

Playing with Gender: An Exploration of
Borderwork and Crossing on the Learning
Landscapes Playground

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An Ethnographic Study by:

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Introduction

Since 1998, the Learning Landscapes Initiative has reconstructed over fifty elementary school playground sites in Denver, Colorado, with the hope of supporting healthy development among young children. This campaign was started as a reaction to the impoverished circumstances that many urban children experience and to the lack of safe, outdoor areas for these children to play. An important aspect of this initiative was the impetus to increase the physical activity levels of the children and, as Brink and van Vliet state, “Schools have the potential to provide numerous opportunities for the promotion of physical activity” (Brink and Yost, 2006, p.1). Yet, while we recognize that low levels of physical activity and soaring obesity rates among youth are significant societal threats, there is a lack of research concerning the social and emotional development that occurs on these newly redesigned playgrounds. We contend that schools are also charged with socializing children and, in providing opportunities to play, enable children to socialize with each other and develop relationships. However, previous research has indicated that various undesirable power structures are likely to develop on playgrounds where race, class and gender meet (Thorne 1993; Karsten 2003; Boyle, D. E., Marshall, N. L. & Robeson, W. W. 2003; Messner 2000). Using these studies as background and important sources of theoretical ideas, we seek to expose the way that gender, specifically, is constructed among the children on three Learning Landscapes playgrounds in the Denver Public Schools.

In doing so, we hope to contribute to the existing literature on gender construction in public spaces, schools and, indeed, playgrounds. Those that have been and are currently involved with the Learning Landscapes project, as well as the teachers

and administrators in the studied schools, are among those that we wish to inform with this research. To understand how children are using their new playground space and the way they are relating to one another during their recess time is crucial to designing more equitable play spaces and to learning more about how children construct their multiple identities.

Conceptual Framework

Using Judith's Butler notion of gender performance, we understand gender to be "in no way a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts proceede (sic); rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1990;140). Indeed, it is through this notion of the performance of gender that we use a feminist and post-structuralist framework to understand how children "do" gender on the playground.

As many previous studies on gender have concluded, it is only with the ideas that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon and that it does not exist prior to its being taken up by the subject that we can begin to explore how children perform their gender on the playground. Indeed, there still remains a widely held notion that gender is natural or exists as "a substantial core that which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex" (Butler 1998; 528). With this essentialist notion of gender firmly in place, any representations of gender outside what is typically considered masculine or feminine only reinforce the presumed static nature of gender and the notion that there is a right and wrong way to "do" gender. Indeed, "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments, both obvious and indirect" that works to

maintain the oppressive power structures in our society (Butler 1998; 528). To understand gender as *performative* rather than *expressive* effectively allows for a fluidity of gendered identities that disrupts the hegemonic dichotomy of an essentialized version of gender. It is here where social norms can be questioned and we can work towards displacing societal power structures that rely on these norms for their very existence.

Indeed, previous research on children and play has revealed the construction of gender on the playground as well as the ways that traditional gender roles are both reinforced and challenged. Barrie Thorne's seminal work, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (1993), functions as the theoretical underpinning for many researchers who have taken up the question of gender construction on playgrounds (Boyle, D. E., Marshall, N. L. & Robeson ??, Karsten 2003;, W. W. 2003; Messner 2000). In disrupting the traditional notions of gender "socialization" and "development," Thorne questioned the prescriptive outcomes that these terms take to be a given. "They assume that the forces that operate on children will produce adults who are conventionally masculine and feminine, or else 'deviant' if the process slips or fails. But ultimate outcomes are uncertain and often amazingly various; children, like adults, live in present, concretely historical, and open-ended time" (Thorne, 1993, p.3). Indeed, Thorne is channeling Butler in questioning the notion of preexisting femininities or masculinities and suggesting a fluidity that allows for multiple gendered identities. Karsten's study on children's use of public space supports this view of gender as she concludes that, "Gender identities are contextually constructed and reinforced by the physical characteristics of the location, the time of day and the activity that is under- taken"

(Karsten 2003, p. 471). Thus, performances of gender are contingent on a variety of factors; they do not preexist prior to how children “do” their gender at any given moment.

