

Bullying Intervention within Garden Playscapes:  
Supporting Childhood Identity Formation through Free Play and Philosophy

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### Abstract

Over the last several decades, teachers, parents, and researchers in education have implemented a wide variety of school-wide interventions among children and adolescents in an attempt to address the pervasive and serious problem of bullying among peers. In light of the limited success of such programs, along with the potential harmful effects presented in the literature review that follows, this work compiles much of the contemporary research on bullying to examine the possibilities for a fundamental change in the way “bullying” behaviors are approached among children and adolescents. By abandoning the common misconception that bullying is pathological violence to be corrected through the development of “character”, and by instead addressing this behavior as a misguided attempt at social identity formation constrained by our own collective problematic social norms regarding “acceptable” and “unacceptable” difference, the future of bullying intervention moves away from punitive consequences to instead facilitate a healthy social identity formation process. The quasi-ethnographic pilot study presented in this work further illuminates the possibilities for this fundamental change in bullying intervention by noting the potential for the manipulation of the physical features of a play space, the introduction of philosophical foundations of thought among children to address perceptions about difference, and the important benefits of frequent play in natural spaces like gardens and playscapes for social-emotional development. The work concludes with logistical considerations for effective future program implementation and recommendations for future research.

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**Introduction**

For the last several decades, originating in the aftermath of the Columbine school-shooting massacre, widespread national attention has been given to the prevalence and negative effects of bullying on children and adolescents in the United States. Since the 1990s, billions of dollars have been spent, legislation has been passed, and indeed an entire anti-bullying industry has been created in an effort to address this widespread social phenomena that plagues our youth (USDOE, 2019). In the process, we have gained some significant insights regarding the prevalence, the specific behaviors, the development of bullying over time, and the lasting psychological effects of childhood and adolescent bullying. Many of the most popular (and profitable) bullying prevention and intervention programs make claims of remarkable successes, which they would assert are well-supported by research (KiVa, 2019; OLWEUS, 2019). However, these claims are hotly contested among independent researchers, outlined in the literature review that follows, wherein the general consensus is that the outcomes of our current anti-bullying programs are “moderate at best” among young children, and likely even increase bullying among older adolescents who have encountered these anti-bullying programs (Galloway & Rolland, 2004; Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014; Yeager et. al, 2015; Temko, 2019).

In what follows, I contend that in light of the contemporary critical research on bullying as a social behavior, the failure of existing anti-bullying programs is not due to lack of teacher training, infidelity in implementation, or insufficient funding, but rather that the approach itself is fundamentally flawed. For decades, we have relied upon the assumption that bullying is a “character” problem which can be addressed through moral instruction and an emphasis on

bystander intervention. Meyer (2016) refers to this approach of labeling “good” bystanders and “bad” bullies, situating them against one another to establish a binary that encourages self-surveillance and punitive consequences, as a form of “gentle neoliberalism” which only serves to further oppress marginalized groups. In this way, the roles of power and privilege are ignored, and the “bully” is instead assigned an individual pathology to be “reformed” through punishment and the surveillance of his or her peers.

This theory is borne out in the research that follows, and lends further credibility to the call from contemporary bullying scholars, not to reform our existing anti-bullying measures, but to reimagine them entirely. In light of their findings, bullying emerges as a tool used in an active process of social-identity formation, with the problematic behaviors of intentional ‘othering’ and victimization stemming from our normative society as a whole, not from pathology or moral deficiency. From this perspective, the aim of this work is to contribute toward this re-imagination of anti-bullying intervention as not-anti-bully support for healthy identity formation among children and adolescents.

In their daily lives, children most often encounter each other within spaces which are subject to a wide variety of hegemonic structures of power that limit and/or coerce their interactions. For example, students who interact in a classroom to collaborate on a group assignment often do not choose their group members, nor the activity assigned. This involuntary interaction is then further subject to the external pressures applied by teachers, parents, and others who have expectations regarding social behavior and academic performance within these groups. Much like the corporate offices which employ these coercive tactics among adult colleagues, the group dynamics produced within this environment are not productive for building positive relationships, especially among diverse groups of people who may or may not have

conflicting interests, values, or beliefs (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1964; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Shinew, Glover, & Parry, 2004; Brown & Hewstone, 2005). In order to facilitate the type of positive inter-group interactions that build healthy peer relationships, these interactions must instead occur without coercion and within a relatively neutral space. Jackman & Crane (1986) specify five conditions under which conflicting groups should encounter each other in order to facilitate positive outcomes:

First, the contact should not take place within a competitive context. Second, the contact must be sustained rather than episodic. Third, the contact must be personal, informal, and one-to-one. Fourth, the contact should have the approval of any relevant authorities. Finally, the setting in which the contact occurs must confer equal status of both parties rather than duplicate the racial status differential. (p. 461)

Leisure activities provide an ideal context for this type of positive intergroup contact, as they are free from many of the hegemonic structures imposed on compulsory interactions among students and colleagues when they attend school or work (Shinew, 2004; Peters, 2010). While playgrounds, and even play itself, are still subject to a wide variety of external factors, many of which will be discussed in further detail in this work, play spaces and play opportunities offer a comparatively neutral social environment, allowing for the spontaneous social interaction necessary for social identity formation (Lytra, 2007). The purpose of this work is to establish a theoretical basis, along with a practical starting-point, for the formation and implementation of a program which would support a healthy social identity formation process among diverse groups of children, leading to a reduction in school bullying and victimization beyond these play spaces.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### Identity and a Sense of “Belonging”

There are a wide variety of theories regarding the personal construction of identity and the role of the “self” in the context of society. Identity theory focuses primarily on the performance of perceived “roles” in society (Stryker, 1968; Burke & Tully, 1977). Stuart Hall (1996) approaches identity as a cultural product. Judith Butler (1990) aims to deconstruct and subvert the concept of identity entirely. All of these conceptualizations can contribute to the future of this work, but I have chosen to initially focus on Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory, because the intentional formation of in-groups and out-groups they describe is a social process which is readily apparent among bullies and bystanders, deeming individual victims as “others” deserving of mistreatment.

**Social Identity Theory.** Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that one’s social identity consists of “those social aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (p. 40). A wide variety of factors work together to determine the extent to which an individual’s particular characteristics are self-perceived as qualifications for group membership, and are thereby internalized as aspects of one’s self-concept. Social experience, positive and negative intergroup comparison, proximity, and similarity are all variables which determine one’s self-identification with particular “in-groups” and “out-groups” among race, gender, skin color, political affiliation, religion, spoken language, and more.

**Childhood Social Identity Formation.** In early childhood, the social creation of “in-groups” and “out-groups” which influence identity formation is a process that remains very fluid, but as children enter preadolescence, they become increasingly skilled in “impression

management” through their daily interactions with peers (Fine, 2006). As they continue to develop these skills, peer groups become increasingly differentiated along the lines of age, gender, race, and ethnicity (Corsaro, 1997). While it is generally acknowledged that children begin to categorize themselves by gender at an early age, many wrongly assume that young children are “color blind” regarding matters of race. Research shows that children as young as three have the ability to understand and use racial and ethnic concepts as they form their earliest relationships (Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

This crucial developmental period provides an ideal setting for children to develop a positive sense of self, along with an appreciation for the differences they notice among each other. However, without intervention, these self-determined categories and the stereotypes and prejudices assigned to them by society will often last well into adulthood, due in part to the fact that these perceptions and behaviors become increasingly difficult to redirect as children progress through adolescence (Corsaro, 1997).

### **Garden Playscapes as Transformative Environments**

**Time in Nature.** Time spent in natural spaces (e.g. parks, hiking trails, gardens) as opposed to urban spaces (e.g. city streets, office buildings, industrial areas) has been shown to impact a wide variety of cognitive and emotional functions in positive ways (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Berman et al., 2012; Bratman, Daily, Levy & Gross, 2015; Mayer, Frantz, Bruehlman-Senecal, & Dolliver, 2009; Ulrich et al., 1991). Even a brief nature walk increases one’s ability to be attentive afterwards (Berto, 2005), and simply viewing nature through a classroom window significantly improves children’s capacity for self-discipline and emotional regulation (Faber-Taylor et al., 2002). Furthermore, Morton, Bles, and Haslam (2017) find that these effects of nature on cognition and emotion have inextricable ties to perceived social



identities, and that when aspects of one's identity are reflected within an environment, there is a dramatic increase in self-confidence and intrinsic motivation.

**The Importance of Play.** Playful interactions among children, which are often institutionally considered off-task, distracting, or even disruptive, actually play a crucial role in the proper development of a wide variety of physical, social-emotional, and cognitive functions (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Paesk, 2006). Identity construction is one of the many developmental domains influenced directly by play behavior. Lytra's (2007) analysis of a racially, linguistically, and culturally heterogeneous group of 10-year-olds in Greece adds a significant contribution to this well-established assertion. Through her ethnographic and sociolinguistic examination of teasing, joking, verbal play, music making, and chanting in both instructional and recreational contexts, Lytra (2007) finds that children (and their teachers) use these forms of "playful talk" to negotiate social relationships, and also to challenge authoritative knowledge, teacher-pupil roles, and institutionally sanctioned power asymmetries in the classroom. According to Lytra, "shifts to play" provide children with the interactional space to establish peer group affiliations, to facilitate foreign language learning and teaching, and to negotiate the visibility of minority groups within their environments (p. 254).

