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How play becomes educational: case study in an out-of-school club in France

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ABSTRACT

Based on direct observations in an out-of-school club in France, this paper discusses the different forms of actions grouped under the general term of 'play' initiated either by the children or their animateurs. After presenting the fieldwork, the first part of the paper aims to untangle the complex web of frameworks that organise out-of-school times and spaces depending on the different engagements and levels of involvement on the part of the children and their animateurs. The analysis then describes how games and other organised play activities can be formalised through an educational process led by adult agenda and contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of the relationships between leisure and education.

KEYWORDS

Play; games; out-of-school activities; school form; formalisation; educational leisure activities

Introduction

In the late twentieth century, childcare and the supervision of out-of-school activities in many industrialised Western countries underwent significant development (Evaldsson 2009). Adler and Adler (1994) demonstrated the institutionalisation and rationalisation of these activities, which were organised and supervised by adults, in the United States and Nocon and Cole (2006) confirmed these findings later. In England, Smith and Barker (2000) reported similar developments in England in out-of-school clubs. Recent case studies conducted in Sweden (Haglund 2015), Norway (Skår and Krogh 2009), Finland (Lehto and Eskelinen 2020), and Australia (Hurst 2019) also show a similar process. While the institutionalisation of childhood is widely acknowledged (Zeihner 2009), it is accompanied by a schoolification process of other social spheres, including children's leisure activities. Even if this process seems to be global, there is room to better understand how the difference between children's 'free play' and 'directed activities' is constructed, which strongly structures these professional and even academic worlds (Pellegrini 2005) and, moreover, what is happening in the French context.

In France, a tradition of pre- and after-school care for children has existed since the 1850s. Private initiatives and 'popular' education movements (confessional and then secular *patronages*¹) mobilised a desire to extend school supervision beyond the school day, and even into the holidays, when the 'benefits' of the school year tended to be

lost (Lee Downs 2002). Since that time, there has been a regular succession of initiatives. After the first *patronages*, the French state promoted the development of ‘intelligent leisure activities’ through ‘directed activities’ at the end of the 1930s (Condette 2011). Discussing its long history, Lebon (2005) showed the more general institutionalisation of the supervision of children’s leisure activities, with its municipalisation in the 1970s supported by the growing professionalisation of socio-cultural activities. Various associations ensured the promotion of ‘educational leisure activities’ that drew on national and local educational policies through the training of professionals – the *animateurs*² – and the establishment of educational projects at the local level. This ‘interstitial practice’ works with all types of public and in a number of fields (social, educational, cultural, sporting, etc.) or institutions (schools, museums, retirement house, sports clubs, etc.) on the borders of many of the better-recognised professions (teaching, social work, cultural mediation, etc.) because it is accessible without training and marked by precarious working conditions (see Besse and Carletti 2016).

Leisure and vacation times, which appeared with compulsory schooling, were thus strongly linked to an educational project. Vincent, Lahire, and Thin (1994, 41) noted how out-of-school and extracurricular activities served to ‘occupy children’s free time’, while Houssaye (1998) considered that out-of-school clubs were potentially nothing more than ‘prisoners of the school form’, claiming an ‘educational continuity’ with the school, its missions and its curriculum. Faced with this hegemony and its extension beyond the school boundaries, Mollo-Bouvier (1994, 82) emphasised the benefits sought by middle- and upper-class families of an educational dimension to their children’s leisure activities (see also Weininger, Lareau, and Conley 2015) and considered that: ‘Schooling and socialisation organise the lives of children in our modern society and explain why (as well as how) children are increasingly entrusted to establishments.’ Children’s leisure activities could thus not constitute an exception, but how does this educationalisation process operate on a daily basis at a micro level?

Within these out-of-school clubs, games – or what is more generally referred to as ‘play’ – are a source of confusion when the same term designates various practices. Teachers use this term in class to present ‘fun’ exercises, *animateurs* organise an ‘Olympiad’ of ‘sports games’, and this term also and very obviously refers to the games played by the children themselves. As King (1982) points out, this diverse perspectives have significant repercussions on the games themselves and how they are played because of this variation in meaning (see also Polgar 1976). Mayall and Hood (2001) highlighted a similar opposition between the ‘classic view’ – of play as autotelic and separate from work – and an educational and ‘developmental paradigm’ in the discourses and practices of education professionals. In this sense, play and games become a problematic research topic.

This paper aims to contribute to these analyses by examining the situation in France, which has received little attention in English literature on the subject. Specifically, it documents in detail how children’s games are transformed into educational activities through an ethnographic study of the daily life of an out-of-school club. In other words, this article describes the process of conformation to the ‘grammar of schooling’ (Tyack and Tobin 1994) at a micro level. The analysis of this transposition which will enable a better understanding of the complexity of the relationships between leisure and education.