Messner’s work on the conditions under which gender boundaries are made more or less salient within the context of a boys’ vs. girls’ soccer game asks “how and under what conditions boys and girls constitute themselves as separate, oppositional groups” (Messner, 2000, p. 780)? Similarly, Boyle et al. conclude that boys and girls may reinforce this separation on the playground by actually playing together but engaging in certain rituals that maintain the gender boundaries (Boyle, 2003, D. E., Marshall, N. L. & Robeson, W. W., 2003). Contests, invasions and chasing are among these rituals and support Thorne’s notion of “borderwork” (Thorne, 1993, p. 64).

When children engage in borderwork, they are making contact with each other but engaging in certain behaviors, such as those found by Boyle et al., that reinforce the gendered stereotypes that effectively maintain the illusion of difference among males and females. This idea is important for our present study as we recognize “[t]hese stylized moments evoke recurring themes that are deeply rooted in our cultural conceptions of gender, and they suppress awareness of patterns that contradict and qualify them” (Thorne, 1993, p. 66). Additionally, Thorne terms instance where boys and girls “may seek access to groups and activities of the other gender,” instances that actually “challenge the oppositional structure of traditional gender arrangements” as “crossing” (Thorne, 1993, p.133). For example, girls who cross may be termed “tomboys” as they choose to engage in traditionally male-dominated activities.

Both borderwork and crossing, taken together, can be important indicators of how children actually perform their gender on the playground and how fluid gender is on this

public space. Thus, in recognizing both Butler and Thorne's conceptions of gender we seek the answers to a number of research questions that reveal the variety and fluidity of the often-presumed dichotomous nature of gender.

Research Questions

Given the previously described purpose and framework of this study we have determined the following questions will work to illustrate how gender is constructed on the Learning Landscapes playgrounds.

- 1) What are the activities that boys and girls are participating in on the playground?
- 2) How are boys and girls performing their gender through these activities?
- 3) How are borderwork and/or crossing enacted on the playground?

Methods of Data Collection

Locations:

The locations we studied were three elementary school playgrounds (specifically, Learning Landscapes Playgrounds) in an urban environment – specifically, Denver, Colorado. Denver is the 27th most populous city in the United States, with a population slightly over one-half million. By use of the term “playground,” we include: grassy fields, hard top or asphalt surfaces, soft surfaces (i.e.: mulch, sand, sandy gravel, etc.). The three schools that we monitored were: Paine Elementary School, Henry Elementary School, and Troutville Elementary School and maps of these school playgrounds can be found in Appendix F.

Paine Elementary School's basic shape is a large 'U', comprised of brick buildings on either side of a central courtyard, which is a sizeable play area. The play area is asphalt-covered and has two four-squares, three tether-ball circles, a half-basketball court and pole and a full basketball court and pole, all well-painted and clearly demarked (#s5, 6, 7 & 8)¹. If you were facing the play area, the building on the right is two stories and is the lunch/gym facility. At the bottom of the 'U' are the school's office, library and general facilities and the classroom building is on the left. Around the classroom building, on the far side of the classroom hall, is the smaller playground facility; it is used by kindergarten and first grade. This small play area is not numbered on the map and runs along the length of the building between the building and the street. It is divided into several use areas. The first play area is the swing set, with only four seats, with a floor of bark which is surrounded by a cement sidewalk. Next to the swings is the jungle-gym and on the sidewalk separating them is a long bench. The jungle-gym area is the most prominent feature of this play area with lots of equipment on its bark floor. The swings and jungle-gym, together, are quasi-enclosed by a semi-circle, chain-link fence which leads to the double-wide sidewalk running in front of the classroom doors. Outside the chain-link fence is a grassy area with a tree providing shade to several benches and several large boulders underneath it. Further on along the building is a grassy area, also quasi-enclosed with chain-link. This grassy area opens up into the larger, main play area of the school.

