
From Playing to Play Advocacy: An Interview with Olga S. Jarrett

Olga S. Jarrett is Professor Emerita in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Georgia State University where she taught courses in child development, teaching methods for urban teachers, and a seminar on play. Her research has focused on science inquiry and the role of play in developing an interest in science, on service learning, and on recess behavior and the effects of recess on classroom behavior. She is currently working on a book about play and social justice. Past president of The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) and the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA/USA), Jarrett has received the Brian Sutton-Smith Lifetime Achievement Award for Play Scholarship and Leadership (TASP), the MLK Faculty Torch of Peace Award (Georgia State University), the Patricia Monighan Nourot Award for Building the Foundation of Play Scholarship (the National Association for Education of Young Children's Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum), the Doctor of Play Award (IPA/USA), and the Joe L. Frost Award for Distinguished Research (U.S. Play Coalition). And she has lobbied for legislation in Georgia to mandate recess. In this interview, Jarrett links her childhood play experiences with her research and activism. **Key words:** play and science; play and social justice; recess; recess legislation.

American Journal of Play: Dr. Jarrett, you have observed and studied play in schools over your long career. From your perspective, what is the current state of children's play in schools?

Olga Jarrett: I think the current situation is sad. It is stultifying, especially in schools in high-poverty neighborhoods. There is very little fun at all. These schools are under pressure to increase test scores, and they spend too much time with "skill and drill" test prep activities. In some of these schools, the teachers' salaries depend on the students' test scores, pushing some teachers to teach to the test and give lots of homework in hopes that test scores will rise. Is that child labor? My research shows that children in high-poverty schools have been less likely to have recess than children in

more wealthy schools. And they are less likely to have a fun curriculum and creative playground equipment. Also, many children, such as those with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or children struggling with challenging situations at home, are deprived of recess as punishment. These are children who particularly need to be active, to learn to resolve conflicts, and to decide what is fair—lessons often learned during recess.

AJP: Do you remember your own childhood play? Did you have opportunities to play in school?

Jarrett: I grew up in downtown Easton, Pennsylvania, where the yards were small and the slate sidewalks buckled. Although we were not poor, there was a lot of poverty in our neighborhood. I played a lot as a child. In addition to some active outdoor play, I played with dollhouses, shopped in a play store, put on puppet shows, played school (made more convincing by a real slate blackboard), tinkered with stuff around the house, made tunnels and bridges with sand, and turned my desk into a rock and fossil museum. My brother co-opted me to be a radio announcer for his station that could broadcast to the immediate neighborhood. Less positively, I remember roller-skating on the rough sidewalk and playing badminton and baseball in our tiny yard with the birdie and ball often flying over the fence.

We played games as a family, checkers, Chinese checkers, Monopoly, and a card game called Goldfinch that taught me bird families. As a teenager, I designed my own magic tricks and put on magic shows. Many of my current interests, knowledge, and concerns developed during my childhood play.

My public elementary school was pleasant, but I don't remember much academic-related play. However, I particularly enjoyed art and music each week. And I learned lots of square dances. We had two recess periods a day, and I had an hour to walk home for lunch. So I had a much better chance to move than our three sons did in elementary school. My fondest memory of recess involves making up and rehearsing a play with some friends. When we were ready, we talked our teacher into allowing us to perform it in class. Not exactly a typical recess activity.

In elementary school, I became very aware of the importance of diversity. Nearly half my classmates were African Americans, and there were many immigrant children, especially from the Middle East. I could invite anyone I wished to come to my house to play. I think it is very important for children to play with a diverse group of friends.

Some predominantly white schools in my county have token numbers of black students. But many more schools are entirely black. One of my former students teaches at an all-black school within a mile or so of Zoo Atlanta. She took her students on a trip to the zoo and gave them cameras to take photos of the animals. Their first reaction was, “Look at all the white people!” And, they didn’t take photos of the animals. They took photos of white people, people perhaps rarer than zoo animals to them. I am concerned about the future of this country when children don’t get to know one another across racial lines.