### **Bullying and Social Identity**

A neglectful approach to childhood identity formation opens a veritable Pandora's Box of problematic ways-of-being, including a variety of "dominance identities" which are then released into our society to multiply abuse, depression, violence, suicide, and even large-scale social and political systems of oppression (Jacobson, 2012). Addressing all of these concerns here would be outside of the scope of this work. I have instead chosen to focus my attention specifically on the social phenomena of "bullying", due to its current prevalence in schools, its broad social

impacts, and its potential to completely transform an otherwise neutral leisure space into a social-emotional hellscape.

**Bullies as Guardians of the Moral Order.** Bullying is a social behavior that has been studied extensively for decades. Jacobson (2012), in his book, *Rethinking School Bullying: Dominance, Identity, and School Culture*, compiles much of the existing research in support of the assertion that bullying is not an inability to control aggression, but rather an intentional practice of public identity construction. Unfortunately for the bully, the social identity formation process is fundamentally reciprocal in nature. Identity affirmation relies on feedback and responses from others to achieve peer recognition of “belonging” within one’s desired in-groups. Bullying is therefore a futile attempt to establish and affirm the status of the self among onlookers by means of domination, because the “identity of dominance” that is thereby affirmed eliminates the possibility for the reciprocity that is fundamental to social identity. This leaves bullies with an insatiable need for new victims, as their efforts will never reward them with the sense of “belonging” they seek (Benjamin, 1988; Ghent, 1990; Jacobson, 2012).

Further complicating the matter, adults and children are both bombarded with discriminatory and problematic messages about identity and perceived “difference” on a daily basis. These messages are transmitted, both intentionally and unintentionally, via the media and within every social environment. We know that the ramifications of these messages don’t simply resolve themselves over time, and that these perceptions directly influence behavior (Devine, 1989; Corsaro, 1997; Madva & Brownstein, 2016). Without intervention, negative perceptions of “others” persist well into adulthood, often throughout the lifetime, and are thereby transmitted to future generations until some form of intervention occurs (Corsaro, 1997; Cernat, 2017; Pirchio et. al, 2018).

Children certainly cannot be expected to interpret and act upon these implicit social messages in appropriate ways without instruction. Yet, when parents and teachers encounter children who discriminate against or victimize peers for their differences, the adult role-models most often respond with the perception that these ‘bullies’ are pathologically different from ‘normal’, ‘nice’ children, and that this behavior is unacceptable in the normative culture. The ‘bully’ is thereby ironically subjected to the same process of intentional ‘othering’ which he or she is told would be unacceptable to impose on his or her peers (Davies, 2011; Martocci, 2015). This only adds to the social confusion, and further impedes the search for ‘belonging’ that led to the bullying in the first place.

Davies (2011) uses this example of the adult response to ‘bullying’ in support of her claim that the elimination of perceived unacceptable difference is not pathological at all, but is instead a common tool used in a variety of social contexts to establish personal boundaries and normative behaviors. The ‘Teacher vs. Bully’ example reminds us that the urge to eliminate social difference is so ubiquitous that, in response to the violence it perpetuates, we have unwittingly attempted to employ it as our strategy to eliminate its effects. Davies thereby contends that it is not the ‘bully’, but the normative social order itself which is the most active player in perpetuating victimization based on difference. She proposes that bullies can be perceived through this lens as “over-zealous guardians of the moral order”. Much like the teacher who is attempting to impose ‘right’ social behavior on the bully, the bully is simply utilizing shame in an attempt to eliminate the types of social difference that he or she finds unacceptable, based on the standards he or she has perceived through experiences within the normative culture.

Martocci (2015) explains that the difficulty in addressing these societal issues stems from our historical reliance on shame in the context of religion, within small, culturally homogeneous

communities, to establish social norms and codes of conduct. This reliance left us unprepared for the transition to a multi-cultural and secular society that espouses the values of personal freedom and autonomy. We still largely depend on the threat of shame to maintain social order, but we now also value our ability to self-determine what that order should be. Martocci says that this poorly executed ideological transition has left our society with an “atonement paradigm”, wherein the basis for judgment is unstable, often unspecified, subject to individual and collective bias, and provides penitents with no established way to gain forgiveness and readmittance to the fold.

**The Bully-Victim.** Once the status of ‘social pariah’ has been conferred upon an individual, he or she is left with little recourse (Cadigan, 2002; Evans & Eder, 1993; Thornberg, 2015). The social crimes for which they have been convicted, if specified at all, are typically outside of the victims’ awareness (e.g. odd sense of humor, awkward demeanor), and often even outside of their control (e.g. socioeconomic status, physical ability). In the search for identity and belonging in childhood and adolescence, questions of “what’s wrong with me?” arise and lead bully-victims to internalize the problem as a reflection of the self, and not of the social environment. Isolated and confused, victims of bullying try desperately to “fix” the self, but since the self is not the problem, these efforts are futile, and often make the situation worse. This leads bully-victims to the perception that it is their personal traits which are unacceptable, that these are fixed traits which cannot and will not change, and that the entire situation is not only hopeless, but is irrefutable confirmation of an innate worthlessness (Martocci, 2015). It should come as no surprise that bullying is often linked to depression, suicides, and even mass shootings (CDC, 2014; Bauman, Toomey & Walker, 2013; Kuehn, Wagner & Velloza, 2018; Raitanen, Sandberg & Oksanen, 2019).

Much like the bully behaviors previously discussed, these responses to bullying from the bully-victims are also inextricably tied to the victim's own misconceptions about identity and the self. For one thing, it is well-established that personality traits are not static, nor are they innate (Dewey, 1938; 1940; Mead, 1932; 1934). The "self" is an active social construction that changes throughout childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood in response to a wide variety of factors, which we can (and do) manipulate (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Corsaro, 1997; Fine, 2006; Acerbi, Enquist, & Ghirlanda, 2009). Victims of bullying are thereby simultaneously assaulted on two fronts by childhood misconceptions of the identity. Initially, they are assaulted through the misguided identity formation process that motivates the bully to victimize others, and then again through the victim's own misguided internalization of this mistreatment as a deserved consequence for an insufficient "self".

In this way, bully-victims have a double-stake in school identity work. There is hope for victims, not only in changing the school environment and the treatment received from others via identity intervention among bullies and bystanders, but also in identity intervention which guides victims to their own realization of their abilities to find and cultivate desirable aspects of the self, to address problematic social behaviors that might limit connection, to celebrate cultural and physical differences, to find "belonging" in desired in-groups, to challenge assumptions about which in-groups are really desirable, and most importantly— to stop the cycle of self-blame that leads bully-victims to conclude that they deserve to bear the full burden of our collective social ineptitude.

**Failed Anti-Bullying Intervention.** If bullying isn't a character problem at all, but rather a problem of social identity and belonging which is rooted in our normative culture, it might explain why efforts to reduce bullying in schools through "character development" programs

since the 1990s have been largely unsuccessful in the long-term (Galloway & Rolland, 2004; Jiménez-Barbero et. al, 2016). Even in their initial results, these programs appear to be far less effective in the United States, where student populations are more heterogeneous than they are elsewhere in the world. In an international analysis of substantive results across 32 studies examining 24 bullying interventions, 75% of the interventions with nonsignificant findings were in the United States, leading researchers to conclude that “schools in the United States face complex challenges and, for many, bullying prevention programs might be insufficient to address the elevated levels of family and community risks to which a large percentage of students are exposed daily” (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014, p. 539).

Furthermore, Yeager et al. (2015) call into question the validity of previous studies that have found significant positive effects of anti-bullying intervention, most notably the oft-cited work of Ttofi & Farrington (2011), calling these findings “artifacts of a misleading methodology” (p. 46). Yeager et al. (2015) contend that through the use of proper analytic techniques, the raw data from these studies does not support their findings. To the contrary, they find that the effects of bullying intervention programs in grades 1 through 7 are “modest” when they are significant at all, practically null in the United States, and null around the world by 8th grade. Even more troubling than program inefficacy, they find that “by roughly 10th grade, anti-bullying efforts are in the direction of iatrogenic, harmful effects, on average” (p. 44). These findings reveal that as students enter older adolescence, it appears that experiences with our existing anti-bullying programs may actually increase bullying. This raises significant ethical concerns, especially as it relates to the implementation of state-mandated anti-bullying measures.

While individual, internationally implemented, sometimes even legislated, anti-bullying programs continue to tout their own research-based effectiveness, the research community is not

in agreement. Chalamandaris & Piette (2015) conducted a review of 62 different studies examining the effectiveness of various anti-bullying interventions, and found that the research methods are so widely varied, often with such questionable research designs, that the validity of results is difficult to determine. For example, they find that while many of the studies rely on survey data for their results, some studies administered these surveys to parents, who do not observe their children in a school context, and would not witness any bullying behavior. Other studies administered surveys to students, but failed to consider that a child's intended or perceived social behavior does not necessarily translate to actual behavior. Several of the studies examined even administered their 'before intervention' and 'after intervention' surveys within the same hour, allowing students to simply remember their previous answers for repetition or modification on the second survey after the anti-bullying lesson, and then cited this "sensitization effect" created by their own research methods as "an alibi for lack of effectiveness or results going in the opposite direction" (p. 151).