Philip's main play area sits on top of the 'U' and extends somewhat past the 'U' on either side. An asphalt pathway/sidewalk leads to a swing set, set in bark, and surrounded by asphalt; this swing set (#11) is on the outer edge of the play area, near the

¹ The #s in the descriptions represent the legends on the three maps.

parking lot. Also near the lunch/gym building, just inside of the swing area is a jungle/gym play area (#10), edged by asphalt and with a floor of cushioned astro-turf. It has three slides, bars, and a 'wheel-twirler', for want of a better descriptor. Further on, sitting on top of the part of the 'U' comprised by the classroom building, is an even larger jungle-gym play area (#4), with a taller and more extensive 'construct'; this one is on bark. Between the two jungle-gyms is a gazebo (#9) with cement chairs and a cement game table. The gazebo 'roof' is slatted wood. Past all of the play areas is a very large field of grass (#s 2 & 3) which extends the entire length of the city block. The grass is level and in nice condition. Furthest away from the buildings along the far fence are several mature trees. Punctuating this larger playground in several places are groups of colorful banners depicting the school's pride and priorities.

Henry Elementary School is best described as a brick building that forms an L-shaped frame around the play area, which is relatively small. Two smaller play yards are enclosed: one along the outer edge of the playground (#10), which is closed for repairs, and the other in the middle of the playground, which appears as a white area on the map. This enclosed area in the middle of the yard is for the youngest children with low, short slides, low-to-the-ground jungle gym equipment and metal, quasi-rocking horses on a ground cover of wood chips. Also in this enclosed area for kindergarteners are several trees on a grassy area and a few benches. A poster with the alphabet is affixed to the play equipment in this kindergarten play area. There is also a relatively larger play area for older children located close to the building which is not enclosed (#6) but which contain swings and jungle gyms. This is the largest play area in the playground. Near this 'crux' of the playground, there were several four-square games painted on the asphalt (#7).

Troutville Elementary School's playground is framed on two sides by its "L" shaped brick buildings with the long leg of the "L" parallel to the street. Its playground is very large. Past the 'top' of the "L", there is 10 to 15 yards of asphalt along the depth of the playground, and beyond that is an enormous grassy field (#s 2 & 3) running almost the entire length of the school's city block, perhaps 50 to 70 yards long and wide. Right at the top of this long leg of the "L" is a small, enclosed (in chain-link) play area for kindergarteners. Near the 'crux' of the "L" are three four-square games painted on the asphalt (#12). Near the end of the short leg of the "L," is the large swing area, with eight swings (#14). Just farther away from the building than this large swing-set is a group of three tetherball poles (#11). Near the top of the long leg of this "L" is a large basketball area with opposing poles—seemingly regulation size (#5). Further away from the building than the basketball area and located next to the street is a large play area with jungle gym equipment and a smaller six seat swing (#4). This play area is on sand, and this larger play area is near the enormous grassy field. Between this play area and the field, sunk into the asphalt, are three enormous boulders, serving as benches or climbing objects for the children (#4).

Sampling and Types of Observations:

The team visited each school at least twice. Data was collected by visiting the three schools either in the morning (at approximately 8:15 am) or during "lunchtime" (ranging from approximately 11:00 am to 1:00 pm). At Paine, the children were allowed to play on the playground for approximately 30 minutes prior to the start of the school day. At each school, the children were allowed outside for a regulated amount of time during their lunchtime period. Due to the limited number of observations and the

continual entry and exit of many different classes, it was difficult to ascertain exactly how long each group of children was allowed to play. A best guess would follow the statement of a paraprofessional who said that each class received 30 minutes of recess. We began our research with open-ended observations at each of the schools. Our open-ended observations were meant to give us a “feel” for our new surroundings. Our general question for the open-ended observation was: “What is ‘going on’ or ‘happening’ on the playground?” During that time, each investigator tried to capture the essence of the activity occurring on the Learning Landscapes playground. Our data included information about the schools and their administrators, how the playground equipment is used by the children, and how the children interacted with each other and with the adults on the playground.