AJP: As a university student, you initially studied history and political science. How did you come to early-childhood education?

Jarrett: That’s a long story. As an undergraduate at Penn State, I had thoughts of majoring in chemistry, a subject I loved. But I got inspired by a history professor and decided to major in history, going on for a masters in political science. I wanted to change the world and figured I would do it through politics, or at least teaching university students about history and political science. In 1963, about half way through my masters program, I joined the civil rights movement and traveled around the South for a year, working with the student YWCA, organizing voter registration campaigns, recruiting for interracial conferences, and participating in a sit-in.

I didn’t become interested in early-childhood education until I had my own children. Our first two sons were very young when we lived in Barbados and Belize for six years while my husband was working for World Health Organization. I start working as a volunteer work in a child care center and realized that the children there did not play. They were kept too long in their cribs, and they didn’t have toys or playful activities. I worried that they were missing out on the fun and learning what happens through play. At first, I brought them toys from home. This led to a toy-making co-op and teacher training about play in Barbados and, later, to teacher training and directing a day care center in Belize.

AJP: You mentioned that you worked in the civil rights movement. What did you learn from that experience? Has it informed your work as a play scholar and early-childhood educator?

Jarrett: I learned many things from my year with the civil rights movement. It opened my eyes to how much discrimination existed and still exists in the United States. It also made me realize that, as a white person, I need to listen to and learn from people of color. The things I learned helped inform my

teaching in our urban, initial certification master's degree program. As a play scholar, I am very concerned about the social justice aspects of play, for example, who gets more play and who has higher quality play equipment. Currently, I am working with colleagues on a proposal for a book about play and social justice.

AJP: How did you come to study play?

Jarrett: When we came back to the United States and moved to Atlanta, I decided to work toward a doctorate degree at Georgia State University with a major in early-childhood education and a particular focus on play. I was lucky to be able to take a psychology of play course, hear Dr. Joseph Frost give a lecture, and be introduced to The Association for the Study of Play (TASP), at that time named the Anthropological Association for the Study of Play.

Throughout my doctoral program, I ran a math-science discovery lab two days a week in my sons' elementary school, where the kids, a group of parents, and I set up a grocery store center, a post office center, a doctor's office center, a pet corner, and a classroom museum. Kids designed their own experiments and kept journals about what they did. Learning in my room was fun and playful, and kids loved coming. I remember a mother telling me her son had been out sick but insisted he go back to school because it was science day!

Eventually, I took more science courses and got hired to teach science education at Georgia State University (eventually teaching both science and social studies teaching methods). I taught my student teachers using many of the methods I wanted them to use with their pupils. Most of the activities and experiments I introduced were new to the teachers also and therefore taught them both content and methods. In one of my activities, I asked the students to draw how they would turn on a lightbulb if given a battery, bulb, and one short wire. Their drawings showed that most did not understand that electricity needed a circuit and that one end of the wire needed to touch one end of the battery while different parts of the bulb needed to touch the other end of the battery as well as the other end of the wire. I then gave each student a bag of interesting stuff including a battery, bulb, wire, nail, two magnets, paper clips, and a compass. Their instructions were to play around with the materials and record in their journals how these things affected one another. Through this activity, they learned about electrical circuits, the polarity of their magnets, what is attracted to magnets, and how to make an electromagnet with the addition of a long

wire. And they had fun working together and showing one another their discoveries. Another playful activity was to design a game to teach either science or social studies concepts and play it with their students. We then had a game night in class during which students brought their games for their classmates to play. My students and I both learned that kids test well on questions they have answered through games.

AJP: Is it fair to say that some of your work has been motivated by changing policy? And, if so, did this begin with your doctoral dissertation on racial identification and preference among black and white kindergarteners in integrated settings?