Even the most well-known anti-bullying interventions are not immune to similar critiques. For example, the KiVa program, an initiative funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, has received international attention in recent years for its success in Finnish schools, based on research which is proudly proclaimed on their website (KiVa, 2019). However, researchers from University of Turku, the same University which designed the KiVa program, have recently found that even in Finnish schools, the KiVa intervention is only effective on bullies who are unpopular and disliked by their peers, having little to no effect on bullies with moderate or high social status (Garandau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014). These findings are not included among the "selected studies" presented on the KiVa (2019) website. Similarly, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), is described on the Violence Prevention

Works (2019) website as the “world's foremost, most researched, and best-known bullying prevention program available today”. However, research not included in this online advertisement reveals findings that range from “no overall effect” (Bauer, Lozano & Rivara, 2007) to concerns that the program actively reproduces inequality and social stratification through its own curriculum materials, which “reflects a failure to utilize the sociological imagination to understand [OBPP’s] own role in the social systems that produce bullying (Temko, 2019, p. 9).

Findings like these raise even more ethical questions regarding the validity of the research being conducted and presented in cooperation with financially-interested industry partners who stand to profit from favorable findings. In light of these revelations about the actual state of current anti-bullying program efficacy in the United States, we must give serious consideration to the potential necessity for a complete paradigm shift in our renewed efforts to combat such a pervasive and serious problem.

## **Chapter 2: A Quasi-Ethnographic Playground Pilot Study**

In an effort to inform this work from a real-world perspective, I conducted a small pilot study regarding children’s behaviors on existing school playgrounds. My goal was to utilize ethnographic methods in observing the interactions that the children selected for themselves when playing freely, specifically who they elected to include and exclude in play, and the ways in which the spaces they occupy might influence these choices. An ethnography is ideal for data collection in this case, since the employment of field notes, as opposed to other observational tools, like rubrics and surveys, can capture the richness of complex social interactions that produce what Geertz (1973) calls “thick descriptions” for analysis. Studies which aim to examine bullying behaviors often employ surveys for data collection, and while these findings might yield



significant insights, surveys are inherently subject to the limits of the participants' perceptions and level of awareness. The collection of observational data contributes to this work by instead providing opportunities to see things that may routinely escape the awareness of the children and adults on the playground (Patton, 2015, p. 333). Because of the limited time frame available for my own playground observations in the context of this work, a full-scale ethnography would not have been possible. This is a significant limitation that I urge readers to consider when reading my findings, as it is important to be cautious not to draw grand conclusions from such small-scale observations. However, in light of the existing research presented thus far, and with the course-corrections these studies imply will be necessary for future bullying interventions in schools, my own quasi-ethnographic findings can contribute relevant, if anecdotal, support for the underlying theoretical basis and methodology suggested by contemporary bullying scholars (Jacobson, 2012; Martocci, 2015; Davies, 2011).

### **Researcher Positionality**

Ethnography as a qualitative research method is subject to individual bias, perhaps more than other methodological approaches, due to the subjective nature of observation, interaction, and the mere act of "paying attention to something" in general. I inevitably bring my own perspective to all of my work, and this perspective directs my attention, frames my interpretation, and ultimately influences the narrative that emerges from my ethnographic observations. As such, it is important for me to address what I bring to this work, especially as it relates to my experiences with children and schools, and to my own personal experiences with bullying, social exclusion, and identity.

**Regarding Teaching and Schools.** Prior to undertaking my graduate work in Curriculum Studies at TCU, I taught in Texas public elementary schools for 7 years. All of these years were

spent in schools classified by the state as “Title 1” (low socioeconomic status), and this was intentional on my part. I have never been interested in teaching in elite or private schools, simply because my motivation is to make a positive impact on the world where I see injustice, and where I believe that change-makers and leaders are most needed.

Each of the 3 schools in which I taught provided its own unique context for me to learn a lot of hard lessons in the hardest ways possible. I had just turned 21 when I started my career, and the naïve optimism I brought with me from my university and student teaching experience was quickly dashed by the realities of classroom management, accountability standards, and collaboration with colleagues and administrators. The steep learning curve, often in combination with a young-adult’s lack of maturity, makes the first year difficult for many new teachers, but trust me when I say that mine was particularly brutal.

I left that school for a fresh start, and spent my most formative teaching years in an open-enrollment public charter school in South Dallas. This school was unique in ways that I am only now really starting to appreciate. Confusion in the surrounding community had led many to believe that this school was being operated, or at least influenced, by the predominantly black mega-church across the street. Because of this perceived association, both the student body and the faculty at the school were almost entirely black. I was one of only two white teachers on the campus in the four years I taught there. I was obviously out of my cultural element, but it never bothered me at the time. I had good personal relationships with my colleagues, many of whom I consider friends to this day, and the cultural energy they brought to the space was uplifting and fun. My 2nd Grade co-teacher taught African dance classes after school, the literature and social studies teachers (I taught math and science) included black history and black writers often in their lessons, there were a lot of great things going on. I wish I had paid more attention. My lack

of awareness at the time was a disservice to my students, but perhaps more of a disservice to myself.

I'm relatively certain that I never said or did anything egregious, but only because I'm sure that I would have been immediately called out by the faculty. In a different campus culture, I might have done much worse. Columbus Day was replaced by Indigenous People's Day across the campus, whether or not I was up to speed on American History. Student talent shows, art, and choir performances celebrated the Black Aesthetic, whether or not I knew what I was looking at. I'm thankful that the environment they created led me to do better than I would have done on my own at that time. I still think of my colleagues and students often, and I'm committed to doing the emotional and academic work I need to do in order to know better and do better in the future, which is ultimately what has led me to my interest in identity work, especially as it relates to race, ethnicity, and culture (REC). REC tends to find its way into all my other academic endeavors as well, and while I don't directly address it in this work, this interest shapes my motivation and my exploration of bullying intervention.

Unfortunately, for all that the staff was doing right at that school, the charter company was a complete disaster. They were trying to create their own curriculum from scratch (a poorly conceived money-making venture), and it was laughable. As teachers, we were essentially on our own to figure out how to approach the content and prepare the kids for STAAR testing. The teacher salaries were low. Our scores were low. The TEA swooped in to "help" us by imposing tedious new documentation and record-keeping requirements, and by sending tired, old white ladies to "train" us on the basics of student engagement and motivation, squandering hours upon hours of valuable classroom preparation time that put us all further behind, and kept us all up working late every night. Everyone was doing the best they could with what they had, but it was

a chaotic mess. I eventually decided to leave and try again with a more traditional public school that was closer to my house, with better pay. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

My last two years of teaching can only be described as a soul-crushing, slow-burning progression from frantic powerlessness to a despondent acceptance of final defeat. My well-meaning attempts to question a few of our school-wide practices at the beginning of the school year put a target on my back right out of the gate, which led to micromanagement of my classroom reward system, my small group interventions, and everything in-between. Among many other things, I was told to cease mixing my small groups by ability level, that the “low” and “high” groups needed to be separated and couldn’t possibly learn from each other. I was told that I could no longer play music in my class because it was a distraction. As evidence, they cited the fact that my first graders knew the names of the Presidents on the US coins, which was not in the TEKS for 1st grade. Clearly, they said, my students had gained this knowledge from the songs I was playing in class while they worked, and this meant they must be paying more attention to the music than their assignments. It was also unacceptable for me to allow the students, who only had 15 minutes of recess at the end of the day, to take a 5 minute “brain break” to dance to a song every hour because of the loss of instructional time. In response, my partner teacher and I implemented a “study hall”. Students who were finished with their work could come to one classroom for 30 minutes of indoor recess, while the other students would work on their late assignments in the other classroom. When the administrators found out about this, they gave me a formal disciplinary write-up. That was the hill I was finally ready to die on.

After a meeting that lasted over two hours, I specifically asked if there was anything I was doing right in my classroom. The Assistant Principal looked right at me and said “If I tell you your outfit is cute today, is that really going to make you feel better?” If I had any

motivation left, that squashed it. I was done. I submitted a resignation request the next day, they gladly allowed it, and although I elected to stay for two additional months to help ease the transition to a new teacher for my kids, they thought it would be a better use of my remaining time for me to sit alone in the Literacy Library and stick blank labels on every book.

While I'm thankful for the career path that led me to where I am today, it's important for me to acknowledge the very real emotional trauma of watching my lifelong teaching dreams be beaten to death through blunt force blows to both my self-confidence and my hope for education reform. When it comes to creating fundamental change in schools, for me, the battle feels fought and lost. This leads me to focus on more subversive methods, specifically in the non-profit space. In many ways, I am left with a visceral reaction to the mere thought of working with existing institutions, and if I'm not careful, this can blind me to very real possibilities for progress and collaboration in these spaces. This was my experience, but this is not every teacher's experience, and I need to be intentional in this work to identify and overcome the personal insecurities and traumatic memories that could prevent me from seeing what needs to be done.

