March 2009

Classroom Life in the Age of Accountability

Recommended Citation

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INTRODUCTION

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In the opening to her 2007 book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Shock Capitalism*, Naomi Klein renders a searing portrait of what she describes as the auctioning off of the New Orleans school system soon after Hurricane Katrina. Although most of the city's poor still lived in exile nineteen months after the storm, the public school system had been just about completely replaced by privately run charter schools. In a matter of a few months, New Orleans was transformed into what the *New York Times* described as "the nation's preeminent laboratory for the widespread use of charter schools," while the American Enterprise Institute enthused that "Katrina accomplished in a day … what Louisiana school reformers couldn't do after years of trying" (Klein, 2007, p. 6).

The ongoing educational experiment in New Orleans highlights some of the most salient issues facing U.S. educators today: the erosion of the public educational system, the systematic resegregation of public schooling, and the loss of teachers' professional authority to make decisions about the quality of life and learning in their classrooms (Orfield, 2004). Students living in rural and urban high poverty areas continue to attend schools in dire need of sustainable infrastructures and are subject to some of the most restrictive interventions. The narrowing of the curriculum to test preparation or performance objectives aligned with high stakes standards has impoverished the intellectual, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of life in classrooms. Students' interests, curiosity, and play, as well as teachers' passions and questions fall by the wayside as they work together to follow directives and meet production quotas. Meanwhile, parents who can afford the costs can opt for private schools that support a wide range of inquiry-based courses, critical conversations, arts programs, and opportunities for community involvement.

For this *Occasional Paper*, we invited teachers to respond to the ways in which the proliferation of standards and testing combined with their own loss of professional control is altering the landscape of American education. *Classroom*

Life in the Age of Accountability carries a special urgency as schooling becomes privatized and federal support continues to decline. Our goal is to raise questions about whether and how educators are balancing the demands of high stakes testing, scripted curricula, and a focus on performance outcomes with the emotional complexity of classroom life. Is it even possible in today's climate for teachers to sustain their commitment to nourishing the aesthetic and psychic lives of children?

More and more, it has seemed to us that various reforms promising greater professional autonomy and status as well as student success are not only disempowering teachers and impoverishing intellectual life in schools, but are serving as a portal for the *marketization* of teaching and education. Teachers are increasingly told that the measure of professionalism is not the development of their own expertise and responsiveness to the individual children in front of them. Rather, it is bought through their fidelity to uniform, commercial and heavily scripted curricula that promise (but often fail to deliver) greater student success. For many of the teachers represented in these essays, the concerns raised about the logic of a new teacher "professionalism" are brought to life by the wry and impassioned observations of the British educational visionary Jimmy Britton. He writes that it is the space for play, conversation, private and shared passions, and simply mucking about with life that enables human passion for living. The critical importance of these things is precisely what is "lost sight of in the rush and greed of a consumer-oriented world, often sacrificed when resources of time and money are insufficient, and when the purposes of education are read off in terms of a market economy" (Britton, 1970, p. 316).

An approach to education that is driven by the desire to replace the idiosyncrasy of the daily life of classrooms with "the development of cognitive and practice skills, of problem-solving and data handling; of number work and environmental studies; scientific, historical or geographical" reflects what Britton names as the misguided and impossible desire "to produce men and women with the efficiency of machines. It must fail … because a man is a poor machine" (1970, pp. 152–153).

That teachers and students are indeed poor machines – and determinedly so – is reflected in the essays by the teachers whose research and reflections we present in this collection. In "Squeezed, Stretched, and Stuck: Teachers Defending Play-based Learning in No-nonsense Times," Karen Wohlwend eloquently describes how playful and inquiry–based engagements in kindergarten and first-

grade classrooms eventually gave way to the demands of district-mandated teacher evaluation plans that called for targeted reading strategies, seat work, and instruction using basal reading materials. Wohlwend's description of the resulting impingement on children's emotional lives and the professional authority of teachers in these midwestern classrooms resonates across zip codes as teachers work to get through the day "juggling the paperwork generated by the need to document our compliance, and generating a range of compromise strategies to find more time for play-based learning." What emerges in this essay are a set of core concerns that challenge us to think differently about what cannot or refuses to be contained by rubrics and performance objectives.