We progressed to guided observations where the controlling question was: “Who are the actors and what are the actors doing?” During that time, our data tracked how many males and females were (mostly) on the basketball courts and the swing-set area. We documented how the boys and girls interacted in these areas and how they moved between them. We concluded this segment with scheduled observations. The data from the scheduled observations can be seen in graphs attached as appendix B. Each of these observations lasted approximately one hour

The number of individuals on the playground at any given time varied. At times, there were as few as 5-10 children on the playground. At other points in time, there were as many as 50-60 children on the playground. The number of adults varied as well. At times, there were as few as 2-3 adults monitoring the children. At others, 6-12 adults might be found at different monitoring stations.

At times, we would position ourselves in locations that made us as inconspicuous as possible. At other times, we allowed ourselves to be approached by the children. During those times, the children would often ask us what we were doing and we would engage the children in a brief chat. At times, the children would approach us as figures of adult authority and seek affirmation or consolation.

After each observation, the team generally reconvened at a restaurant or coffee shop for review of condensed notes and discussion about each researcher's observations. This also created a space and time for typing and expanding fieldnotes. Further reflection over the next few days often provided additional fodder for each researcher's fieldnotes.

The validity of the fieldnotes became an issue because we were each only able to conduct approximately six observations. With our inexperience, much of the time was spent merely trying to understand what to do and how to do it instead of actually doing it. Moreover, with the many distractions of our other classes, we were not able to give the time and attention we would have liked.

Journal Entries:

Journaling served as a mechanism to explore thoughts, feelings, and concerns that did not necessarily fit within the formal context of a qualitative research project. Although our group identified one central question to explore, we each brought our own individual experiences and perceptions to each observation. Seeing "the same" event through different lenses often created different interpretations. Journaling allowed us to explore those experiences and interpretations individually while staying true to our agreed upon central question.

On average, we each wrote in our journal twice a week. Posts related to: the Learning Landscapes playground project, generally; interactions with adults and children while on the Learning Landscapes playgrounds, specifically; readings by Carspecken; Gonzales; Lareau; qualitative analysis procedures; aspects of ethnographic studies; procedural questions; and, sometimes, all of the above. Issues surrounding race, gender, class, coercion, relationships, and more were often discussed. This allowed each journal to be a personal reflection of unique experiences, past and present.

Interviews:

Our group intentionally selected each interviewee such that our project would include one interview with each category of subject. We had one interview with an elementary school-aged boy, one with an elementary school-aged girl, one with a parent of an elementary school-aged boy and girl, and one with an elementary school teacher. Our questions focused on gender distribution on the playground, access, structure of the playground, the activities that boys and girls participate in (individually and collectively) while on the playground, how adults functioned with children on the playground, and conflict on the playground. We all noticed that, at times, some answers were led by the interviewer. This would, at least, call into question the quality (validity) of the interview.

Methods of Data Analysis

The primary method of data analysis employed in this research project was the reconstructive analysis of expanded field notes. The group made twenty one observations. These included nine open-ended observations, six focused observations, and six structured observations. The analysis of the structured observation will be

discussed below. The open-ended and focused observations were recorded in condensed notes and expanded shortly after the observations into expanded field notes. These field notes were analyzed using the process of reconstructive analysis.

Reconstructive analysis is a methodology for analyzing meaning based on a conceptual framework developed by Phil Carspecken in his work in critical ethnography.

