristics of the schools. Two of the three classrooms ranked “High” were in a district with the lowest per pupil expense and socioeconomically least advantaged population. In 5 of the 6 schools, different classrooms were judged as having different levels of play.

D. Relations between level of imaginative play and provisions for play

The 3 classrooms judged to show high levels of imaginative play shared the following provisions:

• Choice time took place every day, for 30 to 60 minutes
• The centers were well furnished with appropriate materials
• Children chose where they wanted to go (“Everything is open, go where you like”); in one case, by putting their names in a slot board—but they could move about
• In two of the classrooms, no limit was placed on the number of children at a center; in the other, the limit was 5
• In the 3 “high” classrooms, teachers were accepting and responsive, sometimes asking questions such as “How are you going to prepare for your party?”
• Reviewing the transcripts, we noted that these 3 classrooms had a certain “flow” --- children engaged in sustained imaginative play (although sometimes interrupted for assessments or reading sessions), children and teachers moved about the classroom in a purposeful way, the atmosphere seemed relaxed.

The 9 classrooms rated at the medium level of play varied considerably in the provisions we considered (see Section B above). The following may be noted:

• In one classroom, choice time occurred only once every 6 days; further, children were expected to shift activities once within the 30 minute period. Yet, on the day we observed, there was considerable pretend play, including sequenced play with dialogue in the housekeeping corner and some miniature world play. The fairly large room was well furnished with materials for imaginative play.
• Considering the 9 classrooms, it appears that free choice selection and the availability of ample materials for play are related to the prevalence and richness of imaginative play which varies within this group of classrooms.

The 2 classrooms designated as low in level of imaginative play were quite different.

• The first of these classrooms was well furnished with a variety of materials presented in 8 centers, including a well equipped housekeeping corner; the other was sparsely furnished, particularly with regard to the housekeeping area (“minimal”), blocks and other materials for
miniature world play.

- In the first room, children were allowed to move around among centers; in the other, they had to stay with the activity to which they were assigned.
- In both, the teacher could be described as quite accepting, but in the transcript of the first classroom she is described as providing “gentle oversight,” occasionally commenting on what the children were doing; in the other as quite directive and at one point participating in (although not leading) a pretend play sequence.

E. Comparative Case Studies of Individual Classrooms (See Appendix iii)

In these comparisons, thick descriptions prepared from dictations made after each classroom observation session offer the opportunity to view the way the children functioned in the setting offered. They highlight our findings that:

1. In the same school, different classrooms can reflect different teachers’ valuing of both choice and imaginative play, in the provisions they afford the children and in the way the children use them.
2. In the same school, different teacher’s effectiveness can be reflected in the amount and depth/extent of the play the children are able to carry out.
3. In different schools, different views of play by administrators and/or teachers are reflected in very different structuring and provisions for both free choice and in particular imaginative play.
4. In different schools, the level of satisfaction with the current program, and changes teachers wish they could implement, as well as their concern about how Kindergarten programs have changed in recent years, vary widely, and are to some degree reflected in the program design and both provisions and observed play patterns in the classrooms.

Concluding comments:

As expected, this study delineated the fact that there has been a significant diminution in the amount of time during the Kindergarten day and week when children are encouraged, or even allowed, to participate in freely chosen unstructured play. It was encouraging to see that in every classroom children made use of every opportunity they could find for imaginative play and demonstrated both interest in and capacity for the kind of play that is the rich basis of learning and growth at this age.

However, it was discouraging to see the extent to which such opportunities were limited, and the extent to which many educators did not feel that limitation was an impediment to the children’s education and development. The categories for looking at imaginative play we developed here seem to have the potential for further use in assessing imaginative play across settings and that will be explored in the future. The analysis of provisions and attitudes, reported above, have implications for recommendations for practice as well as for further qualitative studies of classrooms in additional schools and with both younger and older children. These findings complement those of the quantitative studies and together have implications for policy recommendations.