Jarrett: Definitely, my goal was to change policy. I wanted to work with teachers to help them understand the importance of play and to weave playfulness and playful activities into both preschool and elementary education. My desire to change policy did not begin with my dissertation. My dissertation was an outgrowth of my interest in play and my own childhood recognition of the value of having friends across racial lines. In my dissertation research, I used a free-choice, doll play, storytelling scenario to assess racial identification and preference among black and white kindergarteners in segregated and integrated settings. Drawing on my interest in dollhouses, I presented each child with a screen representing a house, dollhouse furniture, and small dolls painted to look like black and white families. Children chose a doll family to live in the house, told a story about the family, and, when I suggested that a child (of their own gender) could invite two children to help celebrate his or her birthday, I noted the race of the dolls chosen. I also asked them to identify the doll that looked most like them.

AJP: What did you discover?

Jarrett: White children tended to choose more dolls representing their own race to live in the dollhouse and to initiate their stories, but more white children in integrated settings chose black dolls of their own gender as friends. In segregated settings, many white children chose an other gender white doll rather than a same-gender black doll. In contrast to the doll studies that showed that black children rejected black dolls, the black children I studied for my dissertation appeared to choose color of dolls randomly in both segregated and integrated settings. Sadly, I think more children are in segregated school settings now than they were in 1980 when I did my study.

AJP: Did you think of your research as a form of social activism?

Jarrett: My dissertation topic concerned me as an activist who believes integra-

tion benefits society. Of course, I didn't know what I would find when I conducted my study. The focus of much of my professional research has been to answer questions regarding opportunity and fairness.

AJP: Why do children need recess today?

Jarrett: Brain research indicates that humans lose concentration if they sit too long and try to focus on a particular subject without breaks. Recess offers an important physical outlet that also renews the brain and allows it to be more efficient in learning. But in addition, recess offers an important time for learning social skills. In my research with first, third, and fifth graders at a high-poverty school, I found that children organized games they learned in gym class, made up their own games, decided who should be the leader and who should be "it," and resolved conflicts concerning what was fair or not. They were also quite active, chasing one another, engaging in rough-and-tumble play, and playing on the playground equipment. We saw only one fight while observing three grade levels twice a week over several months, probably because the children had learned social skills during recess. There is no other time of the day when children can better renew their brainpower, become physically fit, and learn important social skills.

AJP: What kinds of play should kids have access to at recess? Are some forms of play more beneficial in a recess setting? Are some not beneficial?

Jarrett: Unless children are harming one another or engaged in dangerous behavior, they should be able to choose what they do during recess. It is their break. Sometimes children want to talk with their friends. Or chase one another. Or organize games. Ideally, I think children should have a variety of playground equipment and what are called "loose parts" (balls, jump ropes, Hula Hoops) available so they have lots of choices. If children do not have a history of recess experiences, they sometimes need a teacher or play worker to teach them games; but once they learn the games, they should be able to organize them themselves. That is an important aspect of their learning. I think playground equipment should be sufficiently challenging that children want to play on it. In the name of safety, some playgrounds have become boring. Of course, playground equipment should not have unknown hazards—for example, ladders that collapse when children are climbing or chains that break when children are swinging. But if playground equipment is designed to be too safe, children don't want to play on it or they misuse the equipment to make it more risky. The playground supervisor needs to watch for bullying and social isolation. Some schools

train interested classmates to tend to isolated or bullied children and find ways to include them.

AJP: Does recess or a lack of recess have any effect on classroom behavior?

Jarrett: Definitely, yes. I am convinced that children behave better when they have had recess. I conducted research in two fourth-grade classes to study the effect of recess on classroom behavior. The school we studied did not ordinarily have recess. We were given permission to have the children go out for recess one day each week so we could compare their classroom behavior after recess with their behavior at the same time of day when they did not have recess. We found that the children were more on-task and less fidgety after recess than at the same time of day when they did not have recess. The four children diagnosed with ADHD were among the children who benefitted most from recess. After the study, the principal decided to let the children have recess.