The reconstructive analysis consists of the following steps:

1. Reading through the expanded field notes, making notes of possible meanings.
2. Developing a coding taxonomy to categorize the types of social interactions observed. This coding system consists of codes (e.g.: social interactions involving boys and girls, social interactions involving boys only) and sub codes (talking, swinging, unorganized basketball) that cover all the interactional data.
3. Identifying meaning fields. Meaning fields are possible meanings of social interactions. These meanings take into account the perspectives of each of the participants and may be rooted in various conceptual frameworks. Meaning fields are debriefed by colleagues on the research project. This process serves as both a check for agreement with the interpretation and an invitation to alternate interpretations.
4. Once the meaning fields are established, the researcher moves to a higher level of inference with pragmatic horizon analysis. In this process, higher levels of meaning will be inferred by consideration of the contextual factors, or backgrounding, that give meaning to the meaning fields. The pragmatic horizon analysis occurs in two dimensions, the paradigmatic, or socially meaningful axis, and the temporal, or longitudinal, axis. Both dimensions are essential in developing meanings that are meaningful both in the immediate social context as well as in the context of the sequencing of events in time. Additionally, the team conducted structured observations in which gender frequency counts were made at recess over a forty-five minute time period. The data were graphed with gender counts versus frequency and are in Appendix B. The goal of the structured observations was to investigate the possible presence of gendered spaces on the Learning Landscapes playground. The key data used in the findings from the structured observations were the frequency of boys and girls on the basketball court and the swings.

Results/Findings

Gendered Spaces:

Using Barrie Thorne's concepts of borderwork and crossing, we attempt to explain the mechanisms through which boys and girls negotiate gender boundaries on the playground. To set the stage for explaining these mechanisms, we begin with the findings from the structured observations. In order to determine the extent to which certain playground spaces were either male or female dominated or neither, the research team conducted structured observations to gather data on gender frequencies in the swing area and the basketball courts. These choices were made in the interest of narrowing down our ethnography to two, more easily observable playgrounds spaces. The data were graphed to visually represent the gender frequencies over the observation period and are in Appendix B. The data show that the basketball courts are male dominated and the swings show a more evenly mixed gender distribution. These data suggest that boys may have greater access to the various spaces on the playground while girls find it more difficult to move freely onto some spaces. Thus, the opportunities to perform borderwork and crossings may, in fact, be dependent on the degree to which the spaces have been constructed by students as more open or closed to each gender.

Borderwork:

Borderwork is behavior that reinforces the boundaries between boys and girls as they interact (Thorne, 1993). The activation of these gender boundaries serves to reinforce the dichotomous notion of gender and increase a sense of difference among

males and females. Through our observations, we found instances of borderwork among the children on the playground that support Thorne's research.

Two boys and two girls are running around one of the playground structures. One of the boys makes a face and waves his hands at one of the girls. The girl chases the boy away.

Here, we see a clear example of borderwork as the boys and girls are playing with each other but engaging in an activity, chasing, which reinforces the boundary between male and female. As Thorne notes, the fact that the boys provoked the girls prior to chasing is also characteristic of borderwork.

The next excerpt provides evidence for borderwork that is based on contests between boys and girls. While Thorne primarily refers to contests as the instances when, "Girls and boys are sometimes pitted against each other in classroom competitions and playground games," we also see arguments between male and females during play as adding to a contested atmosphere.

One tall African-American girl joins the boys playing with tennis balls on the wall. She takes the ball and throws it very hard onto the wall. The smaller boys watch her and the ball flies far away past me. She and two African-American boys chase it. She gets to it first and the boys argue with her for it. She says that she does not have the ball.

While the girl in this example may have been, in fact, attempting to cross into the boys' activities, the argument that ensued served to reinforce the boundaries between her and the boys.

The next example is taken from one of our researcher's interview with a fourth grade boy who describes the nature of the disagreements on the playground.

Researcher: Whenever there are disagreements, do you think they are normally between boys--- boys and boys disagreeing, or boys and girls disagreeing?