Ethnography of ludic forms

Based on a fieldwork, I collected first-hand data, *in situ* and *in vivo*, in the daily life of children's leisure clubs. Depending on the place and the time, I conducted direct observations and took notes of the situations with details on the associated atmosphere, body language, intonations, objects held, and words expressed. As much as possible, I extended my observations with a view to understanding the habits, routines, strategies and similarities across the sequences captured *hic and nunc*. Given the specificities of conducting research with children in order to collect their points of view (James 2001), I chose to be a simple observer introduced as a student and with deliberately limited participation. This peripheral position allowed me to develop a 'least-adult role' (Mandell 1988) and to avoid being considered as an authority figure, or even as a 'spy' working closely with the team of amateurs.

This was a delicate posture to build and that proved fragile to maintain both with the children and with the adults, the latter not being used to working with a 'non-disciplining' adult (Fine and Sandstrom 1988, 29). The pen and paper associated with a main activity – writing – constituted the first visible and distinguishing features. The writing was, moreover, deliberately tiny, which regularly earned me the nickname from children of '*the man who writes really small*', indicating a different status (Fine and Sandstrom 1988, 42) and it was part of familiarisation (Barley and Bath 2014). Raising questions, the first discussions on what I was writing opened up a conversation about what I was doing and why I was there, namely '*to study the games the children were playing in the playground*' and so on, children frequently approached me to tell me about their games as Gildas does in the following excerpt:

1:25 pm I see Marvin and Zora chatting and running around together. '*We're playing tag,*' Gildas tells me. '*Indeed, I can see that.*' – '*Oh ... [visibly disappointed]*' – '*But I have a question: is it girls against boys?*' – '*Yes.*' – '*Thanks!*' And Gildas runs off again. Indeed, Marvin and Zora are having a more substantial game of tag with other children in the playground.

Although there was no ethics committee in French social sciences departments at the time of the fieldwork, I followed the ethics principles of Alderson (1995) of research with children and the professionals who supervise them. While my entry into the field was supported by old acquaintances, my past professional experiences underpinned the establishment of relationships such as understanding temporal and spatial organisation or norms and beliefs. This has helped me to become a different adult by constantly paying attention to my position and location depending on the places and the presence of *animateurs*, as Harvey and Lareau (2020) shows.

A Goffmanian approach of play

The study of this 'play' draws on the work by Brougère (2010) who considered it as a specific social form with a certain number of 'criteria' that can be more or less present in a situation (see also Smith 2010), builded on Goffman's work ([1974] 1986). It is less a question of being interested in content (activity, equipment, rules, objects, etc.) than in the relationship of the people involved to this content, their interpretation. For example, in the case of a broom, it is quite difficult to determine, at first sight, whether a child sweeping is doing so 'for real' or whether they are just pretending. It

is in this sense that play, or the play form of an action, becomes based on ‘keying’ (Goffman [1974] 1986, 44–45), a secondary framework, an additional layer that modifies and attributes another meaning to an ordinary activity. This operation of redefining the meaning of the situation is done by the person who decides to start playing. Based on these two main criteria (pretending, deciding), all sorts of objects can be used as playthings and every situation can be turned into a game, provided that the person or persons involved decide to do so.

At a second level of analysis, the framework of play is inserted into a context that is more or less favourable to a keying. I thus take an interest in the situational properties that facilitate this implementation of play, as at least two definitions of the situation can cause misunderstandings between the protagonists present. Playfighting are a typical example of this when children respond to worried adults: ‘*Oh! boys fighting ...*’ – ‘*We’re not fighting ...*’ – ‘*Oh, I know, that’s how it starts out, but it always ends up in a fight*’ (MARC³ 1:01 pm). Goffman ([1974] 1986, 308) refers to this misperception of a situation as ‘misframings’ or ‘errors in framing’. This is why particular attention was paid to situations involving an incident highlighting these ‘errors’ – or even deliberate infractions – and subtly reveals the dominant framework when several definitions of the situation tend to overlap, are in opposition, or compete with each other. Thus, the theoretical approach also offered a methodological perspective.

More specifically, ‘[f]rame, however, organizes more than meaning; it also organizes involvement’ ([1974] 1986, 345); play involvements are not always accepted, and are even prohibited in areas such as the toilets or the corridor – even if the sheen on the staircase banister tended to point to children regularly sliding down it. These games may deviate from the involvements authorised and organised by the established framework and thus be considered as being ‘outside the framework’. Goffman (1963, 44) distinguishes, firstly, between a ‘main’ and a ‘side involvement’ for a person who can engage in a main action (reading, chatting, eating) while performing other tasks (knitting, chewing, smoking, etc.) without disturbing the ‘main line of action’. Secondly, this distinction is reinforced by the difference between ‘dominant involvement’ and ‘subordinate involvement’, which refer to the levels of involvement required by the situation and its framework. For example, during lunchtime in the canteen, the parallel practices on the part of the children – including relatively tolerated games, but without involving food (Mechling 2000) – must remain subordinate to the meal and its progress.