We believe a significant finding of this study is the degree to which limitations of play as well as variations from classroom to classroom are the function of an interaction among the larger educational culture, policy mandates from federal, state and local sources, and the views, interests and values of individual educators in administrative and instructional positions within schools. These factors, taken together, contribute to the provisioning of classrooms, the schedule arrangements, and the things teachers say and do that in turn are important influences on the extent and depth and richness of imaginative play in classrooms. Attempts to change policy and practice to increase the amount and quality of play in Kindergarten programs need to take all of these factors into account.
References:


Appendix i

Play Study Observational Categories

Teacher Activities:

Pre-Play:
- Providing space (setting up centers, areas)
- Providing time (a time in day/week allocated to choice/play)
- Providing materials (open-ended materials, imaginative play props, etc.)
- Delineating choices available (from “everything is open” to “today the imagination area if open”)
- Asking children to choose an activity, think about what they want to do
- Assigning children to activities
- Miscellaneous (limiting numbers in an area, standing rules, etc.)

During Play:
- Initiating
  - Teacher-led activity with pretense (e.g. “This will be a restaurant area today.”)
  - Teacher-led pretense (e.g. “This is a camera”)
  - Suggestion to child about play (e.g. “You like trains—why don’t you draw a train?”)
- Responding
  - Limiting, rushing, stopping play (e.g. “There are too many people here, you need to go somewhere else”)
  - Helping resolve conflict (e.g. “Say you are sorry”, or “Could he be another brother?”)
  - Helping the play proceed, setting limits, answering questions (e.g. You can use the blocks as dishes but you need to leave the snack plates here.)
  - Asking about, commenting with interest on the play (e.g. “What is the bunny going to do next?”)
  - Present near, accepting play

Post-Play:
- Talking about, discussing play (e.g. “What did the block committee decide to build?”)
- Allowing material to stay so play can be resumed (e.g. “The blocks can stay up over the weekend.”)
- Documenting play (with video, photographs; displaying samples)
- Talking about, discussing next time

Imaginative Play Activities:

- **Role playing** (child takes on a pretend role in play)
-Miniature world play (child creates a pretend scenario with small scale objects, doll house, Lego, and small figures)

-Block Building/Large construction materials
  -Construction only (without imaginative elaboration)
  -Symbolic activities around construction (scenario using the construction)

  -Visual Representation (drawing, sculpting): representational forms, writing

Sub-categories of imaginative activity:

-Narration (e.g. “The dog is running away now”)
-Dialogue (e.g. “I need more food, Mommy”)
-Sound effects (e.g. slurping sound with pretend eating)
-Establishing spaces (e.g. “his will be the ocean over here”)
-Establishing/negotiating roles (e.g. “We can have two Dads”)

-Props:
  -literal use (e.g. miniature car being run along a block)
  -transformed use (e.g. a plate is used as a hat)
-Imaginary objects/actions (e.g. holding an imaginary phone to one’s ear or talking to an imagined person out an imagined window)
-Other verbal elaboration: planning, describing, explaining, discussing, identifying, etc.

Non-Imaginative Activities:

-Describe activities available and carried out

-Teacher-initiated (e.g. painting papier-mache planets)
  -Child initiated (e.g. taking out a checkers game and playing it)

  -Participation assigned
  -Participation chosen

Miscellaneous/Ambiguous (when it is not clear or possible to tell whether an activity is imaginative—e.g. child is moving objects without verbalization or drawing but representational nature or not cannot be determined.)
Appendix ii

Kindergarten Study: Principal Interview Questions

I. About the school and the administration

How long have you been principal? What is your background in education?

What is the administrative structure besides you and the teachers? 
(grade level teams? AP? Curriculum specialists?)

What supervisory/decision making processes are in place? 
(in particular in regard to how curriculum is developed, implemented)

Can you point us to a written or online source of demographic information about the school?

(If not: please describe the size of the school, number of classes on grade level, class size, demographics of the community, annual per pupil expenditure)

How would you describe the educational philosophy and/or goals of the school?

(Are there particular initiatives/challenges on the school’s agenda or yours currently?)

II. About the Kindergarten

Please describe the Kindergarten program—structure, number of classes, class size

Please describe the curriculum or varieties of curriculum—does it vary from class to class 
(Follow up questions on math and literacy curricula if any used)

How are Kindergarten program, room set up, schedule decisions made?