Boy: Probably when we're on football or stress ball it's probably boys, but when the girls come and play football and they're not playing right it sort of turns into fighting between the boys and the girls.

With the boy's emphasis on the girls "not playing right" which consequentially turns into a fight between boys and girls, we have another instance of borderwork in the form of a contest between the two groups. Gender, as a marker of identity, "is a convenient basis for sorting out two teams" and, in this case, even results in antagonism between the boys and girls. The boundaries between boys and girls on the football field are reinforced when arguments about rules occur, for the attempt to play together has not only been disrupted but it has also further entrenched each side into their respective gender roles.

We recognize that these instances may have occurred for reasons other than boys and girls performing their gender in opposition to one another. However, given Thorne's research and Dutro's claim that "A large part of what it means to be a boy is to be other than a girl" (Dutro, 2003, p. #?) we contend that the boys' behaviors may, at least in part, be performed in opposition to the girls' behavior and vice versa.

Gender Crossings:

Though gender is constructed through the establishment of boundaries in boy-specific and girl-specific interactions on the playground, these boundaries can be fluid and permeable. *Crossing* is the process through which a girl or boy may seek access to groups and activities of the other gender (Thorne, 1993). It is distinguished from "playing at" the activities of the opposite sex in that the individual who crosses does not merely play in the same space and maintain distance and certainly does not participate in borderwork through invasions or disruptions (Thorne, 1993, p. 121).

Another girl (“girl wearing coat”) enters the basketball court. She is shooting baskets by herself, using a different basket than the one occupied by the Latino boy. Two more girls join her. A third ball makes its way onto the court and the first African-American boy (the one that had been playing with the African-American girl) starts playing with that ball. There are now a total of 3 boys and 7 girls occupying the basketball court. The girls begin taking shots at the basket from an imaginary free-throw line. A boy stands under the basket grabbing the ball after each shot and passing it back to one of the girls. Girl in coat and the Latino boy (that had originally been playing with the African-American boy and girl) are playing a very informal version of one-on-one. They laugh as each tries to take the ball from the other. Yet another ball appears. The Latino boy leaves the game of one-on-one to retrieve the free ball.

In this particular instance, girls are engaging in what is typically “male” behavior in order to maintain access to the basketball court. Our data, particularly the structured observations in Appendix B, establishes the basketball courts as a male-dominated area. In this case, several girls have crossed, apparently with the boys’ acceptance, into this male-dominated space and activity. Neither the girl nor the boys engage in behavior that reinforces the oppositional nature of being masculine or feminine. Instead, the girls have successfully crossed onto the typically boy-dominated basketball court and are playing with the boys. This instance shows that gender boundaries on the playground may be, at times, fluid and permeable.

Seven boys and one girl occupy the full basketball court. They are deciding on what to play, the rules, the teams etc. They seem to be arguing about these parameters but two teams emerge suddenly. One of the boys starts the tip-off but the game does not begin. There is some disagreement about the teams and how to start the game. Another boy starts the tip-off and the game begins.

One boy passes to the lone girl, she shoots and misses. The eight kids play a full-court game, passing to each other dribbling and then shooting. The girl is included in this game just as the other boys are. She is passed the ball; she shoots and misses. The game proceeds, back and forth.

This is an example of crossing as the girl involved in the interaction successfully crossed over to a male dominated space. She is fully involved in the game and, though she does not make any baskets, the boys do not confront her about these misses and continue to include her as an active player. Indeed, the basketball court was a space that had a number of instances of crossing by a limited number of girls. While there remained a majority of boys on these play spaces, some girls gained access to the court through a combination of what Thorne has identified as persistence and skill (Thorne, 1003, p. 130-131).

When the African-American boy gets the ball, he regularly hands the ball to the African-American girl who is smaller in height and weight than both of the boys. [The game looks like a game of 2 on 1 ... the African-American boy and girl vs. the Latino boy.] These three continue to go up and down the court at a high energy level even though no baskets are scored for many minutes. Then, the girl bounce passes the ball to the African-American boy who scores a basket.