The research setting

This out-of-school club was retained because it could be considered as atypical given the explicit wishes of the management to ‘*encourage play*’. The club is housed in a large school in the suburbs of a large city in the South of France, in a neighbourhood of detached houses and flat blocks where the majority of the children live. Because some families avoid this school, there are a number of classrooms available. The out-of-school club has thus been established in former classrooms that are permanently unoccupied during school hours, and that now house a ‘*toy library*’, a ‘*plastic arts room*’ and a ‘*multi-purpose prefab*’, in addition to a gymnasium and a covered playground.

During the week, the club hosts around 150 children, aged 6–11, being looked after by a team of nine animateurs led by two female directors who hold professional

qualifications. In line with the professional group, most of the animateurs are young female students, new to this club, with half of them lacking experience in this field or without qualification while the management, however, have a great deal of experience, particularly on this site. In total during the school year in 2015, I was able to conduct around one hundred hours of observation (25 days over a period of 6 months) – from the reception time before class, during the lunch break, and after class – supplemented by attendance at meetings and daily ‘*debriefings*’, as well as by occasional conversations with members of the team. This resulted in the collection of some fifty pages of data which were then subjected to ‘analytical induction’ based on the recurrent confrontation of the first induced analyses of the data with ‘negative cases’ until all the data is incorporated (see Katz 1983). Here again, ‘errors in framing’ was helpful to identify specific situations by their deviation from the expected order and to grasp it. I have retained some of the most relevant extracts for this article.

An intricacy of frames and positions

There can be no doubt that children play in the playground and in the rooms dedicated to the out-of-school club observed, but the forms of play implemented need to be differentiated depending on the situations and their associated frameworks. Alternating with school time within an educational institution, the operation of an out-of-school club is subject to a temporality that cannot be controlled and is interposed in spaces already defined according to a functional logic.

5:52 pm In the entrance hall, a lot of children are moving towards the exit. Alexia calls out to a young girl: ‘Thelma, you’re going to make a poster because you’ve got a second ‘X’ ... We don’t give lines here, we make posters! This is not school.’ – ‘Well, yes, it is ...’ replies the girl. – ‘Yes, but we’re not in a school framework here, it’s a leisure framework ...’ – ‘Well, that’s nonsense!’ she grumbles.

The school context is a ‘primary frame’ that encompasses the positions and involvements of the children and animateurs, who must then ensure an adequate ‘situational harness’ (Goffman 1963, 26). Despite her opinion, ALEXIA cannot deny this and Thelma finds herself, as the animateurs say, ‘disciplined’ and even ‘sanctioned’. Between ‘leisure time’ and ‘school time’, a complex web of frames structures the daily life of an out-of-school club. In order to better understand these, the following sections retrace the lines of action of the protagonists, as well as their adjustments and redirections in the event of departures from the rules, with a view to identifying two main frames separated by a ‘break time’ and structuring the actions undertaken.

A ‘break’ during recreation

At the end of an out-of-school period, a precipitous tidying up announced by an animateur reveals a first clue underlining the existence of two frameworks: that of ‘*activities*’, differentiated from that of ‘*free time*’.

1:30 pm In the toy library. ‘*Oh dear, we’re running out of time and the bell is about to ring. We’ll have to hurry and tidy up ...*’ says LUCIE, the animateur. ‘*Come on, everyone! Look sharp! It’s time to tidy up. Playtime’s over. I don’t mind not having a break ...*’ She moves from table to table, telling everyone to hurry up. The children start tidying up, and the

first of them go out to put on their coats. Little by little, the children fold the boxes and leave the room while LUCIE puts the games back in the cupboard, saying several times: *'Come on, everyone! Hurry up!'*

The term *'break time'* refers to the short interval between the end of the *'activities'* and the bell announcing the resumption of classes. On another day, during a discussion between the trainee and the director before the start of the lunch break, the latter specifies that the equipment, prepared for a *'workshop'*, *'is not for right now, there's break time first'* (AUDREY, 11:29 am). While the use of the term *'break'* is self-evident during school hours, reference to a *'break time'* during the *'lunch break'* subtly reveals the educational formalisation employed by the animateurs. More precisely, these two *'break times'* act as *'brackets of a conventionalized kind'* (Goffman [1974] 1986, 251) that announce and inaugurate the specific frame of the *'activities'*.

11:41 am Equipment is brought out in boxes in the covered playground. The children grab these skipping ropes, diabolos, rackets, balls, etc., and start playing with them.

11:47 am Walking around the playground, ALEXIA asks her colleague: *'Shall we get back?'* Her colleague nods and says to a group of children, *'OK, let's put the ball away and get back to our activities!'* She then shouts, *'Back to activities, everyone!'* and calls out to the children still absorbed in their game. The equipment is gradually put away in the boxes in the covered playground, and the children spread out and then wait in the specific areas in the playground that designate the *'workshops'*.

11:50 am After the departure of certain groups with their animateurs, about fifteen children remaining in the playground for *'free time'* run towards the equipment that was just put away. A game of table tennis starts up with nine boys and an animateur nearby who watches them. Two boys play with the skipping rope in a corner, some girls start chatting, others throw leaves in the air.

