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Racing to the Top: Who's Accounting for the Children?

Celia Genishi & Anne Haas Dyson

The optimism following the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 enveloped intense hopes that we would soon see humane policies in place to support young children, their families, and their teachers. Alas, many liberal advocates are embittered as these hopes go unfulfilled: where there was No Child Left Behind legislation, there is now Race to the Top (cynically described by some as “Bush on steroids”), which defines accountability as meeting the reductionist benchmarks of standardized tests. To use a well-worn and tiresome phrase, one size is supposed to fit all—all children, all teachers. But is racing toward reductionist benchmarks a worthy goal for the education of the very young? Is it an apt metaphor for the professional endeavors of skilled teachers? Is it, in the end, what we as a society want for our children—that they make a beeline for slim academic pickings?

We argue against the Race to the Top metaphor with its goal of standardization and for shifting the spotlight from teachers straining to be accountable to the group we are to educate, children in early childhood settings. Indeed we urge a change in the cast on the classroom stage, along with a change in scripts. Let us explain.

In the areas of language and literacy, the curricular areas we know best, there is a stunning disconnect between the diversity of schoolchildren, especially in cities around the globe, and the regimentation and homogenization of classroom practices, from prekindergarten forward. We are struck by the growing number of prekindergartens where teachers use worksheets to teach early literacy and math, as they try to respond to parental and societal pressure to “educate.” We are depressed by the number of kindergarten classrooms that adhere to a schedule—posted for all to see—that features 90 minutes of “literacy” per day. These are often prolonged minutes of seat-work that push play times off the classroom stage entirely. We feel defeated by the “basics” of primary-grade children, which pull written language conventions, like letter names and sounds, from their intention-driven communicative use to sterile lists of hierarchically organized skills. We are, finally, despondent about the conditions of children and childhood in classrooms where every teacher shares the curricular stage with a monitor, perhaps an invisible expert in surveillance. This is someone who keeps time with a stopwatch and checks to see that mandated, sometimes scripted, language and/or literacy curricula are being enacted with an acceptable level of fidelity to a published script.

Yet we know that in a universe parallel to the one we have just described there are early childhood educators whose classroom stage is inhospitable to a monitor, resistant to the single-minded goal of producing young academics—children who read and “do math” before they enter first grade. These educators desire to hold themselves accountable to young children, placing the needs of children before

those of parents and/or policymakers. While these teachers acknowledge that parents deserve a role on the classroom stage (certainly in lieu of surveillance monitors), it is not a starring role.

Children in this parallel educational universe live a complex life because their teachers often offer situated choices: in this moment to play or not to play, and to play at what, with whom, and where; to communicate or not; to be interested in books and the conventions of print or not; to participate in a community of peers and their teachers or not. In short, there is space on this curricular stage for children to be, just for instance (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 10):

- Resistant to structured lessons
- Physically but not linguistically gifted
- Informed by experiential resources other than those deemed middle class or mainstream white
- Able to become bilingual or multilingual over time
- Boys that choose to wear skirts in the dress-up area, or girls who refuse to wear skirts ever
- More interested in gerbils than letters of the alphabet
- Mastering a “nonstandard” dialect of English by the age of 3
- Behaving more like an artist or expert player than a reader.

Children with these preferences or characteristics—children who can thrive in a classroom where the boundaries between school, home, and self are permeable—are endangered in narrowly focused classrooms where becoming academically skilled, through the medium of “standard” English, is the dominant goal.

In the choice-laden classroom of our parallel universe, teachers still want children to become readers, writers, and numerical problem solvers; but academic purposes are not at the top of a rigid schedule. Along with space for diverse children with diverse interests, teachers allow individuals’ own timelines. For example, in a study of a Head Start center with a play-based curriculum (Genishi & Dyson, 2009), we observed a classroom of four-year-olds populated by a number of children becoming bilingual in Spanish and English. In that setting Luisa, who has been known for over a year to be very quiet, declares herself to be ready to play:

(Luisa has found a button and brought it to the sand table.)

Luisa: Lookit, I found it.

Josué: Dame, dame. (Give me, give me.)

Luisa: I want to play.

Josué: You want to play? (sounding surprised) Someone stop [that is, let her have a turn]. Luisa wants to play...

Luisa: I play, I play! (said with animation and some adamance).

(Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 35)

Indeed Luisa became a player, not always as animated as she just was, but a player nonetheless in Head Start and beyond. Fast forwarding in this longitudinal study to the primary grades, Luisa was observed to become a successful student of reading and writing. Her play, though, was muted in favor of a mandated curriculum, which dominates many a U.S. classroom.

Luisa's experience of the decreasing time and space for imagination and play as she moved through the grades is one shared with many children in these times of curricular mandates driven by a time table of to-be-mastered skills. Indeed, in some primary classrooms, imaginative storytelling is explicitly prohibited in children's early composing (Dyson & Genishi, in press).

We believe that, in the complex worlds children inhabit, linguistic flexibility, individual agency, collaborative play with ideas, and imaginative rethinking itself will all be critical to our shared thriving on this precarious planet. We, therefore, call for an end to metaphors of races and pinnacles of success that are, in truth, way too narrow to support children's growth. Moreover, we argue that teachers are accountable not to some narrow "top" but to the rhythms and rhymes of their developing students. We imagine the classroom stage, not as a race, but as a dance hall, where teachers and children adapt to each other, even as they sometimes move to a rhythm all their own. The teacher responds, leads, and sometimes lets go to observe more carefully the rhythms of children in motion. Then teachers and children come together and, rather than racing to a top, spread their skilled, responsive movement across times and spaces, dancing their way into the future.

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