AJP: What sorts of barriers have deprived some children of recess?

Jarrett: One barrier is being in the “wrong” school system, one that has abolished recess. In 1994 we moved to the Atlanta area where I took a faculty position at Georgia State University. Our youngest son came home from his first day of school complaining that they didn’t have recess. My reaction was: you’ve got to be kidding. I knew the school had a playground. I told him to give it time and they would probably have recess. But they didn’t. I later found out that our school system, as well as two others in the Atlanta area had abolished recess several years earlier. That turned me into a recess advocate. In 2003 and 2004 and again in 2018, a small group of us tried, unsuccessfully, to get a bill passed to mandate recess across the state.

My school system and the others in the Atlanta area now allow recess after being required by legislation in 2004 to make a decision on recess policy. But that does not mean that all the children in these systems get recess. Some principals discourage recess. Some teachers are worried about test scores and are afraid to “waste” time outside. Some punish children for various infractions by depriving them of recess. These infractions can include getting out of their seats without permission, not turning in homework, not finishing work assignments in time, or forgetting to bring a note from home.

Eventually, the teachers in my classes all taught in urban schools that officially allowed recess. Across four years, choosing a beautiful spring day when all children should have had recess, I surveyed these teachers on

whether they had recess that day. On the day of the survey, only about 50 to 70 percent of these classrooms actually had recess. And in half of these classes, some children were deprived of recess as punishment. I am convinced that we need legislation mandating access to recess for all children, and I plan again to advocate for a recess bill.

AJP: Are certain populations more at risk to be deprived of recess?

Jarrett: When I discovered that our school district did not have recess, I also discovered that three wealthier, majority white school districts with higher test scores had recess while ours and two other poorer, majority black districts didn't allow it. No one can convince me that white kids need recess more than black kids. Or that children with ADHD can pay attention all day without the opportunity to run and play. Not even if they are on Ritalin.

AJP: How does the United States compare to other countries on this issue?

Jarrett: Currently, all the countries I have visited or studied have recess. For example, England has a long lunch period that includes play as well as short breaks in the morning and afternoon. Turkey has fifteen-minute breaks every hour, even in high school. Ugandan students get a half hour in the morning, one hour at lunch, and one-and-a-half hours of activity time in the afternoon. I also have heard that Japanese children get ten- to twenty-minute breaks between fifty-five-minute lessons or five-minute breaks and a long lunch; Finnish children get fifteen minutes of recess every hour; and Taiwanese children have many breaks a day, each with five to six minutes to transition back to work. Article 31 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures children the right to play. This human rights treaty has been ratified by 196 member countries. Only the United States has not yet ratified it. I don't know whether signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child causes other countries to take recess more seriously. But I suspect that just about every other nation has more recess than the United States does.

AJP: What advice would you give to parents, teachers, and students concerned about sufficient access to play in schools?

Jarrett: Over the years, I have received many emails from parents who see my name as a recess advocate on the International Play Association (IPA/USA) website. Usually they contact IPAUSA because their child's class does not have recess, does not have enough recess, or the teacher uses recess deprivation as punishment. To try to get more recess, I recommend sharing research findings with the teacher, the principal, and eventually

with the school board if satisfaction can't be reached at the school level. I authored "A Research-Based Case for Recess" summarizing the research, which is available on the U.S. Play Coalition website (usplaycolation.org). Other good sources of research and strategies can be found through the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

I recommend being polite but firm when talking with school authorities. Share research with them that shows how children and teachers benefit from recess. Often decisions to mandate or forbid recess are made at the school or school district level. Many teachers in school systems that do not allow recess are also concerned. The CDC recommends at least twenty minutes of recess for all grade levels through high school, so there is a lot of work to be done. I think the best method for ensuring that all children get recess is to pass a bill at the state level that mandates daily recess, that is, unstructured activity time, preferably outdoors, which is not withheld as punishment. Where laws have been passed to mandate recess—most recently in Arizona, Florida, and New Jersey—it has been because of the determination of parents and civic organizations who have tried for years to get such legislation passed. As I mentioned earlier, a group of us in Georgia have advocated for legislation to mandate recess at least through elementary school. The bill we supported would have mandated thirty minutes of recess.