"Invisible Ink: A Psychoanalytic Study of School Learning" by Lisa Farley and "Mouthy Students" and the Teacher's Apple: Questions of Orality and Race in the Urban Public School" by Alyssa Niccolini speak to how we might strategically put apparent excesses—excessive talking and the excessive rush of memories—to work in the name of creating a pedagogy that challenges the logic of control and the surveillance of learning. Writing about her high school students and their penchant for "mouthing off" and "contested desires," Niccolini observes that "schools are spaces marked by desire, and I have become a guardian of the mouth." While the mandates established in the name of No Child Left Behind claim to "nourish urban minority youth, and low income students in particular," they do so through discourses that medicalize and pathologize. Minority students are pushed to reach numerical benchmarks, held accountable for their talk, and master what is mistakenly understood to be standard English (Stubbs, 2003).

The pedagogical event, like any artistic performance, is a collaboration that calls for inquiry as all participants work toward animating the material. Whether a student is learning to read, speak a new language, or use an algorithm, what works to bring the subject alive is not always visible or apparent—and certainly, it is often not planned, as Farley makes evident. Teaching, she suggests, is a form of memory that calls forth the adult in the child and the child in the adult, and each intrudes in unsuspecting ways on the work of education and induces us to symbolize what our conscious memories cannot fully contain or comprehend. What would it mean for educators to respect that which cannot be possessed or understood? What might it mean to direct our attention to creating a curriculum that works according to a system of production and reproduction that cannot be replicated or easily measured, but that moves us emotionally and civically and directs us out into the communities that call for our substantive participation and commitment?

Peter Nelson locates this form of curriculum in the woods, twelve years ago, before accountability and testing measures had eradicated "subjects associated with playfulness: art, music, and physical education." In his defense of playfulness, Nelson argues that the loss of play has unwittingly provoked a loss of critical thinking and civic engagement. Like Nelson, Gillian McNamee argues that play is in fact central to the development of a literacy that is both personal and socially responsive. She paints a picture of young children at work and play that is simultaneously utterly familiar to those of us who have been in education for a long time and utterly remarkable in that it has all but disappeared in contemporary classrooms.

McNamee's championing of play and imagination and Nelson's call for "playful world traveling" are in stark contrast to the disciplining ethos that emerges in Elizabeth Park's essay, "English Language Learners and High Stakes Testing." As her students prepare to take their tests to exhibit English proficiency, the atmosphere, writes Park, "becomes military at best, prison-like at worst. Regulations are distributed. Teachers are warned that state examiners may appear unannounced to look for infractions of the myriad rules…" Scare tactics are used to try to assure that the testing activity remains uncontaminated by human desire, fear, or simple boredom.

Each of our contributors offers us generous narratives that contain what matters most to them. In their portrayals, we too have found a repertoire of pedagogical methods and insights that illuminate what it means to be engaged—at times enraged—public intellectuals.

While we began our comments with the charter school experiments in New Orleans, we end with a different image, one of hope and integrity. Inspired by the "people-managed tsunami rehabilitation" in Thailand, a small delegation of hurricane survivors from New Orleans initiated waves of direct action in New Orleans and are working toward taking back their city and the public school system they so highly value. Rather than relying on government support, members of these delegations are restoring their lives and taking part in communal recovery. "Reopening our school," announced the assistant principal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, "says this is a very special community, tied together by more than location but by spirituality, by bloodlines and by a desire to come home" (Klein, 2007). These words and the project of "people-managed rehabilitation" taken up by so many courageous, imaginative citizens, offer, we believe, one of the finest examples of how educators

might begin to consider reclaiming their own professional authority. We hope that *Classroom Life in The Age of Accountability* contributes to reviving our public educational system in ways that inspire the practice of a democracy that refuses to be tempered by the insidious grasping after efficiency, compliance, and uniformity that is the false promise of the age of accountability.