Depending on the above, please tell us more about what kinds of choices K children have available—both time-wise and in terms of activities, indoors and outside

Depending on the conversation so far, please talk about play: how do you see it? What role do you see it play in Kindergarten program?

Do you see a need for more or less play opportunities in K? What kinds of play? How do you see play relating to learning? How do you think the teachers view it?

Depending on whether this has already come up, how do you see 5 year olds in terms of what experiences they should be having at school? Is the Kindergarten program meeting what you see as appropriate? If not, what would you like to see changed?

If not already touched on, what constraints do you feel are imposed on your Kindergarten program (by school board, state, fed govt, parents, etc, including standardized testing if any)?
III. Would you be willing to have our research assistants observe in a K classroom later on this Spring in a possible next phase of the project?

IV. Is there anything we can offer to the school around these issues (meet with teachers, parents, etc)?

V. To whom should we make our and send the small stipend for the K program?

Kindergarten Study: Teacher Interview

I. About the school and the Kindergarten:

How long have you taught K here, in other places?
What is your background in education?

How are decisions made about curriculum, room design and outfitting, etc?

How much choice do you have to organize your program in whatever way you wish to?

How do changes get made?

What is the overall program for the kindergarten? How well does it fit with your wishes for an ideal K program?

II. Can you describe your classroom…size, materials, time, structure of the day/week?

How much choice of activities do the children have? What kinds of options do they have for those choices?

How do you see the role of play in Kindergarten? What kinds of play take place, what kinds would you like to see take place? How do you see play relating to learning in K?

How would you change your program if you could do anything? (In particular, more or less choice time? More or less play? Different play opportunities?)

What constraints do you find yourself working with in terms of what 5 year olds need and what you are required to carry out?

III. Is there anything we could offer that would be helpful to you in terms of discussing these issues with parents, etc?
Appendix iii

Sarah Lawrence College Child Development Institute
Kindergarten Research Project

Comparative Case Study: School A

School A is the K-5 school in a small suburban school district with a high per pupil expenditure and a somewhat homogeneously white, middle to upper middle class population. It has been traditional here for Kindergarten teachers to have considerable choice about how to equip and structure their classrooms, and some parents indicate the kind of classroom they feel will best suit their child. This has meant that some classrooms are more traditionally structured, others more progressive, and occasional ones modeled on particular programs, such as Reggio-Emilia. At the time of the study, state regulations were increasingly affecting all the classrooms, and district mandates were beginning to as well. A literacy program was in place and a new math curriculum had just been adopted for use throughout the elementary school. These programs required a significant portion of each Kindergarten day and were to be carried out in specific ways at specific times.

The K teachers otherwise remain free to schedule their classroom activities, although they must work within the framework of a six-day rotation schedule the whole school follows, and they are scheduled for music, art, computer, physical education, and Spanish: they reported finding this constricting in terms of their ability to include choice time in the schedule. Teachers 1 and 2 have resolved this issue in quite different ways, as will be described below.

Classroom A1:

In this class, choice time takes place for ½ hour three times a week. The room, for 17 children, is fairly large and well-organized, with various materials around the perimeter and tables in the center. Imaginative play provisions include: a large supply of large blocks (with animal figures); sand table (with small vehicles and a doll house in it); a house-play corner (with dress-up clothes and kitchen materials); and art materials. The choice time options include these as well as puzzles and manipulative materials. Four children may be at each station at one time and they sign up by placing their names on the relevant section of a large board, taking turns by table group. They are free to move around during the period. No children were asked to do any other work or activities during choice time.

During choice time, teacher 1 moved about the room, sometimes encouraging given children to move around to have a variety of experiences; managing the noise level when she felt it necessary; taking photographs of the activities for an end of the year album for the children; giving time warnings when the children need to begin to wrap up their activities; and asking children to clean up the area where they were working. She allowed block structures to remain up for the next choice time and projects to be left in cubbies so that work on them can continue next time.