This daily ritualisation serves to organise the gathering of dozens of children to provide information about the *'workshops'* offered in parallel on the same day, before distributing the children among the animateurs. This interlude (or *'bracket'*) marks the distinction between the first moment of *'letting off steam'*, just after class, and the *'activities'*. From this point on, the rooms are accessible, either freely after authorisation to use the *'library'* and *'toy library'*, or subject to an organised *'activity'* in the case of the gym or the plastic arts room. Tidying up and gathering the children together thus mark the separation between two frameworks of experience that do not follow the same rules of distribution of involvements, where the animateurs henceforth define the dominant involvements, outside of *'free time'*. A similar but reversed framing operation announces the end of the out-of-school time as soon as all the children have tidied up and returned to the playground. The children are accorded another moment of *'letting off steam'* before they go back to class, this time being marked by the traditional and equally ritualistic lining up in front of the teacher, or again when they leave with their parents at the end of the day, as the animateurs finish work.

These two *'break times'*, included within a time conceived as a recreation during school time, introduce and highlight the *'activities'* and the different ways in which they are formalised, particularly the *'free time'*. On the one hand, the first *'break time'* conforms to the traditional conception of excess energy (Evans and Pellegrini 1997) to be evacuated through a short moment that is quickly interrupted in order to move on

to the next framework. On the other hand, the final ‘*break*’ contrasts – implicitly – with the previous framework of the out-of-school ‘*activities*’ before the children return to the otherwise formalised framework of the classroom. How is the ‘*activities*’ framework constituted?

The importance and uniqueness of the ‘*activities*’

After the ‘*break time*’, and with the interruption of the children’s games, the different ‘*activities*’ proposed by the animateurs can begin simultaneously. Between ‘*manual*’ and ‘*sports*’ activities, they sometimes follow the same ‘*theme*’ for a day or for a ‘*special*’ week. Discussed during meetings or prepared behind the scenes between two work periods, sometimes on personal time, these ‘*activities*’ are most often linked to the animateur’s personal interests. Another ritualised framing operation, they always begin in the same manner: the children are gathered together, the animateur asks for their attention or waits for silence before presenting the aim and the instructions, sometimes shows a ‘*model*’ or several examples in the case of a ‘*manual activity*’.

1:15 pm The ‘*sports game*’ is ‘*Silent (dodge)ball*’, says the animateur, NICO, as I enter the gym. A mixture of two games [*balle au camp* and *roi du silence*], in this *silent dodgeball*, if the children speak they are also out, just as when they are hit by an opponent. One boy, happy with his throw, shouts, ‘*Yeah! Got you!*’, and NICO sends him to the bench. NICO laconically runs through the names, ‘[So-and-so] *you’re out*’ and the children concerned go and sit on the bench, not far from where NICO is sitting in his chair near the radiator. He then allows them to return to the marked out game area: ‘*Go on.*’ The atmosphere is strange, restrained, and I hear only the sounds of shoes squeaking on the floor and muffled exclamations.

1:21 pm Some children spontaneously go to sit on the bench while others do not if the animateur does not ask them to do so ... That being said, none of the decisions are contested. Any offending players who speak, however, go straight to the bench.

1:29 pm End of the game. NICO gets up and says: ‘*Time’s up ...*’ – ‘*Is it over already?*’ – ‘*Yes, it’s time to go back to the upper playground.*’ The children put away their equipment (cones, mats) before getting dressed again, and then line up in front of the door while waiting for the laggards. Before leaving, the animateur explains what is going to be done and asks that the children ‘*walk and wait for him in front of the entrance and not in the corridor like last time*’.

Positioned as simple underlings, the children are (silently) subordinated to a dominant involvement defined by the animateur who controls the rules, the space, the duration, and even the participants’ actions. All these elements refer to a high form of rationalisation identified by Adler and Adler (1994) in certain forms of out-of-school activities, including sports competitions. In a way, organising a game amounts to ‘rekeying’ it (Goffman [1974] 1986, 81) by conferring additional meaning on it in order to transform it into a ‘contest’ ([1974] 1986, 56), moving it away from mere ‘make-believe’ ([1974] 1986, 48). This sequence demonstrates the importance of the ‘*framework*’ that the animateurs want to ‘*establish*’ in order to supervise and contain the children’s interactions both during and after a game integrated into an ‘*activity*’.

Following the criteria of the play form (Brougère 2010), this frame, which can be described as ‘sports-oriented’, adds a new layer that undermines the frivolity and uncertainty of the game’s progress, and risks becoming a form of refereed training. Whatever the content, other ‘*sessions*’ propose formally similar gym or dance ‘*workshops*’, the

configuration of which follows the same characteristics. The framework of an ‘*activity*’ is structured around a single dominant involvement, defined and decided by the animateur for the whole group of children who comply with the indications and rules announced, within a specific area and for a defined duration. Other ‘*workshops*’ distribute the involvements with slight variations.