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SQUEEZED, STRETCHED, AND STUCK:
TEACHERS DEFENDING PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN NO-NONSENSE TIMES

karen e. wohlwend

Teaching, Playing, and Working in Early Childhood Classrooms

> *…if experience with the federal Reading First initiative is prognostic [for Early Reading First], the administration may promote rigidly paced, curriculum-driven, scripted instruction that is not developmentally appropriate. …Effective teaching cannot be delivered through a one-size-fits-all or scripted instructional program. Good teachers know well what each child knows and understands, and they use that knowledge to plan appropriate and varied learning opportunities that are embedded in contexts and activities that make sense to young children. (Stipek, 2005, para 14)*

Research and media reports (Adler, 2008; Hemphill, 2006; Henig, 2008) provide fresh evidence that conflicts over the relationship among play, work, and learning remain unresolved in the United States. In schools, legislation such as No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) recognizes discrete reading, math, and science skills, as measured by standardized tests, and establishes a particular knowledge and skills set as the official work of schoolchildren. Classroom teachers face unrelenting demands to produce "annual yearly progress" in testing scores under NCLB policies that continually challenge them to do more—or else. The result is an increasingly standardized prepackaged academic curriculum

In this educational climate, early childhood teachers find themselves caught between "a rock and a hard place" (Goldstein, 1997, 2007), bound by dual obligations. Teachers are expected to be good colleagues and team players who contribute their fair share to achievement goals. Haunted by the specter of school failure and state takeover pressures, teachers accept pushed-down curricular goals so that kindergarten becomes pre-first, first grade becomes second, and so on up the grades. However, as Stipek (2005) notes, we are also expected to be good teachers who nurture children, respond to individual developmental needs, and

heed warnings about the dangers of hurrying children into formal schooling (Elkind, 1981). When pressured to raise achievement scores, teachers of young children protest that play is necessary and appropriate for their students.

Caught between two compelling educational demands, teachers struggle to reconcile what they believe children need and what their administrators expect, eking out time for play or recess in a school day crammed with increased workloads and skills practice (Ohanian, 2002). We've set ourselves an impossible task, trying as individuals to satisfy contradictory expectations established by opposing global discourses of good teaching: nurturing play versus compliant work.

Discourses of Good Teaching

Early childhood professional organizations circulate a discourse of nurture through teacher education literature that promotes an active, play-based, child-centered curriculum (Paley, 2004), based on the rationale that Sutton-Smith (1997) identified as a wide-spread play ethos (play is necessary for learning; all effects of play are unquestionably positive for children). Early childhood teachers are expected to nurture the whole child—intellectually, emotionally, physically, socially—by providing plentiful opportunities to play in a stimulating environment that prompts children to engage in exploration. In contrast, federal and state governments circulate a discourse of accountability that uses standards and annual testing to monitor teachers and to increase student workloads in order to raise academic achievement scores (Albright & Luke, 2008). Accountability discourse depicts schooling as a prerequisite for economic livelihood and calls for increased effort and rigor in school, activating a work ethos (work is necessary for learning; play is off-task behavior that reduces academic achievement). Teachers are positioned as trainers who efficiently teach literacy skills and knowledge delivered through systematic direct instruction and sufficient practice of a comprehensive predetermined sequence of lessons. This approach exemplifies developmentally "inappropriate practice" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 72), a term used to critique lessons that push young children prematurely into the paper-and-pencil seatwork of formal schooling.