**Regarding Identity Work and “Bullying”.** My time in graduate school has sparked a personal interest in identity work, in large part because of the teaching experiences outlined above, but also because of my own identity-formation struggles. Exploring the underlying social processes of identity formation provides valuable opportunities for me to momentarily view my current social trajectory from the exterior, and to evaluate the elements of my own “self” that might reveal where efforts to create change are warranted.

Developments in my father's career as a Baptist Minister necessitated several significant “moving days” that punctuated my childhood and adolescence, the most disruptive and traumatic of which was in the 7th grade. Despite being very shy and a little awkward, I managed to make a

few new friends, and in High School, when my parents forced me against my will to choose after school activities, I finally found my sense of “belonging” in both Theatre and Debate.

Unfortunately, this was short-lived, as my school district opened a new High School my Junior year. I was the only one of my friends who was transferred, as most of my friends lived in different (higher-income) neighborhoods.

The new school was often referred to within the community as “the black school”. I vividly remember widespread concerns about whether or not the new district map amounted to intentional re-segregation because of the school district’s racist history. The friends I initially made in the newly-established Theatre and Debate teams at the new High School (I was the “President” of both) deteriorated almost immediately into blatant bullying and social isolation when I started dating my first “boyfriend” (now my husband). Initially, I didn’t realize that all of my new “friends” were also romantically interested in him, but when we returned from the Winter holiday break and revealed that we were now a “couple”, there was immediate social backlash. This included a friend who called and asked him to date “literally anyone else” because I was “flaky and fake”, and another friend who offered him sexual favors if he would publicly break up with me, propositions which shocked us both as he answered these calls on speaker-phone while I was in the room. When he declined these advances, the rumors started swirling, and the intentional social exclusion was so swift and severe that it was even perpetuated by a teacher who wouldn’t allow students to say my name aloud in her presence, telling students to call me “that girl” instead.

Within a few months, I had completely resigned from and stopped participating in both theatre and debate. Removed from these spaces, I found myself completely out of my cultural element. The hallways were excessively loud and uncomfortably energetic to me. I didn’t know

anyone. Frequent fights made every passing period feel dangerous. Other students mocked me in class for “sucking up” if I simply turned in my work on time or participated in a class conversation. I was actively prevented from sitting at every table in the cafeteria, and I wasn’t allowed to retreat to the parking lot, stairwell, or other semi-private areas to eat due to teacher concerns about sexual and otherwise illegal exchanges among students in these places. I ate my lunch in the restroom until I eventually found a few unlikely alliances among several Muslim refugees from Somalia, and a classmate who volunteered with me in the “Partners in P.E.” program for students with special needs.

These experiences in my most critical formative years certainly didn’t do much to help me mitigate my existing social-anxieties, and while I managed to make a few of my own friends in college, the ultra-conservative campus environment made most of these relationships tense and high-risk. I relied mostly on my then-boyfriend-now-husband’s strong relationships with his own childhood friends, and the friends he made through his university experience at TCU, which became my new (almost exclusively white male) social circle. It was at this point that I began my 7 year teaching career, which you have already learned was by no means a journey to develop a positive sense-of-self. My husband’s friends have remained my primary social circle until I recently began to form new relationships among my graduate school colleagues. I should also mention that I became a mother after my first graduate semester. This brings a sense of urgency to my work, as I am trying to understand what it means to raise a child responsibly, specifically a white male, all while I navigate the realities of balancing my family and career goals. Clearly, I am currently at a bit of a social identity crossroads, and I inevitably bring this lens to all of my work.

While my personal identity formation process thus far has been largely uncomfortable, at times very painful, my experiences in graduate school have encouraged me to recognize and appreciate the ways in which these experiences have uniquely suited me for identity-work among children and adolescents. As a white, straight, cis-gendered, physically-able, middle-class, Christian woman in the suburban American South, my life experiences could very well have left me lacking even a tiny key-hole through which to glimpse the suffering caused by the marginalization of “others” in the normative culture. Certainly, because of these various forms of privilege, my vision is clouded to an extent that I will never fully understand. In sharing my positionality as it relates to my identity, it isn’t my intent to equate or even to compare my experiences to those of others. Instead, I aim to note here that while my privileges have afforded me a lot of options in life, they are also in many ways my most significant limitations, especially as I consider my approach to identity-work, and these experiences are the best tools I have.

Comparatively insignificant as they may be, I am thankful that my experiences with “not-belonging” have developed my capacity to find commonalities where others fail to see them, and to genuinely appreciate difference. This developed as a coping mechanism while I tried to make friends in environments where my “place” wasn’t as obvious as my differences were, but it now allows me to approach this work through the more spiritually productive lens of empathy, of genuinely receiving the story of another as an ally to become a “co-conspirator” (Love, 2019), rather than the often toxic lens of sympathy that leads many would-be-allies to self-important heroism instead. I can identify with the soul-crushing weight of feeling unseen, misunderstood, and intentionally excluded- of wishing to fit anywhere. I have been there. I can also identify with the struggles of being thrown into the realization of one’s own complicity in systems of oppression- of wishing to stand behind privilege in a feeble attempt to protect a fragile self-



concept. I have been there. Some days, I am still there. So, this work is as much for me as it is for anyone else; and perhaps that's exactly what identity-work should be.

## **Methods**

I visited two public elementary school campuses to observe and gather ethnographic data among the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders as they played at recess. These visits were arranged through Dr. Debbie Rhea, who is a professor of Kinesiology and the Associate Dean of Research and Health Sciences at TCU. Dr. Rhea's "LiNK" project (Let's Inspire Innovation 'N Kids) has received national media attention for examining whole child development through the addition of unstructured, outdoor play breaks and character development in schools (TCU, 2019).

The two campuses I observed were both public schools with the following demographics: Campus A was 55% White, 31% Hispanic, 6% Black, and 8% other or mixed. Campus B was 66% White, 16% Hispanic, 7% Black, and 11% other or mixed (TEA, 2017). I observed 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade recess at each campus. Campus A was participating in the LiNK program, and so these students received four twenty-minute recesses each day. I observed all four of these recess blocks on two separate days within the same week. Campus B was not participating in the LiNK program, and so these students received one twenty-minute recess each day. I also observed this recess block on two separate days within the same week, one week after my observations at Campus A.

As an adult observing children, attempting to gain access to the 'emic' perspective shared among the children within the playground culture would yield limited success, as an adult can not become one of the children, even in appearance, and certainly not in perspective. I instead employed an 'etic' approach from an analytical perspective, a method which contributes to the different, but equally valuable, insights to be gained from "standing far enough away from or

outside of a particular culture to see its separate events, primarily in their relation to their similarities and their differences, as compared to events in other cultures” (Pike, 1954, p. 10). To this end, I tried my best not to interact with the children at all, and mostly wandered around in an attempt conceal who and what I was paying attention to. As a part of this effort, I took notes about the play environment prior to the students’ arrival, and the rest of my observation notes were written as soon as the students had returned to their classrooms.

In accordance with Creswell’s (2007) recommendations regarding ethnographic recording procedures, I utilized an observational protocol in my collection of field notes, arranged in a handwritten notebook. This protocol included detailed physical descriptions of each space on the first pages, followed by field note pages separated into two main sections. The left side of each page was designated for more “objective” observational notes, while the right side of the page was reserved for my own reflections and meaning-making that arose from the observations. The top of each page included space to note the date, time frame, and location of each observation to avoid any future confusion. I then used these field notes to form the descriptive narrative summaries that constitute the findings that follow, utilizing Patton’s (2015) methodological approach toward the presentation of vivid descriptions with minimized interpretation, to give readers the truest sense of the spaces, behaviors, and interactions observed. Interpretations and meaning-making based on my field note reflections are therefore reserved for the discussion section.

### **Considerations and Limitations**

When conducting an ethnography among children, there are existing barriers of power that will influence the children’s behavior when an adult is introduced to the space. These can never be effectively eliminated through time and relationship building, and so they must simply

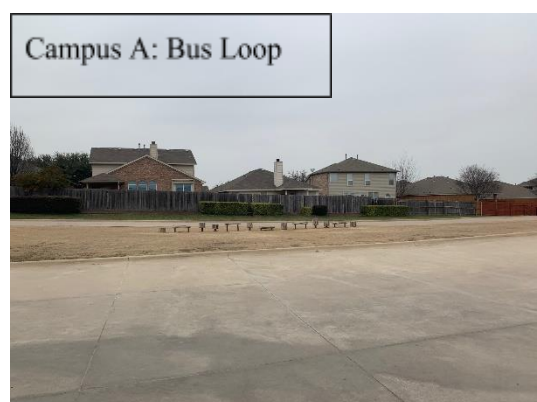
be acknowledged and mitigated however it is possible. Drawing on Corsaro's (2003) ethnographic approach would be ideal--avoiding all authoritative roles, taking notes only when children aren't present, and generally presenting as a non-threatening, friendly adult, who simply enjoys playing with and learning from children.