Imaginative miniature play took place around the block structure, with collaborative extended dialogue and sound effects, as well as planning, including “Let’s pretend we’re in a museum” and “do not enter.” It also took place at the sand table—sand was transformed into food being given to a stuffed animal inside the dollhouse. Instructions within the play included “Don’t fill up the doors [with sand]—it will
kill it.” A girl at the sand table engaged in imaginary object and imaginary game play with some boys in the adjacent block area: an imagined store product was referred to as “that’s in aisle number 4.”

Elaborate dramatic role play took place in the house corner as well, with several girls dressing up and narrating a scenario about going to the grocery store, making cakes, and feeding a dog some milk, using a stuffed dog in a transformed prop high chair. A group of 4 boys engaged with art materials, made representational drawings and narrated a story about what they were drawing, for example, “I’m drawing a house, I have a fire in the sky”,

Two boys made a very long link chain across the room, possibly a pretend fence; they expressed the wish that someone would open the door it was linked to and break it open. At easels, 2 children painted for an extended time, long colorful pattern lines, very similar to each other (whether it was representational or elaborated in any way could not be determined.)

Classroom A2:

In this class, by contrast, choice time takes place for ½ hour once every 6 days. The classroom is of similar size to Classroom 1, and currently holds 19 children. There are many areas and furnishings here, including audio-visual equipment, computers, and the same range of teaching materials seen in Classroom 1. The pretend play provisions include: Lego (with little horses and people and a sort of landscape set-up)—in the same area as a relatively small number of assorted sizes and types of blocks (unit, cardboard, small colored); art materials; easels; house corner (puppets, stuffed animals, food materials, but no dress up clothes). Additional choices included: manipulatives (math materials); table Lego; library; listening to stories on tape; and a games and puzzles choice. Each area had a set number of potential occupants and children signed up by placing their name cards; the teacher determined the order of the sign-ups, keeping children who had spent a lot of time in one area back until others had chosen, so as to give everyone a chance at the more popular activities (which means one might only get to do blocks every other or every third choice time). Children may leave an activity part-way through the time, but must clean up before leaving. It became apparent that they are encouraged to switch after about 15 minutes, and many had internalized that time frame and did so spontaneously, but no one was required to switch. The teacher says she will not let them switch after just a few minutes, to diminish wandering, but some of that did occur.

Teacher 2 moved about the room throughout the period, sometimes asking people who were wandering if they were looking for something to do. She occasionally helped resolve a conflict, in a low key way. She did not make suggestions though she occasionally asked a question, particularly of the children who were doing art. She seemed to be quite interested in the art work and children brought it to show her, one making her a necklace which she put on. She gave some technical assistance with cutting and with the tape players. When the time was up, the teacher told the children to clean up and praised them on how well they cleaned.

The children engaged in imaginative play with the assorted blocks and large Lego; the blocks were all together in a bin and the children worked rapidly and creatively to set up small structures they could play with. Of four children in the area, two played together immediately. Four children went to the house corner and were immediately engaged in imaginative play there. Some children around the room played by themselves, with paint, art materials, puzzles. It was impressive that the children who wanted to do imaginative play dug right in, collaborated smoothly and quickly and stayed engaged for 15 or 20 minutes. Those who switched mid-way became equally quickly engaged in their new activity. Likewise, one child spent the entire time on one elaborate drawing, while others were more variable in
the effort they expended on their work.

In the art corner, representational drawing was taking place. There was also writing in conjunction with drawing and much verbal elaboration out of the play as well as describing the drawings. They transformed paper into jewelry. Painting included both representational work and designs. In the block area, there was narration, establishment of space (“This is the river”, “You’re standing in my village”), talking outside of the play, and object transformation as a block became a hat. There did not appear to be characters. Miniature Lego play took the form of horses going on a plane, with narration but not much dialogue. In the house area, first a group of boys and then a group of girls did some intensive imaginative play. Here there was narration, set-up, role negotiation and conversation outside the play. Plastic pretend food objects were used but there was also transformation of a container into “coffee” and a basket into a hat. The group of girls likewise quickly established a scenario that was food oriented, but this involved much dialogue, sound effects (puppy voices), and spatial designations. A pretend pregnant belly was created, and description, narration and dialogue took place around that theme. The puppet stage became a “puppy room” and a puppet show was put on. A brief bout of play took place around a chain link set which one boy wanted to have be a fire hose. When some conflict arose, the teacher told the boys to work it out themselves and the boy just dropped the idea.