12:55 pm In the ‘*lab*’, FRED is running a ‘*perler beads workshop*’ with around ten children. Moreover, some children enter the room and then leave again after seeing the equipment set out on the table. Eleven of them are sitting at the big table making an object, and the animateur is ironing the drawings. Most of the drawings are Christmas decorations. Other children are drawing. ‘*Stop it! Santa Claus doesn’t exist.*’ – ‘*He does too.*’ – ‘*He’s just a fairy tale.*’ – ‘*He’s for babies ...*’ FRED reacts: ‘*Hey! Any chance you guys could make a little less noise?*’ The children have actually drawn their objects beforehand. They now put a transparent grid over them and add the beads while the animateur has the iron on a small table away from the main one.

This ‘*workshop*’ focuses on the same involvement while leaving room for interpretation on how to make the decoration. Thus, the children can enter and exit the room, and start a decoration while following a parallel line of action among the tacitly authorised side involvements (drawing and discussions). However, these involvements have to remain subordinate to the framework of the workshop, as the following situations show, where small infractions to the rules are disciplined.

5:18 pm In the prefab, JULIEN calls out to a boy: ‘*Gildas, that’s not what you’re supposed to be doing ...*’ – ‘*Oh, right ... I’ll start on the perler beads now!*’ He hurries to sit down at a table and grabs some beads. He had been running around in circles on the mat, waving his arms in the air.

12:54 pm In the plastic arts room, Lou-Anne and Doriane are chasing each other. MARC tells them to ‘*stop*’, interrupting his explanations to a boy. The girls continue running around and hide under the tables, crawling between the legs. Marc warns them that if they continue, they will be ‘*sent to free time because this is a room here*’.

Clearly, the two girls were chasing each other around when they should have been waiting for the equipment and constructions previously started and redistributed by the animateur, who was having a conversation with another child. They can be said to have been keying their waiting time through play, opening a ‘*disattend track*’ in the main line of action (Goffman [1974] 1986, 210). Due to this small infraction, the framework or official definition of the situation is (re)clarified by the animateur: the ‘*room*’ dedicated to the workshop is not for the ‘*free time*’ that implicitly takes place in the playground. Moreover, this second scene shows how the distribution of involvements is reversed between the single involvement defined and prescribed by the animateur, to which Gildas complies, and the ‘*free time*’ that seems otherwise accessible to the involvements initiated by the children.

The regulated and plural nature of ‘free time’

The general configuration of the ‘*activities*’, with its variations, verges on another less formalised configuration, that of ‘*free time*’, which is similar to the *spontaneous play* observed by Adler and Adler (1994, 312). Taking place at the same time as the other ‘*workshops*’, the venue for the ‘*free time*’ is the playground.

11:50 am As I am sitting on a bench watching the goings-on in the playground, three girls I have already met come up to me to explain their current ‘games’. These games include *Patty cake*, *Rock Paper Scissors*, *Colour tag*, singing the alphabet and counting-out rhymes. One of them adds: ‘*And there’s also Chouchouchou and Grandma’s footsteps!*’ In response to my question, she explains the first game to me (as I had never heard of it before), and says that she learned the last game from her (older) cousin and the others from her friends at school.

Without directed ‘activities’ subject to enrolment, and without clearly delimited spaces and durations, the children come together according to their affinities – related to age and sex around ordinary play activities (Beresin 2011). These are supported by objects brought from home, whether trading cards, figurines of their cartoon heroes, hyper-speed spinning tops, or marbles depending on the season ... In contrast to the ‘activity’ and its unique main involvement, the proliferation of parallel actions demonstrates that ‘free time’ is a ‘multi-situational’ framework, where children themselves define their dominant involvements. Clearly, the shaping of this framework, which remains very flexible, refers to that of break time during school hours, especially as the playground serves as the stage for both of these frameworks.

Under these situational conditions, the position of the animateurs is profoundly transformed. The ‘free time’ is distinguished by the distant – and sometimes distracted – supervision on the part of the animateurs, who provide the children with the various equipment. Thus, one animateur considers that she is merely ‘supervising’ the children during this time, since ‘*I’m not leading an activity*’. When I ask for clarification, she stresses that ‘*it’s basically conflict management*’ (ALEXIA, 11:45 am). Reduced to a subordinate involvement, the animateurs ‘walk around’ the playground talking among themselves. As a result, ‘free time’ can become, especially in winter, a ‘chore’ that everyone seeks to avoid during the daily distribution of responsibilities. ‘Conflict management’ is sometimes combined with the role of referee during ball games (basketball, volleyball; football being prohibited here) and, more often, with the unpopular role of ‘cop’, consisting of reminding offenders of the rules.

11:56 am After asking them ‘*what they were doing*’, TOM tells the children that ‘*there’s no such thing as a car fight* [shaking his head]. *You’re breaking the equipment.*’ The three boys mutter something under their breath, leave the cars, and move on to the KAPLA construction set.