In this particular pilot study, there was no time to establish these relationships, and this was a significant limitation. Without even speaking to the children I observed, they saw me as an authority figure right away. This had a direct impact on their play behaviors and the spaces I observed. When I moved closer to groups of children who were having private conversations, they instinctively moved farther away before I was in hearing range. When I sat on a bench and then got up to walk around, the children assumed I had claimed it for myself and helped each other to respect me by avoiding it, saying "No, that's her bench! Go sit over there!" At one point, a girl ran up to me and said "You're one of the recess people, aren't you?!", and when I replied "Oh, I'm just here to watch kids play", she said "I knew it! I could tell because you have a backpack!" It wasn't the backpack; they all had backpacks. I'm an adult, and I was hardly undercover.

This has significant implications because, while I didn't witness any overt physical or verbal violence at either campus, the private conversations and interactions that the students were having outside of my awareness could have certainly included bullying. Children who know bullying is considered inappropriate behavior that could get them into trouble might even be more motivated than others to be surreptitious around adults. It would take a much more strategic methodology to gain access to these conversations, but for a work with a larger scope, these efforts could yield rich data. Future research is needed in this area.

### Chapter 3: Findings

**Campus A Environment.** This school was participating in the LiiNK program, which allowed them four, twenty-minute recess blocks per day. Two of these recesses were located on a traditional playground, which included two standard commercial play structures and two swing sets, with a large grassy area between the structures and around the perimeter. The other two recess blocks were located in what the teachers called “the bus loop”. As the name implies, this was a large open area within the school parking lot, used for school busses during arrival and dismissal. This space included a small grassy median in the middle of the lot, with a few short stumps arranged in a row for kids to play and balance on. Surrounding the loop, there was also a small amount of grass extending to the perimeter of the campus, and a few “musical fixtures” that the students could bang on if they felt so inclined, but this space was essentially just an empty parking lot.



**Campus A Observations.** When the kids first arrived on the traditional playground, it was clear that claiming a spot on the swing set was a top priority for some. The race was on as soon as they escaped the building. Those who didn't get a swing waited patiently and took turns in a surprisingly equitable process they had devised among themselves. The kids who didn't care about swings took their time getting to the playground. The commercial play equipment was the only area where genders were equally mixed, but the social interaction was not very rich here. The focus was mainly on using the equipment as designed, and the conversation that did occur was primarily logistical in nature (e.g. who should go first down the slide or across the monkey bars).

The kids who elected not to use any equipment proceeded to arrange themselves almost exclusively by gender, with very few exceptions. I didn't notice any grouping based on race. The boys engaged in more active play, mostly racing or playing tag, sometimes discussing rules for more complicated games like football or soccer (with a pretend ball, which obviously led to arguments about the score). The girls stood around the perimeter of the play area in groups of three to five, with quite a bit of mixing between the groups, as some girls would leave one group and run to join another. Some of these perimeter groups wandered around together, some found a seat on a bench or under a tree. On the second day, when it was particularly cold, many of these girls ran around hugging each other for warmth and pretending to huddle together for survival.

It was very difficult for me to get near these perimeter girl-groups. No matter how casually I tried to approach, or how much I tried to pretend to be paying attention to something else, they would move when I started to get close, or even break apart to join other groups. Of eight total recess blocks, the one conversation I was able to hear in one of these groups was

presumably about Momo<sup>1</sup>, the viral hoax terrifying parents that particular week. I had overheard the teachers saying that the mere possibility of the video's existence was necessitating student trips to the counselor, so they had told the students not to talk to each other about it at all. The girl excitedly told her friends "I *did* see a scary video once!" Her friends looked at me, and when she realized I was there, she lowered her voice to continue "It just wasn't *that* video, so I just... shouldn't tell you...", and then they ran off. As an ethnographer, the obvious impact that my presence was having on their interactions was frustrating, but the girls left me no option but to speculate about them from afar, and so that's what I did.

From this perspective, the girls seemed to be having a nice time with each other. It was obvious that a few of the groups were more exclusive than others, as some of the girls always found their way to the same group, but for the most part, the groups mixed freely. There was only one clear expectation- no boys allowed. At one point, I noticed what I thought was play-fighting, and then realized that the group of five girls was trying to oust a boy who was trying to talk to them. They moved to another location and he followed them, throwing his hands up to gesture "what?!". They moved again after talking to him briefly. He then tried to join another group of three girls, who also promptly walked away. I paid particular attention to this boy during the other recess blocks, and noticed that when he was on the traditional playground, he spent most of his time wandering around and trying unsuccessfully to engage others in conversation.

When the same group of second graders had recess located in "the bus loop", there were some significant changes in their behavior. In the absence of traditional playground equipment,

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<sup>1</sup> The "Momo Challenge" was reportedly a video featuring a creepy doll, named Momo, distributed by hackers interrupting children's YouTube channels, 'challenging' children to commit suicide and providing explicit instructions to this end. See Colins & Wodinsky (2019) for a detailed explanation of this viral hoax.

the students who had been using this equipment seemed to share an understanding that every person in the space was participating in a giant, very loosely organized game of tag. Any student who was found standing alone was quickly tagged and thereby invited into the game. This included the “wandering boy” from the traditional playground, but he was only briefly interested in active play. He wanted to talk, and there was no space for boys to do this on either playground. The perimeter girl groups behaved similarly on both playgrounds, but the students who were playing more actively were far more imaginative in the bus loop. Chasing and racing were still preferred, but now included elements of role-play (e.g. puppies being chased by their mama, a cop chasing and detaining bad guys). These imaginative games seemed to encourage the more active kids to separate themselves by gender more than when they were using the play equipment.

Aside from the wandering boy mentioned previously, I only saw one instance of social exclusion on Campus A, and I’m not even sure if that’s really what I was witnessing. A girl on the traditional playground sat on a bench near where I was standing and started crying. Another girl immediately ran up and sat next to her, giving her a hug and asking what was wrong. She was sobbing and didn’t respond. I asked if she was ok, and she told me she had been excluded from a game. I asked what the game was and she said “I don’t know! I can’t tell what he’s playing because he won’t let me play it!” She identified the boy, but he didn’t appear to be playing a game at all, nor did he appear to be talking to anyone. He slid down the slide and then ran to an open spot on the swing set. I said “Well, whatever he was playing, he looks like he’s already done with it. Why don’t you go play with someone else? [Referring to the girl comforting her] I bet she wants to play with you.” She said “He’s the only one who ever plays

with me!” At that point, recess was over, and she continued sobbing as she lined up, being comforted by several other girls on the way in.

I had seen this girl playing with several other girls earlier on the bus loop, and in combination with all of the support she was getting from her classmates, I’m not sure her reaction had anything to do with bullying. However, it is worth mentioning here that her appearance was extremely unkempt. She wore a very large, adult-sized t-shirt that hung to her knees, along with brightly-colored, worn out leggings that didn’t match the shirt at all. Her hair was messy and tangled. It was very cold (44 degrees), and she wasn’t wearing a jacket. This was a student who, as a teacher, I would notice and start watching for signs of abuse, so these might be things that her peers have noticed and pick on her for.

**Campus B Environment.** This school was not participating in the LiiNK program, so these 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students only had one twenty-minute recess per day. I observed these students during this recess block on two separate days in the same week, the week after I had visited Campus A. These recesses were both on the same traditional playground, which was much larger than both of the playgrounds on Campus A combined. The space included two standard commercial play structures, five swing sets, a basketball court, a large soccer field surrounded by a jogging track, and ample grassy space between and around these spaces with benches, picnic tables, and trees.





**Campus B Observations.** Similar to the kids at Campus A, there was an immediate race for the swings. Once these spots were filled, no one waited there for a turn. These students stayed on the swings for the duration of their recess. The rest of the students separated themselves based mostly on their chosen activity, which created a pretty clear gender distinction, much like Campus A. About twenty boys played soccer (with a real ball), the basketball court had a three girl game and a three boy game going at the same time (both with real balls). A group of five girls spent all twenty minutes on both days picking flowers together. A group of 7 boys laid claim to one of the sets of commercial play equipment by using it as an obstacle course for a game of tag. They didn't tell the other kids to leave, but all the racing around on the equipment quickly made the other set seem more comfortable for the kids who wanted to play without getting crashed into.

I stayed to listen to these boys, and overheard one shouting to another "Don't get [X]! He's not playing!" The other boys seemed confused, because [X] was actively playing at the time. Nevertheless, they stopped tagging [X] without any debate. [X] continued trying to tag the other boys, but when no one tagged him back, he just sat on the steps and watched them. When the boys got tired of playing, they sat around together on the equipment and talked briefly about something I couldn't discern. [X] was sitting with them, but he wasn't included in the conversation. He wasn't visibly upset, so I wouldn't have even noticed this event if I had missed the initial comment.

When I found these boys together again on the second day, they were playing some sort of war-game. They had established a bench area as their "base with metal walls", and they all agreed not to let [X] in for unspecified reasons. Instead, they asked him to chase them as their collective enemy. One boy (not the one who had isolated [X] the day before) offered, "We're a

trio, but do you want to be a single?” perhaps as an effort at inclusion. [X] immediately and enthusiastically agreed, and they ran away. He paused and looked down, the first time I saw him visibly disappointed, he picked up a stick on the ground, broke it across the bench, then he ran off to chase the boys.