In this paper, I position myself with my former colleagues in primary teaching. Using critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999), I examined our discussions around professional demands to provide work and play, to push children but also protect them from the pressures of school, to both nudge and nurture them. I looked closely at the double bind of conflicting expectations that diverts our

attention from the source of the problem: competing educational discourses that mask institutional conflicts and offload responsibility for their resolution to teachers. Instead of questioning how pitting accountability versus nurture discourses empowers institutions in this educational tug-of-war, we often fixate on the work required of us: individual teachers stretched thin at the middle, trying to reconcile both sides, and blaming ourselves when we can't

Teachers and Friends

The research described here is part of a larger study of children's literacy play in primary classrooms in three elementary schools in the Midwestern United States. In this paper, I focus on a suburban school in a middle class neighborhood. Eighty-five percent of fourth- and eighth-grade children there tested as proficient by NCLB standards (U.S.Department of Education, 2002), which initially insulated this school from restrictive mandates and enabled the relative autonomy that teachers experienced in developing and implementing curriculum. During previous years here as a kindergarten and first-grade teacher, my teaching colleagues and I met weekly as a team to collaborate on thematic units, share daily lesson plans, and discuss classroom issues. When I began my doctoral studies, I became interested in documenting the kinds of play that teachers encouraged and in identifying the issues and barriers to play-based curriculum.

In my new role as teacher-turned-researcher, I visited six of my friends' kindergarten and first-grade classrooms to videotape instances of children reading or writing while playing (Wohlwend, 2007). For example, during play times, children wrote texts for pretend play (e.g., prescriptions for ailing dolls, grocery lists) and for their own social purposes (e.g., birthday cards, drawings as presents, or letters to friends). I also met with the teachers to discuss selected video excerpts and analyze children's play and its potential for literacy learning. These sessions resembled our previous peer-coaching professional development projects, where we shared videotaped clips of a reading group or writing activity and collectively sorted out our interpretations of classroom interactions in terms of discovery-based learning or literacy development. The next two sections provide a glimpse into two teachers' classrooms.

Rita's Kindergarten Classroom

Rita worked to make each child feel comfortable in school.[1] She spent time

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[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper for all the teachers.

getting to know every student and helping children form friendships. During a daily literacy block, Rita worked with flexible guided reading groups of three to five children, while the rest of the class worked in small groups at assigned activity stations with a parent volunteer. Each child worked with tracked literacy skills software for a district-mandated 15 minutes per day. The literacy block was followed by 45 minutes at play centers: housekeeping, blocks, puzzles, art, dollhouse. Rita did not interact with children at play, using this time to work with individuals on letter recognition assessments or skills practice.

Kara's First Grade Classroom

Kara focused on establishing a classroom community and a smoothly running schedule. A typical morning in first grade began with whole group activities such as sharing time, shared reading, or interactive writing, followed by independent writing at tables, and then play-center time. For most of the morning, Kara worked with guided reading groups, while the rest of the class read or wrote independently or participated at adult-directed learning stations with small-group activities. Once a week, Kara organized the literacy block as a writers' workshop, and children wrote collaboratively. Kara moved around the room during play periods, talking with children, mediating activities as a guide, and playing along as a participant. Centers typically included: discovery (inquiry materials, science tools), art, school (big books, story easel, class library), writing, blocks, math, pretend (house corner, dress-up clothes), puppet theater, and construction (small manipulative blocks).

Accountability Pressures

In September, classroom activities in all six rooms meshed with teachers' voiced belief in play as a viable path for furthering literacy development: each teacher provided time for children to play and infused play areas with literacy materials. However, as the school year progressed, pressure to raise reading skills scores on district assessments increased and began to affect the teachers' curricular decisions. In our sessions, we discussed the steady erosion of play-centric curriculum, thinking about how we might consolidate required basal components and mandated computer reading programs to preserve at least some time for play centers. As colleagues, we shared a history of collaborative curriculum design, brainstorming in response to changing administrative programs, and I'm-here-for-you problem-solving.