1:06 pm In the playground, I am surprised by a shout. ‘*Is this where the cars go?*’ LUCIE shouts to the boys who played car fight before, as she walks around the playground with NICO. Without waiting for an answer, she adds: ‘*No. So put them away.*’ The boys half comply and simply walk to the other side of the playground, next to the green mat; the ‘right place’ according to the rules.

In addition to the uses that ‘do not exist’, as TOM puts it, the rules mainly delimit the places dedicated to the objects made available when an installation (basketball board, markings on the ground, table tennis table in the covered playground, etc.) does not already delimit a specific space. While they do not control the multiple nature of the children’s involvements, the animateurs do regulate them by defining the encompassing framework, as well as their territories (notably by supervising the toilets) and the objects that are accessible, as Thomson (2005) observed in the United Kingdom or Evans (2007) in Australia. It is also confirming the difference between indoor and

outdoor environments (Stephenson 2002) when a room and its walls serves as ‘spatial buckets’ against the vulnerability of the dominant involvement while the playground affords many ‘distraction events’ (Goffman [1974] 1986).

A continuum of transformations

Playing, and especially the contents that can take place in, are very much influenced by the context and its social configuration (Evaldsson and Corsaro 1998). In the same way that Vincent, Lahire, and Thin (1994, 41–42) compared football taught in a football club and ‘children playing at football in the street’, the above situations demonstrate that the same game does not take the same form (nor the same meaning) depending on whether it is part of an ‘activity’ or ‘free time’. Within the controlled and regulated framework of the ‘activity’, the play form seems to be sportified, whereas it can take on a certain duplicity during ‘break time’ or ‘free time’.

But whatever the framework applied, all the actions take place within the school establishment: a primary framework set up and governed by a functionalisation of spaces, a management of movements within those spaces, a precise control of temporalities and the division of the children into groups, as well as a set of impersonal rules. These are all characteristics of a ‘school form’ where ‘organised activities, supervised by specialists, regulate and structure the children’s time. They tend to keep them constantly occupied’ (Vincent, Lahire, and Thin 1994, 41).

Without focusing on a simplifying opposition between the structured and supervised games of the ‘activities’ and the ‘free games’ played during ‘free time’, the dedicated ‘toy library’ presents a hybrid form enabling an extension of the analysis. The study of this framework makes it possible to identify in greater detail the signs and indications of the transposition from a recreational mode – or ‘key’ (Goffman [1974] 1986, 43–44) – to an educational mode, still based on errors in framing or (re)framing operations.

Order in the ‘toy library’

Roucous and Brougère (1998) have already shown that the atypical nature of toy libraries, through their mission centred on toys and games, makes it possible to understand the complex relationships between leisure, of which they are a part, and education, from which they are separate. A specific case, this ‘toy library’ highlights a re-shaped version of a framework, in theory devoted to children and their games, by being part of an out-of-school club and, therefore, within a school. Like an ordinary toy library, this room contains almost all the toys and board games available in the school, including a ‘tea party corner’, dolls and figurines, toy cars, and so on.

6:11 pm Two girls are sitting on the floor. They are playing a game of *Turtle Race* based on their own, slightly different rules. They are using only two counters, one each, which they move forward depending on the result of the ‘battle’. They each draw a card at the same time and, depending on the highest value, move forward the given number of spaces. If the numbers are the same, they draw again. Beside these girls, two boys are playing *Jungle Speed* with different rules that are clearly to the advantage of one of the boys. He explains what the special cards mean and, strangely enough, he never loses.

This is a common situation in which the equipment in a game is used for other ways of playing: the children draw on their play culture as well as the possibilities offered by the use of the cards, counters and other objects at their disposal, to which they apply keying to establish their rules of play. The toy library enables the children – those so authorised – to borrow the board game of their choice and therefore to play according to their own rules. The animateurs are not in a position to impose a single main involvement on the part of all of the children present. Thus, a relatively surprised trainee asks me if *'all we do here is supervise the children?'* (INES, 12:57 pm) while, at her side, the children play among themselves.

12:14 pm I go to the *'library/toy library'* and different games are set out across several tables, including *Uno*, *Connect Four* and *Lynx*. And, for once, an animateur is taking part in a game. By the time I write this down, he has stood up. He reminds the children at a neighbouring table to *'take it easy'* and twice asks a boy to *'sit properly'*. Then he orders another child to get down from the table he is sitting on.

Apart from these frequent calls for order and calm, the animateurs rarely participate in the games initiated by the children, nor do they start them, although they regularly respond to requests to borrow or return games. Avoiding getting involved in the course of a game, they have to divide their attention between several groups and places according to the outbursts and *'swear words'*, and also manage the mass arrivals and hasty departures of the children. As a result, it is common to see an animateur sitting at a table, ensuring peace and quiet in the room or preventing potential problems by not handing out certain games. Indeed, although it may seem difficult to intervene in the course of the games, the animateurs can always influence the context of the situation. Since the games are stored in cupboards and not on shelves, the children are required to ask the animateur's permission to borrow a game or equipment and then tidy it up and return it before leaving. This control of access to the room and to certain games reinforces the level of supervision of the children and the maintaining of the required peace and quiet. For example, TOM refuses requests to borrow the toy money for the tea party because *'it causes trouble every time and the outcome is always the same ...'* (11:47 am).