This may have been an isolated incident, but when observing the playground as a whole, I noticed something more concerning. While the vast majority of the (approximately 130) second-grade students quickly found activities that interested them on the playground, there were at least ten boys who were wandering between activities without ever fully engaging in anything or talking to anyone at length. The lack of interest in social interaction among these boys struck me as odd in comparison to the playgrounds on Campus A, where all of the students were actively seeking out ways to use their recess time for fun, as you would expect from children who are contained within a classroom for the rest of the day. One of these disengaged boys was wearing noise-cancelling headphones, and especially in combination with his disinterest in social interaction, I would assume this indicates his presence somewhere on the Autism spectrum. On the second day, the ten boys (maybe more) were again wandering aimlessly, but something new had happened among the girls. As soon as I walked away from the boys who were excluding [X] from their “base with metal walls”, I noticed a girl sitting alone on a bench. I started to make my way in her direction, and when I got close, a nearby teacher approached her to ask if she was ok. I couldn’t hear her response, but she sat back down on the bench, so I asked the teacher what she had said. The teacher told me “She just said she wasn’t upset, she just wanted to have some time alone today. I told her that’s fine, we all have days like that.” I agreed, because indeed we do.

Then, this teacher and I simultaneously noticed another girl who was just sitting on the playground equipment stairs. I didn’t acknowledge the situation at all, but the teacher

approached her and asked if something was wrong, and she said “Oh, I think I bruised my knee cap”. The teacher inquired further “Are you sure that’s the only problem?” and the girl assured her that she was fine. The teacher walked away to address another group of students who were walking up the slide, and since I had intentionally turned my back to the conversation while I was listening in, the girl didn’t realize that I was privy to this interaction. This allowed me to observe that for the remainder of recess, she would employ a fake limp, only when this teacher was watching, in an attempt to validate her story.

At that point, I looked around the playground and saw that there were now at least 8 other girls who were sitting, standing, or walking in complete isolation, visibly despondent. Unlike the boys who I had noticed wandering the day before and again on that day, the girls looked, at the very least, extremely bored, perhaps even on the verge of tears. I had missed something. Perhaps it happened while I was watching the boys who were excluding [X]. Maybe there was a situation at lunch, or something that had happened in the classroom earlier that day. I had already witnessed two of them attempt to hide the problem from their teacher, so I watched closely, hoping to gain a little more insight. Slowly, the isolated girls began to pair up, but not to talk. One girl was sitting on the ground, making a pile of dirt with her hands, when another girl sat next to her and began drawing in the dirt with a stick. They didn’t acknowledge each other. The two girls who had been questioned by the teacher were now sitting together on the play equipment stairs, slouching with their chins cupped in their hands, and they weren’t talking either. A girl who had been walking around the track joined a girl who was sitting alone on a bench, and another girl joined them moments later without conversation. At this point, only one girl was still alone, slowly going down the slide and then across the monkey bars as if she was

bored out of her mind. None of the girls said anything to each other for the last few minutes of recess, and when it was time to line up, they all just walked together to join their classmates.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

### **Playground Insights**

Several interesting social phenomena reveal themselves within the quasi-ethnographic findings. As others have noted, social demarcations among pre-adolescents appear to have very little to do with race, and very much to do with gender (Corsaro, 1997; Fine, 2006). These findings were confirmed on both campuses I visited, with the girls also showing a significantly greater tendency toward in-depth conversation and establishing intimacy among close friends, while the boys engaged in far more competitive and physically active forms of play. While it appeared that girls who wished to be more active were welcome to join in the racing and tagging with the boys, the same was not true for boys who wished for more social intimacy. This cultural climate poses a problem for boys who are less athletically inclined, or who simply don't wish to conform to these gender norms for other reasons. Even the boys who prefer the more competitive and active forms of play would benefit from having meaningful conversations with their peers, and neither environment welcomed this possibility.

On Campus A, the shift between the two different playgrounds made a significant difference in the children's behavior. In the absence of traditional playground equipment, there was more social interaction, and the play was more imaginative. The default game of tag included every student in the "bus loop", and those who did not find much inclusion in the structured playground space were thereby brought back into the fold. By contrast, the students who played on the traditional equipment often played in isolation. While they enjoyed burning off some energy on the slide or the monkey bars, this allowed students who may have been

struggling socially to spend all of their recess time alone without even noticing. This might be more comfortable than confronting the problem, but it is not conducive to social growth. That said, because these students had access to both spaces twice a day, they had plenty of other opportunities to interact. Additionally, the teachers at Campus A couldn't say enough about the social and behavioral benefits they were witnessing in the classroom as a result of the additional recess time provided by the LiiNK program, and these benefits were made very apparent by my visit to Campus B.

While I didn't witness any violent behavior on either campus, the boys on Campus B who repeatedly assigned [X] to the periphery of their play provide a clear example of intentional 'othering' on the playground. Notably, [X] accepted and even participated in his own exclusion without contesting it, which raises significant concerns about his feelings of self-worth, and also makes this social behavior nearly impossible for adults to detect. Furthermore, the fact that the boys preferred to keep [X] in their group as an inferior, rather than simply avoiding him entirely, suggests an attempt among these boys to affirm the status of the self by establishing a social hierarchy. This collective co-construction of the 'normal us' is what Thornberg (2015) believes allows bullying to continue without bystander intervention, as bystanders must affirm the criteria that is used to exclude 'others' in order to maintain their own position among the 'normal us'.

I was also surprised and concerned to see so many of the boys on Campus B just wandering around as if they didn't even want to play. Perhaps they have been intentionally excluded in the past and have stopped trying to interact, but I didn't see any reason why they couldn't join in one of the many playground activities. Even more confounding was the behavior of the girls on the second day. Whether or not there was a traumatic event which put them all in such a sullen mood, they weren't responding in a productive way. I can only suppose that they

began to sit near each other near the end to avoid feeling or looking lonely, but without any conversation or interaction at all, nothing could have been resolved in this way. Even more concerning, if they were telling the truth to their teacher that they just wanted to be alone, what could lead nearly twenty boys and girls in total to conclude that they would rather sit alone or wander the playground for twenty minutes than take the only opportunity they have all day to talk and play?

With such limited information, I can only speculate. I would have anticipated that the students at Campus B, who only received a fourth of the recess time allotted for Campus A, would be even more motivated to make the most of their time. I thought the excitement and pent up energy might even manifest itself in violence or other problematic behaviors, but this wasn't the case. Perhaps this indicates that the limited play time has stunted their social-emotional growth, leaving them without the tools they need to maintain strong relationships among friends. Another, more likely explanation might be that although the playground on Campus B seemed far superior to those on Campus A, the abundance of space and variety of options actually served to limit interaction. The students on Campus A were in close enough proximity to keep an underlying default game of tag going, including the entire space, and all of the kids. In this scenario, loners who didn't look like they were otherwise occupied were essentially 'sitting ducks' and would be promptly tagged, inviting them into the game. This would have been impossible on Campus B, as the playground was roughly ten times larger. It was difficult for me to even observe in this space because of the amount of time it took me to walk between activities, and maybe this is overwhelming to some students who need more of a direct invitation to feel included.

More research would be needed within these spaces to ascertain the dynamics behind the children's play decisions. This would necessitate a more in-depth ethnography, allowing time to draw on Corsaro's (2003) methodology for building relationships and minimizing the power asymmetries between adults and children. Without laying this groundwork, conversations with the children would likely be futile regarding the most important details, even misleading if they think they might get in trouble or that the adult ethnographer may intervene in unwanted ways.

### **Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations: A New Way Forward**

**Places and Spaces.** As these ethnographic findings relate to playscapes themselves, the significant variation in play behavior observed in each of the outdoor spaces urges us to consider a more critical spatial analysis of the playground. It is worth noting here that the psychological and cognitive benefits of time spent in beautiful, outdoor, natural environments, a few of which are presented in the literature review section of this work, should not be overlooked (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Berman et al., 2012; Bratman, Daily, Levy & Gross, 2015; Mayer, Frantz, Bruehlman-Senecal, & Dolliver, 2009; Ulrich et al., 1991; Berto, 2005; Faber-Taylor et al., 2002; Morton, Bles, and Haslam, 2017). Based on the abundance of existing literature on this topic, the ideal space for developing social-emotional intelligence through play among children would likely be an outdoor space which is aesthetically oriented toward nature and the environment. This is especially true when we consider the potential for these spaces to reflect and validate the cultural identities of the children within them, to foster their collaboration toward shared goals through gardening and maintaining such a space, and to acquire powerful knowledge and skills that will serve them well into adulthood. Examining the details of such a space is a task for a future work. However, we also find that play spaces which do not reflect the natural world, such as parking lots, commercial play equipment sets, and even the size of the

space as a whole also directly impact play behaviors in positive and negative ways that must be examined and considered as we move forward in designing interventions within these spaces.