Comparison:

In these two classrooms we saw a considerable difference between the teachers’ valuing and support of imaginative play, particularly as reflected in the much larger amount of time/frequency of choice time and extent of imaginative play materials available in Classroom 1. More blocks, the sand table with props, the 3x a week choice periods, and the teacher’s encouragement of leaving block buildings and projects available for further work, all supported more elaborate and extended play. In Classroom 2, the rotation of activities, the infrequent choice period, and the suggestion that children switch activities mid-way in the period, as well as the provision of a number of non-imaginative play choices, tended to discourage extended imaginative play by many children. Teacher 2 seemed less interested in the imaginative activities outside of the arts and crafts area. She was generally less engaged in the children’s activity than teacher 1.

Of note is the fact that a number of the children in Classroom 2 were very adept by the Spring of the year at engaging rapidly and deeply in play, getting to it in the limited time they had, and switching gears rapidly to equal engagement with another activity. This was not the case for all of the children, however, so there was a wide range of degree of involvement and elaboration of imaginative play. In Classroom 1, most of the children were engaged in imaginative activity.

Contrasting Case Study: Classroom 1 at School F

School F is the K-4 school in suburban school district quite similar to School A in per pupil expense; the income level and demographics of the population of the district are similar to, though slightly less diverse, than School A’s. School F went from half-day to full-day Kindergarten 4 years ago, and the teachers and administrators developed the program they would use, visiting a variety of other schools to find elements that would include in their curriculum. The teachers at this school responded to the question about describing their Kindergarten program by saying “It’s fabulous!” and had no complaints about it or aspects of it they would change if they could. They felt considerable ownership of it and a sense that their school had a fair degree of say over its program, despite district-wide and state mandates and appreciate that they do not give standardized tests until second grade and do not require that children read at the beginning of first grade (although about 75% do). Of all the schools visited,
this one had the fullest day of academic activities, beginning with a 1 hour 45 minute to 2 hour literacy block (balanced literacy—Reader’s and Writers Workshops, etc) in the morning, and extending through math, social studies, and science periods each day. Children also went to specials each week, including art, physical education, library, Computer, Kinder Yoga, and Kinder Fingers, a fine motor skills program. Teachers said they had freedom in room set up and implementation of the programs, but tended to discuss and agree on basic approaches. Asked what was on her agenda for the future, the principal mentioned a consideration of a Handwriting Program (“Handwriting without tears”) and her desire to figure out how to keep a phonics emphasis without sacrificing the rest of the balanced literacy program.

In the context of this full program, the greatest choice occurs during the after-lunch period; instead of going to recess after lunch, the children come back to their classrooms with the teacher’s aide and are read a story, followed by what is referred to as “station time,” which is comparable to what at other schools is called choice or center time. The time allotment for reading and station time is ½ hour, although on the day we visited, because it was raining and the children would no be later going out, it was slightly extended, to about 45 minutes.

**Classroom F1:**

Currently housing a group of 19 children F1 is a large room, of similar design to many of the other classrooms observed, except that in this room two larger computers occupied a table in the middle of the room, rather than along the periphery as in all the other classrooms. The children returned from lunch in a silent single-file line, were given some antibacterial hand gel and sat quietly on the rug. Teacher 1 read them two stories from a Frog and Toad book—she read very dramatically and asked rapid, right or wrong answer questions about the story as she went along. She frequently interrupted her reading to tell the children to sit properly, stop putting their fingers in the mouths, etc. Many children raised their hands but most were not called on. About 15 minutes into the period, Teacher 1 began setting up the station time. There were clothespins with each child’s name, and she placed the pins on a chart which had different activities…the chart was somewhat out of the children’s view, so she had to repeat the choices several times during the process. She began by telling the children to think about what they had done the day before—if it was Building or Imagination or computer, they needed to make a different choice today—and she wanted them to be honest and self-report and not tell on each other. There was much discussion of this as each child made their request—whether they had done it the day before or not. The stations available were: computer, puzzles and games, pattern blocks, building (two plastic bins of unit blocks, without props); art; imagination (kitchen furniture area with doll bed but no dolls, no dress ups, and some puppets, and some plastic dishes and pans); and dry erase boards. 3 children could go to imagination, two to computer (though none did) and 4 to building.