A hybrid situation between outdoor *'free time'* and indoor *'workshops'*, the *'toy library'* represents a framework offering greater accessibility to the children's involvements and to the choice of content, while the animateurs are limited to simply *'managing'* the context. Moreover, after school time, the framework remains similar to that of the *'lunch break'* for the games present, with the exception of the computers, subject to specific rules of use. Indeed, while access to them is usually prohibited, it is now possible to use them for one hour. Unlike the other games that can be played in many different ways, an initial time slot is reserved for *'educational games'* by restricting access to selected sites before authorising other games. As with the *'activities'*, a temporal distinction exists between a directed discovery form and a recreational form, within the toy library itself.

The discovery of 'true rules'

On rare occasions, the animateurs are tempted to intervene more directly on the content, notably by acting on the course of a game and specifically on its rules or, more precisely, on what they refer to as the *'true rules'*.

5:43 pm In the library/toy library, FRED approaches the group of boys sitting around the carrom board. *'Hold on. Let me explain the true rules of 'billard indien' [carrom].'* – *'What do you mean, 'true rules'?' – 'Billard indien?'* – *'Wait, [he says to another child] I'll show you how it's usually played.'* The children seem surprised. The animateur interjects as a boy continues playing: *'What on earth are you doing? I'm showing you the true rules ...'* – *'But that's not how we play it ...'* – *'Yes, I know, and the pawns go flying everywhere. I play carrom like I play marbles, and I'm much more accurate.'* He continues his demonstration with a kind of flick. Insisting on how to play the game correctly, he adds another justification shortly afterwards: *'It's just to show you a different way of playing the game.'*

This type of attempt is rarely accepted, and even sometimes clearly rejected by the children. On another occasion, following an interruption by an animateur, the children agree as soon as he walks away, *'we'll avoid him, OK?'*, before returning to their own rules and shooting techniques. These interventions demonstrate a desire to make the children discover and respect the official rules when they decide to play in their own way. Consequently, it is not so much the fact of playing as the discovery of a (new) game that the animateurs are interested in. These *'true rules'* particularly echo Waksler's reflections (1991, 255) that these 'right' ways of using games reveal an adult-centred conception of play practices. Without being imposed, these rules are confronted with those decided, and maintained, by the children. But upon leaving the framework of the toy library for that of an *'activity'*, the children's play practices are transformed in another way. This is illustrated by the following situation involving the *Pokémon* card game.

12:47 pm Opening the door, the first children arrive and the animateur, NICO, signals to them to gather around the centre table where he has laid out the equipment. *'To be able to play against each other, you need a pack of 60 cards.'* He presents the decks bought by the club. *'You need energy cards, the basic Pokemon, and items, about 20 of each ... That's what you need to play the game.'* He unfolds the paper playmats that represent the famous battle arena. *'So, listen carefully, the goal of the game ...'* and he begins a demonstration on the table while the children watch.

12:51 pm Among these children, I see only boys of different ages, almost all of whom have brought their own cards, but they do not necessarily have enough to make up the deck of 60 cards required according to the precise distribution indicated by the animateur. Some of the boys count their cards several times. The explanation continues.

12:59 pm As a few of the boys start to look at each other's cards and compare them, NICO intervenes again: *'Either you want to learn to play Pokémon properly ... or you don't, and you can leave,'* he firmly announces. The boys turn to look at him and he finishes presenting the rules and asks the children gathered in front of the playmat *'if they have understood'* after a trial run. I do not hear a clear answer to this question.

1:01 pm NICO selects two boys, tells them to sit opposite each other in front of the playmat and, after a short demonstration, leaves the table. *'So, carry on playing, and if you have a problem, come and see me.'* Moving away from this table, he asks the rest of the children present: *'Who here has Pokémon cards?' – 'Me, me, me ...'*; all the children raise their hands. *'OK, I'm going to come round and see you, and tell you if you're playing the game correctly ...'* NICO starts with two other boys sitting at another table, grabbing a new playmat representing the famous battle arena.

The beginning of this *'activity'*, which would be worth quoting *in extenso*, demonstrates in several ways how the transformation of an educational form into an activity works. Just like classroom chatter, frivolous childish practices (swapping, collecting, displaying)

are relegated to other moments while the dominant involvement explicitly concerns learning the ‘*true rules*’. The children are not supposed to play according to their own rules but rather to learn how to ‘*play correctly*’, i.e. to follow the rules printed in the leaflet, revised the day before by the animateur; rules which then become impersonal, another ‘feature’ characteristic of the ‘school form of socialisation’ (Vincent, Lahire, and Thin 1994, 39). The sequence thus framed by the animateur involved attests to the serious nature and legitimacy of the presence and use of playing cards that were previously only relatively tolerated, with just a few cards, according to the director (AUDREY, 1:52 pm).