Drawing on Foucault's loosely conceptualized 'heterotopias' and Lefebvre's interpretation of social spatiality and the 'right to the city', Soja (2015) analyzes geography as a "thirdspace" of ontological existence, which is subject to the same forces that influence the other two (time/history and social/society). In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, he explains, "space is not an empty void. It is always filled with politics, ideology, and other forces shaping our lives and challenging us to engage in struggles over geography" (p. 19). While we strive to shape spaces to meet our needs, these spaces respond by shaping us in a wide variety of ways, all at once both reflecting and defining the self. From this perspective, we can see that the particular features of the play space, which Foucault would call 'little tactics of the habitat', clearly have direct and significant implications for the ways in which the children encounter each other. This is most apparent when observing the same children on the same day in different spaces at Campus A.

Soja's (2015) critical examination of the intersections of space, knowledge, and power thereby invites the possibility of manipulating the physical features of a play space, challenging assumptions and disrupting the distribution of power among children through strategic design. From this perspective, we might find that space now becomes a tool that is more useful for both analysis and intervention. If spaces function as mirrors, as spatial theorists imply, we can gain significant insights through their manipulation, but we can also gain different significant insights by observing children's' behaviors in existing play spaces, left as they are. Perhaps the key is in the juxtaposition of different play spaces provided to the same children, as in the observation of Campus A. In this endeavor, we might be better able to uncover the elements of a space that serve to create either emancipatory or oppressive play environments. For instance, it is



immediately apparent from the quasi-ethnographic findings that the presence of commercial play equipment limits imaginative play and encourages obedience to prescribed activity, but these findings are of secondary importance. We must keep in mind that spaces are often used for unintended purposes or in unexpected ways. A group of boys might lay claim to a set of equipment and begin to exclude others from the space, all without ever going down the slide or across the monkey bars, and these are the ‘reflections’ that should catch our attention.

Therefore, where we truly find the greatest potential for social intervention is likely not in designing the spaces, but in designing the social support systems to be provided within these spaces, and in simply allowing time for the children to practice appropriate social behaviors through frequent free play in any space. This means that there are a wide variety of contexts through which a team of community organizers, teachers, and researchers could undertake such a project. As we begin to consider the potential for a real-world approach to this work, especially in light of the difficulties we will soon encounter in our discussion of the intervention itself, this is encouraging. Individual schools could do this on their own without much district support. Even in the complete absence of a school’s willingness to participate, existing spaces like public parks and nature centers could be used to pursue such a project in after school and summer programs. Similarly, neighborhood community centers and churches could offer space for community leaders to take up the cause. Any attempt at implementation that isn’t met with support can be successfully rerouted to another space, even if it isn’t outdoors, and this potential holds a lot of promise.

**Social Identity Intervention.** When we consider the work of Davies (2011), Jacobson (2012), Martocci (2014), Thornberg (2015), and other contemporary bullying scholars, especially as they relate to the failed anti-bullying programs of the last several decades, we find that it is

time to abandon our long-held assumption that bullying is a form of sadism or consequence of immorality. From this newly informed perspective, the problem to be addressed through intervention is no longer a matter of developing the bully's character, conscience, or capacity for empathy, nor is it to eliminate his or her pathological propensity to be cruel. Instead, we must now aim to help these entirely normal children learn healthier ways to unpack the implicit messages about difference they have received from us, their collective society. They must learn the significance of our personal feelings about "acceptable" and "unacceptable" difference, how the expression of power through categorization leads to widespread social inequities, and how attempts to eliminate our own differences might limit our potential for belonging to ourselves and among each other. In navigating these social complexities, perhaps the girl groups on Campus A would come to a realization that it's ok to allow the 'wandering boy' to join in their conversations, that he actually might have something to contribute to the topics they are already interested in, despite their gender differences. Perhaps the boys on Campus B would recognize how hurtful it can be to adhere to a social hierarchy in their role-play, that it might be more fun for all of them if they take turns being the 'villain' in these games, rather than assigning one person to the outcast role.

The required investment of time and effort would be significant. Davies (2011) concludes her work by emphasizing that "such an approach [to bullying] would make philosophy central to all students' education, beginning in the earliest years" (p. 284). This is no small task, and it first requires that we develop teachers who are themselves capable of appreciating difference and the not-yet-known, rather than selecting faulty children and problem behaviors for reform. Davies explains:

This would not be a philosophy based on moralistic judgements, but a philosophy that enables children to learn the skills of thinking as Foucault defines them, and to learn to recognize the problem of an absolute position that justifies the sacrifice of other individuals in the maintenance of their own absolute position. Students involved in such a programme would learn how it is possible to practice [Badiou's] ethic of truths, to regard difference not as threatening, but as of value, and they would learn how they might grant themselves and others freedom to open themselves up to [Deleuze's] differentiation, that is, to becoming different, and to the evolutionary possibilities of the not-yet-known. (p. 284)

If we are going to give serious attention to the possibilities of addressing bullying through this kind of identity work, by first informing that work with centuries of philosophical knowledge and critical thinking skills, along with the necessary cultural competencies for effective interaction among diverse communities, the people involved, adults and children alike, are going to need some serious headspace.

How might we approach such an endeavor? The amount of research and teacher training that would be necessary to provide and maintain the appropriate social structure and targeted interventions within these play spaces could prove to be astronomical, and this is certainly the greatest challenge in considering real-world implementation. Would every adult leader in such an intervention need to be fully invested in philosophical thought and cultural studies, or would it be possible for a few individuals to make the most necessary components quickly ascertainable for larger groups of interested teachers, parents, and volunteers? How much and what type of direct instruction would be required? How must these instructional components be interwoven within the play environment to allow for the spontaneous interaction that forms identity? How

much time would need to be invested with the children (and adults) in order to make a long-term difference in social behavior and beliefs about the self? Perhaps most importantly, when we consider all of the academic and social pressures that are already placed on American children, is it inappropriate for us to spend a significant amount of their time introducing forms of “knowledge” that are deemed unimportant by their normative society? Conversely, might this work actually improve academic performance and behavior in the classroom? These are important ethical concerns and questions to be addressed in future research. Conducting a full-scale playground ethnography could potentially contribute significant insights toward the development of practical guidelines for implementation.

**“P4C” (Philosophy for Children): A Jumping-off Point.** The “Philosophy for Children” movement, often referred to as “P4C”, has been a work-in-progress for over 40 years. The program, which was initially conceived by Matthew Lipman in the 1970’s, was based primarily on theories from Dewey, Mead, Vygotsky and Buchlerhas, and has since been adapted and researched extensively, with great success in a wide variety of classroom contexts around the world (Lipman, 2008). For Lipman, the purpose of P4C as an educational program was to “enhance democracy” through philosophy in the following ways: (a) offering rich and varied treatment of universal and controversial concepts, such as truth, justice and freedom; (b) provision of an education in thinking that leads children to be higher-order thinkers (critical, creative, and caring thinking); and (c) offering an opportunity for significant dialogue that fosters better judgment (Kohan, 2002, p. 7).

In more recent years, many other scholars and philosophers have contributed and made course corrections to Lipman’s original P4C conceptualization, most notably by shifting the focus from actualization (achieving a purpose, e.g. “develop critical thinking skills”), toward

experiencing indeterminacy (suspending the ritual of teaching and learning). Biesta (2012) proposes that P4C should therefore avoid using philosophy as an instrument for production, and should instead emphasize “exposure” as the central educational concept, stating “exposure does not produce; exposure interrupts, bringing about an experience of not knowing” (p. 149–150). Building upon Biesta’s suggestions, Jasinski and Lewis (2015) describe a nuanced approach toward establishing “communities of infancy” within P4C environments, as opposed to communities of inquiry. Drawing largely from the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, they contend that the “teacher-as-not-a-teacher” should assume his or her role as the “paradigm of infancy” in such an environment (p. 377). In this model, the teacher is neither the facilitator of knowledge, nor does he or she silently transcend the space. Instead, the teacher-as-not-a-teacher becomes the paradigm of infancy by presenting as the most infantile of all the students, and thereby exposes space for the communal experiences of indeterminacy that are central to philosophical knowledge.

Utilizing the last several decades of research regarding implementation with real children, along with the recent course corrections and contributions made to the program from contemporary philosophy scholars, the P4C model provides a firm theoretical and practical foundation for this work. Going forward, an in-depth analysis of the specific elements of the program that have contributed toward its remarkable success, including their training materials and policies for program oversight, would be necessary. Through further research and analysis, we can begin to expose the ways in which features of the play environment might be manipulated to open space for particularly productive experiences with being and knowing, and to thereby help students navigate the social identity formation process in positive ways.

## **Logistical Concerns**

**The Program as an Entity.** Once the details of such an intervention have been loosely conceptualized, the next step would be to find a space for a pilot program to gain more insight regarding the real-world challenges these teachers-as-not-teachers might face in implementation, as well as the impact such a program could have on bullying. My own non-profit organization, C.L.E.A.R. Education (Cooperative Leaders Enhancing and Revolutionizing Education) could be a significant resource here. While the organization has been on the back-burner for the most part since I started graduate school in 2016, I have kept up with all the state and federal requirements, and it is still an active 501(c)(3) in good standing with the IRS. When I established the entity, I wasn't entirely sure what direction it would take, so we intentionally crafted a very broad "purpose", as follows:

The purposes for which the Corporation is organized are exclusively charitable within the meaning of the Internal Revenue Service Code, Section 501(c)(3), and the Texas Tax Code, Section 11.18. Specifically, the Corporation is dedicated to excellence in learning and teaching promoted through the development of educational programs that enrich, supplement or replace the basic curriculum provided to students in public, private and/or home school classrooms. The Corporation's innovative solutions are geared to promote the success of each child touched by its programs. (CLEAR Education Inc. Bylaws, 2016. Article 1: Section 1.02a.)