AJP: You have also studied playful learning in the science classroom. Has play been important for aspiring scientists?

Jarrett: I have studied the backgrounds of famous scientists and have surveyed science majors as well as geology professors. Childhood play with chemistry sets, making collections, inventing things, and play with LEGOS building blocks seem to be predictive of an interest in science. Unfortunately, many scientists did not have inspiring school experiences. It was their families and opportunities to have a lab at home that supported their interests. What about children whose families don't include Nobel Prize winners and who can't afford to provide their children with labs, tools, and chemicals? I am convinced that schools need to provide the kinds of playful experiences that develop interest in science, especially for children in poverty.

AJP: Are there benefits to integrating playfulness into science education?

Jarrett: Yes, definitely. Allowing children to tinker with materials, take things apart, experiment with toys, build things, and ask questions develops inter-

est in science in a way that textbooks with concepts and formulas to memorize and cookbook labs with right answers do not.

AJP: What does a playful lab look like?

Jarrett: Besides my math-science discovery lab, I worked with teachers of children in preschool through fifth grade, taught science in day care centers and at a Saturday School for the Gifted, and coordinated an after-school science club for children in third through fifth grades, so I will answer based on my experiences. In a playful lab, the children are engaged. They tinker with materials. They are excited about experimenting and showing each other what they are finding out. They might be working at learning stations that allow them to experience various aspects of a topic and share use of scarce equipment, such as microscopes. In a playful lab, there are opportunities for children to have input and answer their own questions. Such labs are not quiet. There is an excited hum both from teachers and children. I developed learning stations on several topics, including inventions (including inventing a game); electricity and magnetism; light and color; the geology of our state; the geology of Hawaii; sand, trees, oceans, water resources, rainforests; and science from toys. Much science can also be learned from cooking centers. In my classes, I have modeled the use of learning stations and the importance of allowing time for tinkering with ideas and materials. I have also used improv—improvisation acting techniques—for building classroom community.

AJP: One last question: How do you play today?

Jarrett: I have a three-year-old grandson who visits about every other weekend. My play with him is probably the most pure play I do as we visit museums, play on playgrounds, build with blocks, and play little action games like Peek-a-Boo and This Little Pig Went to Market.

The rest of my play might be considered interests or hobbies. I do Sudoku, enjoy traveling, and like to read, mostly nonfiction. I find it fascinating that so many of my current interests began during my own childhood play. I collect puppets and agreed to write a chapter on puppets for a book on developmentally appropriate toys. I am a rockhound (that is, a rock and mineral collector) and the coeditor of the *Georgia Mineral Society* newsletter. I am also a sand collector and have created and taught others to design sand-art projects. My dollhouse interests have morphed into making and displaying miniatures. I have taken three tinkering courses from the Exploratorium and have enjoyed sharing tinkering ideas at conferences

and at a nearby school. That led to a recent book chapter on tinkering. Occasionally I take on a new craft. My latest is trying to spin hair from the two Siberian huskies next door into yarn. I gather up the clumps of hair when the dogs get brushed outside. My grandson wants me to make him a hat, but given my difficulty with spinning I doubt whether he will get a hat any time soon. When I learn something, I find it fun to be able to teach it. He is not ready to learn to spin, but I have been teaching him to make Christmas decorations and cookies.

I just asked my husband to comment on how he thinks I play. He said I play by doing research and writing articles. I guess in one sense he is right. I enjoy and play around with what some people might consider work.