Again, the girl is a full participant in this male-dominated activity. She is welcomed with no visible resistance by one of the boys and participates fully in the activity. As in the two previous examples of crossing, the girls' behavior on the court challenges that which may reinforce traditional gender arrangements. Thorne suggests that this is a process of identification for the girls that "may challenge familiar stereotypes and even the boundaries themselves" (Thorne, 1993, p. 133).

Interestingly, we did not find any notable instances of boys who successfully crossed. While this may be a result of our limited study, Thorne identifies crossing as more difficult for boys as they age and notes the "high status" that they must have within their school in order to successfully cross (Thorne, 1993, p. 130). "Unquestioned

masculinity” also plays a role in allowing boys to cross over into what are typically girl-dominated activities such as jump roping and dancing on the playground (Thorne, 1993, p. 123).

In regards to this variable social context, Thorne makes an important distinction in stating that, “The process of crossing is complex and often contradictory, affected by matters of definition, activity, and the extent to which an individual has developed a regular place in social networks of the gender”(Thorne 1993, p.121). We recognize this statement to be important when making claims about crossing within our study. Without further research it is difficult to establish the social context that crossing may require in these three instances on the basketball court. It may certainly be the case that the girls who were able to “cross” and play ball with the boys have significant social capital that is result of their skill and allows them to persist in crossing onto the basketball court. It may also be the case that we did not observe any successful boys crossers because they did not have the social resources to cross and were in fear of the stigma that accompanied participating in “girly” activities.

One member of our research team completed the following reconstruction of the structured observations. It serves to highlight one way in which the swing set could be a place in which crossing occurred, according to Thorne’s definition, but also a way in which crossing is not applicable due to the context in the play that is occurring.

Our structured study, for instance, revealed that both boys and girls used the swing sets at 3 different schools in similar proportional representations, with boys and girls alternatively swinging more than each other. It may be that both boys and girls view the swings as being congruent with their genders. That is to say, both male and females may have liked things about the swings that were consistent with their traditional gendered self-images. The swings allowed swing throwing, swing hanging, jumping-off swings, pushing, talking with swingers, or just swinging. If the children felt the swing activity were gender-congruent, neither the boys nor the girls were

‘crossing-over’ in using the swings. However, if they were drawn to use the swings in a manner not congruent with their customary gender roles, they may have been crossing over. It appears that boys and girls alike performed both male-oriented and female-oriented behaviors: boys were just plain swinging while girls were swinging really high, for instance. Therefore, our results show that some crossing-over in the swings likely occurred. This is an instance in which the context may have been a factor in gender crossing.

The swing set is a place where it is difficult to establish the nature of the crossing that may occur. Again, the context of the play is important as the perceptions of the kids are critical in determining if they are, in fact, participating in activities that are previously established as “gendered”.

Indeed, further observations and interviews are needed to explore the complexity of crossing on the Learning Landscapes playground.

Conclusion:

Using Butler's conception of gender as a performance rather than a preexisting marker of identity, we conclude that gender is, indeed, performed on the playground. Both the boys and girls "do" their gender through a variety of activities that both work to reinforce gender dichotomies and challenge them. Indeed, our data works to disrupt any essentialized notion of gender as we have shown that both boys and girls gain access to the spaces and participate in the activities of the opposite gender. It is in these instances where children are able to break down the gender barriers and challenge the hegemony that these barriers support. Yet, we also found instances of borderwork in which boys and girls interacted with each other in the same space but maintained these barriers. This only works to support the notion that gender is continuous and highly performative. Children can, given the social context, choose what acts of gender they want to exhibit during play. This prescribes a level of agency to these children as we work to not only challenge a binary notion of gender but to "help bring children in from the margins and into the center of sociological and feminist thought" (Thorne 1993; 4).

Appendix A

References:

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