Any efforts related to the implementation of a bullying intervention program among children and adolescents would fall well within the scope of the CLEAR Education purpose. As stated previously, any space that is sufficiently safe and accessible for children can be used for such a project, whether it is outdoors or indoors. I see the greatest potential for an initial pilot

program in the afterschool space. In this way, interested families can elect to enroll their children, and there is no initial burden to prove the efficacy of the program as a bullying intervention prior to its implementation. Funding could be secured through any combination of grants and donors, in connection with an interested University or simply through the CLEAR Education Organization by itself.

Ideally, a university partnership would allow for the IRB approval necessary to generate quality research through the program as well, and this would help significantly in establishing efficacy, pinpointing areas for improvement, and generating the broad support base that might eventually help the program find its way into the school day as a bullying intervention in an official capacity. Perhaps most importantly for work with teachers, parents, and community leaders, all of whom will have diverse ideas and feelings about the program, its ideology, and its implementation, a University's support and oversight would assist in keeping the project seated firmly upon its theoretical foundations, executed in fidelity with the existing research, without overstepping any family's ideological boundaries or religious freedoms. Because of the federal regulations regarding 501(c)3 organizations, the CLEAR Education bylaws already expressly eliminate any of the would-be concerns about potential religious or political affiliations, and the opportunities afforded to the organization by this legal status would allow for the fundraising, grant writing, and volunteer support necessary for this redirected approach to bullying intervention to gain traction in communities and schools.

**Legal Requirements and Funding.** After school programs in Texas are subject to a wide variety of legal requirements. In accordance with the Expanded Learning Opportunities Council (ELO Council), which was established by the 83rd Texas Legislature, Senate Bill 503, these regulations are codified in the Texas Education Code Chapter §33.251-260 (TEA, 2019). The

regulations for child care found in Chapter §42 of the Texas Human Resources Code also apply (DFPS, 2019). The Texas Partnership for Out of School Time (TXPOST, 2014) has issued a guide to these requirements, which includes standards for: safety, nutrition, staff management, activities, diversity and inclusion, family/ community/ school engagement, and program sustainability. A link to this guide is included on the reference page.

TXPOST is just one of many national organizations that works to secure grants and other funding sources for after school and summer programs in Texas. Others include the National Institute on Out of School Time (NOIST), the Afterschool Alliance, and the National After School Association. There is only one source of federal funding for after school programs, which is the “21st Century Community Learning Centers” (21st CCLC) initiative, a part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), based on an assessment of Title 1 needs. The TEA distributes these funds through the “21st Century Afterschool Centers on Education” (ACE) grant, which accepts competitive applications from school districts, as well as non-profit organizations that can demonstrate a “track record of success” with after and before school programs (TEA, 2019). A program proposal can be made either directly through the ACE grant application, or through the application process of an organization that has received an ACE grant. Fort Worth ISD, for example, uses a combination of ACE, FWISD, and FW City funding for its 79 Fort Worth After School (FWAS) programs. These are chosen based on proposals given to the school board when the budget is allocated, and this aspect of the process is overseen by FWAS Director, Miguel Garcia (FWISD, 2019).

Apart from working with school districts and national organizations, there are a wide variety of state and local grants and initiatives that could provide support for this program. For example, Fort Worth’s Strengthening After-School Programs through Advocacy, Resources and



Collaboration (SPARC) provides advocacy, resources, and collaboration in support of equitable after school programs. Organizations like the United Way, Boys and Girls Club of America, the YMCA, and It's Time Texas support community initiatives to improve mental and physical health. The Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO, 2019) offers annual grants for philosophy programs in schools, and The Center for Ethics and Education is currently funding philosophy research in K-12 with grants worth up to \$40,000 (CEE, 2019). As it relates to the physical space itself, grants for community gardens and outdoor educational spaces for children are ubiquitous: Project Orange Thumb, Annie's Grants for Gardens, The Youth Garden Grant, Captain Planet Foundation, Big Green, and the KaBOOM Playground Grant are just a few of the more well-known options.

### **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research**

In his analysis of the progression from the old anti-bullying resources for teachers and children as they compare to the new resources used in schools today, Meyer (2016) finds that over the last several decades, these texts consistently espouse the neoliberal norms that encourage individuals to perceive their actions and experiences as freely and deliberately chosen, and that they bear full responsibility for their choices, regardless of the social forces that might influence or constrain a person's experience or behavior. Drawing on imagery from Foucault's (1977) Panopticon prison described in *Discipline and Punish*, Meyer persuasively argues that the development of a seemingly "kinder", "more gentle" approach to reducing bullying through bystander intervention, as opposed to the more aggressively punitive approaches employed previously, does not amount to progress, does not even address the real problem, and actually serves to reify the existing imbalances of power that marginalize the individuals who are at the greatest risk of victimization from bullies.

We can see from the studies examining the efficacy of our existing bullying interventions that Meyers' (2016) claims are borne out in the research (Jacobson, 2012; Martocci, 2015; Davies, 2011; Galloway & Rolland, 2004; Jiminez-Barbero et. al, 2016; Evans, Fraser & Cotter, 2014). The potential for profit among those who would capitalize on the ongoing bullying crisis through the creation of "anti-bullying" resources in alignment with these neoliberal ideals cannot be ignored, and this has undoubtedly contributed to a substantial body of highly-questionable anti-bullying research, clouding the academic waters for those who wish to swim against this current (Yeager et. al, 2015; Chalamandaris & Piette, 2015; Garandeanu, Lee & Salmivalli, 2014; Temko, 2019).

Through an examination of the social processes at work in childhood identity formation as it relates to bullying, the potential for a different direction reveals itself. Through careful attention to the introduction of critical theories and the philosophical foundations of thought, and by simply allowing children to play together frequently and appropriately, would-be-bullies are released from their assigned pathologies, would-be-victims are empowered to embrace and showcase their differences, and would-be-bystanders are no longer employed as 'snitches' against their friends at their own social risk.

While the quasi-ethnographic pilot study presented in this work was limited in scope, the findings further support the possibilities of manipulating play spaces to influence the ways in which children encounter each other, and this would be a rich area for future research. The findings also show that there is much insight to be gained from observing children in existing play spaces as they are, and in an analysis of the features of a play space along with the social interventions provided outside of the play space, as they relate to behavior and perceptions about identity. It is important to note that future research might also consider the features of "cyber

spaces” as they relate to bullying, as these spaces present a wide variety of other social and structural influences on behavior that must be addressed in a comprehensive bullying intervention program.

To this end, making progress will take considerable effort and will require input from a variety of interested stakeholders and researchers. Implementing such a program with true fidelity to its theoretical foundations will be difficult, but not impossible, and the logistical approach briefly presented in the Discussion section might provide a sufficient starting-point for future work toward such an ambitious endeavor. While it is important to acknowledge the abundance of future work to be done prior to effective implementation of such a program, it is also important to note here that if we have been actively confronting the “bullying problem” from a fundamentally flawed perspective for decades in schools, there are likely many other behaviors that are linked to identity in ways we have failed to consider. In just one of many examples in the existing research, an independent evaluation of in-class P4C intervention showed significant improvement in academic attainment after just one year (Gorard, Siddiqui & See, 2017). This is yet another area for future research that could yield significant insights, and if a philosophical approach to identity work through play could begin to directly impact not only social concerns in the classroom (e.g. substance abuse, teen pregnancy, gang affiliation), but also academic concerns (e.g. achievement, retention, and college admission), the effort would be well-worth any investment of time and money required for effective implementation.

In future efforts to create a perpetually adaptable methodology for a social intervention that addresses the complexities of implementation, it would be most beneficial to conduct a series of full-scale playground ethnographies. While building the theoretical foundations and planning the intervention itself, this research could provide valuable insights regarding the ways

in which the social and physical features of existing play spaces influence, direct, enable, and constrain interactions among children. After analyzing these findings and situating them within the applicable existing research and theoretical frameworks, subsequent similar playground ethnographies might be conducted among a group of children who are receiving a pilot-intervention, alongside a demographically similar group of children who are not. By continuing to utilize ethnographic methods, both in the development, initial implementation, and then in the ongoing assessment of intervention efficacy, these methods would allow the program itself to remain responsive to the complexities and unique dynamics of every social environment in which it might be implemented, a feature which is foundational to the proposed approach. Perhaps in this endeavor, we will find a sustainable way forward for social identity work and philosophy in schools, and perhaps we will find that these efforts aren't just for bullies and their victims, but that the benefits of such programs would spill out of these play spaces, into the deeply held beliefs of the children involved, quite possibly the beliefs of the adults involved, and if we dare to hope, the beliefs of our collective society as a whole.

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