In short, in order to attach an educational label to a situation, its framework must display specific situational properties. Defined by a specialist, the dominant involvement is meant to be exclusive and concerns a group of children who must be focused on the assigned tasks within the given time and space – with other involvements thus becoming ‘ou-of-frame’ (Goffman [1974] 1986). In other words, organising a game involves rekeying it by conferring upon it an additional educational meaning and supervising it (like a referee or an umpire) in order to ‘prevent the players from making a game of the game’ ([1974] 1986, 81). This educational formalisation can be established according to a meticulous ‘planning plotted closely in advance’ ([1974] 1986, 61), following the rational logic of the ‘*project methodology*’ close to goal-based learning. More broadly, this transformation is similar to a ‘technical redoing’ ([1974] 1986, 58).

While in other cases the play form, practised during ‘*free time*’, is juxtaposed with educational forms (the ‘*activities*’), the ‘*true rules*’ attempt to hold together and associate a formalisation that concerns both education *and* play. On the one hand, the planning and direction by the animateur subordinates the children’s decision-making and reduces uncertainty. On the other hand, the seriousness of the objective, seeking a possible learning experience, alters the level of frivolity and the minimisation of consequences. In short, the educational form and its characteristics clearly take precedence over the ‘criteria’ of the play form. In the final analysis, while many activities are referred to as ‘play’ by the animateurs, the term hides a diversity of practices with varied forms and a process of formalisation. Some of these forms attempt to integrate an educational form into the play form (Brougère 2010), but at the risk of causing it to lose its playability, i.e. the possibility of playing it.

Making an educational framework

In conclusion, this study documents how this process of ‘bottom-up’ pedagogisation operates through the practices of the animateurs. From ‘*free time*’ and the less formalised forms of the ‘*toy library*’ and the ‘*workshops*’, to the specialised ‘*activities*’, this out-of-school club highlights the variations of a continuum in the distribution of involvements and the structuring of the games played. As the animateurs reframe the children’s involvements, the educational formalisation can be observed in the use of toys and equipment, in the rules applied, in the relationship to the places and temporalities, and in the forms of sociability. In the words of Adler and Adler (1994), the spontaneous play assigned to ‘*free time*’, similar to a break time where children can, for the most part, decide their own games, is contrasted with sportified games that take place within the framework of the ‘*activities*’ organised by the animateurs. ‘*Play*’ blurs what could be an opposition and

makes it possible to better understand how practices from children's cultures can take on a pedagogical form, i.e. how they are rekeyed by the animateurs when this educational formalisation is expressed, all the same, through the discovery of 'true rules' and practices deemed appropriate.

To put it another way, the process of pedagogisation can be characterised by the structuring of several dimensions present in any social situation: a delimited (sometimes specialised) space, a limited temporality, actions that are ordered or even controlled by sports-oriented and arbitrated rules, a defined group of children (often enrolled) under the supervision and direction of a trained education professional, in relation to precise academic or learning objectives. All these characteristics are similar to or, more precisely, conform to those of the 'school form of socialisation' (Vincent, Lahire, and Thin 1994) – or the 'grammar of schooling' – in order to give a pedagogical dimension to the situation by reframing children's play practices. This 'transposition' (Goffman [1974] 1986) affects the meaning and direction of children's practices, usually drawing on their cultures (Evaldsson and Corsaro 1998; Strandell 1997), to become an activity constituted and oriented by adult and pedagogical considerations, controlling the material conditions of its realisation.

While Gram (2003), in comparing children's leisure practices between several European countries, was able to demonstrate the high degree of supervision of children in France, this process can also be observed elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, it should be noted that this educational formalisation can cause dilemmas for professionals, caught between children's participation and their initiatives in deciding on their games, and the implementation of activities prepared and framed by educational considerations that minimise this same participation (Haglund 2015; Hurst 2019; Lehto and Eskelinen 2020; Skår and Krogh 2009; Shiakou 2018). In several respects, it is worth analysing this process of pedagogisation within the current context, particularly in France, where new learning policies, both national ('learning holidays') and local, are being developed with the aim of providing an educational dimension to children's leisure practices. Finally and more broadly, this process, which takes place at a micro level, could be understood in comparison with other phenomena that contribute to the institutionalisation of childhood on a larger scale, as shown by Sutton-Smith (1981) through the historical study of children's games in New Zealand, or again by Cavallo (1981) through the analysis of the development of children's play areas in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. After-school programmes that organised children's leisure activities while providing them with basic religious instruction after the secularisation of public schooling in working-class parishes or parochial schools.
2. The French term 'animateur(s)' is quite difficult to translate in English when 'supervisor', 'youth leader' or 'counsellor' doesn't fit their work. A more apt translation could be 'organiser', but we prefer to keep the French word, which better reflects the specificity of their practice.
3. In order to differentiate the animateurs from the children, the first names of the former are written in small capitals, thus highlighting an asymmetry of position with respect to the children, whose first names are written in ordinary case.

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Appendix. Data set

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