The assigning process took about 10 minutes, and the teacher reminded the children as they chose that “you can’t get crazy in imagination”, and “you can take games to the table but you have to stay at the table”. During the 17 minutes of station time that followed, the teacher moved about the room, giving many directions, ranging from “I know you love trains, why don’t you draw a train” to “stay at your stations”. She frequently asked children what they were doing, but often moved on before they replied. Two other adults were in the room, one a special aide who began the year with two children but now works with the whole group, full time, and one a mental health professional who came in to facilitate social skills for one little boy. That adult did lead one pretend activity when she pretended a square of cubes was a camera. There were 5 or 6 conflicts that erupted briefly and the teachers directed the children to stop, apologize, talk to each other, etc.
In this classroom, we observed the smallest amount of and least elaborated imaginative play. The children in the building area did no pretend play at all, and their building was fragmentary and rudimentary, sometimes including dumping the blocks out of the bin. There was considerable investment in collage and decorative activities by three girls at the art table, with little conversation; two boys drew elaborate representational works for the entire time period, each sitting separately at large tables. One boy worked with the dry erase board, drawing, and erasing, representational figures, and at the end, he made a list with numbers and blank spaces, something the teacher noted with a smile as relating to the story she had read. Several children played with table-top building materials, dominos and Unifix cubes, making towers-like structures, without imaginative elaboration. In the imagination corner, three children played for the entire time, with one child as the director throughout—“Let’s pretend you are angry now”…”now you cry”…”now you bite my leg (to the child being a dog)…roles were taken, but not discussed, a little dialogue was directed and repeated, but there was generally little conversation, except for the directions and some resistance (e.g. “Stop it!” when director placed a pan on another child’s head.) At one point a chalkboard easel in the area was used as a location for the dog but the teacher, seeing the children crowding under it, came over and took the easel away, offering small chalkboards as a replacement.

After a little more than 15 minutes, the head teacher returned, commented on “What a great job you are all doing” and told them to start cleaning up and getting ready for math. She pointed out to the two drawing boys where they could store their drawings to work on later.

In this school, the fact that some degree of free play occurs only for about 15 minutes a day, when the head teachers are not in the room, reflects the view the teachers and administrators stated, that while “We still believe in play”, its primary value is to make the academic activities more appealing, and freely chosen, child directed play is not a priority (one teacher said, “15 minutes of choice buys you 45 minutes of work”). In Classroom 1, the lack of provisions, both physical and teacher-attitude based, seemed to further limit the richness of play seen, more than the time constraints did (based on comparisons with other schools with limited time and another classroom in the same school.) While teacher 1 involved herself a lot with the children, she often seemed to be interrupting, limiting and otherwise interfering with free choice and imaginative activity.

**Comparative comments:**

There were evident differences between the educational plan for Kindergarten in School A and that in School F. The latter, as described above, had a much more specific, academically designed and uniform curriculum that was carried out in all the classrooms. However, it is important to note that Classroom 1 at School F differed in significant ways from Classroom 2 in the same school, in terms of the provisions, teacher behavior, and play observed. Classroom F1 was rated “Low” on the criteria for imaginative play, while Classroom F2 was rated “Medium.” While the teacher in Classroom F1 was, as described above, seen at a number of points as interfering with the extent and richness of the play, the teacher in Classroom F2 was seen at various times as facilitating imaginative play in a variety of ways.

The differences between the play observed in Classrooms F1 and A1 and A2 was therefore only partly a function of the difference between schools A and F; it was also to a significant extent the function of differences in attitude and style between the teachers; even though teachers in F1 and F2 were each constrained to some extent by the grade-wide mandates and decisions about scheduling and curriculum at their school, they still differed significantly from each other. This illustrates what we judge to be a significant finding of the present study, and one deserving further exploration: there is an interaction
among the larger educational culture, the policy mandates from federal, state and local sources, and the views, interests and values of individual educators in administrative and instructional positions within schools.