When a district-mandated teacher evaluation plan required school-wide documentation of a year-long series of weekly lessons on particular targeted reading strategies (e.g., summarizing), the emphasis on isolated skills teaching positioned play as separate from learning and valued less than seatwork, which could be collected and quantified as evidence of required teaching. Frustrated, we attempted to justify time for play, but had little success in changing an administrative view of the school day as a zero-sum game in which play periods meant lost time for academic learning. By the end of the school year, all the teachers had scaled back play periods to make time for direct instruction using basal reading materials and for daily computer rotation through individually-tracked literacy software (Wohlwend, 2008).

Defending Play

Most of the teachers agreed that children should set and pursue their own agendas with minimal adult interference. There were a number of small differences among their classroom practices; for example, Rita drew a sharp distinction between play and work activities in her classroom and rarely talked with children at play, preserving play time as a respite from teacher instruction.

> Rita: …they're playing. They're learning a lot and they're doing a lot and they're integrating a lot of new things but they're still playing—that's how they work, which is how they learn.

In contrast, Kara circulated throughout play periods, participating in play and posing questions to stretch children's thinking.

The teachers saw play activities as inherently academic and justified including them by drawing upon a play ethos as their rationale. For example, Kara saw academic value in a video clip of big-book reading in which a boy, pretending to be the teacher, read a familiar big book to two children:

> Kara: I saw [the big book reading] as both [work and play] because the little guy was playing the role of the teacher and you know with the pointer and that, you know how they model [sic] what the teacher does. But at the same time, he was working because he was telling a picture walk and saying, "I notice something here" so I thought that was kind of cute. I'm sure his teacher had said, "Now what do you notice on this page?" so he's just kind of playing and reenacting that.

In our discussions, teachers stressed the need to convince others of the value of play-based learning and floated several possible arguments:

Courtney: … I would just tell parents that during play, they're learning way more than what you can ever imagine and during our regular, you know, if you think of the academic piece if math could be a game, and they were playing, they're going to learn more than if you say you need to do this paper, (taps table) you know

Kara: I wonder if they do think math games are play or work?

Rita: Well and I think [who] could argue with learning should be fun?…Nobody would argue…well, (Laughs), you might have a few. But most people would say, you know, learning can be fun. Well, what's more fun than a playful situation?

Discourses in Conflict

Discourses about teaching are layered in past and present social spaces that extend beyond the classroom, situated in a network of surrounding institutions (Leander, 2002) including schools, families, school districts, communities, state and federal governmental agencies, and teacher education programs in universities. Each circulates a particular vision of learning, with goals and identities that shape how teachers interpret children as learners and ultimately, how they act to enable or limit children's learning experiences (Wohlwend, in press).

A quick comparison of the components that support each discourse shows that the underlying systems are disparately empowered. Federal legislation and state regulations trump local school board policies that in turn trump teachers and their professional organizations. Accountability discourse is supported through yearly testing tied to federal funding that overrides teachers' classroom decision-making power. Standardization measures circulate narrow skill-based definitions of literacy and a constricted view of development that is peppered with normalizing benchmarks (Goodman, Shannon, Goodman, & Rappoport, 2004; Ohanian, 2002). The emphasis on isolated skills practice conflicts with the practices advocated by university teacher education programs that instill instructional expectations for playful exploration and learner-centered curriculum. The clash between discourses produces an untenable situation, where teachers must either deny their

professional judgment to comply with accountability expectations, or convince administrators that play has academic benefits.

Holding Teachers Accountable for Institutional Conflict

This need to defend play produces, and is reproduced by, the continual need to explain ourselves and defend our teaching practice, thereby emphasizing our obedience and our need to be recognized as good teachers. It keeps us feeling guilty about failing to provide enough play and fearful that failing to raise test scores will cost us our jobs. It makes us complicit in maintaining institutional systems rather than questioning and working to change the systems.

Institutions, in contrast, have regulatory and professional language to gloss over the effects of their actions. The language in policy documents and school promotional materials espouses a nurturing discourse and promotes the play-based learning that the teachers in the school I studied seek to provide. However, the mandated institutional rubrics for teacher evaluation procedures and children's report cards emphasize benchmarks scores, reducing teachers and students to numbers. Brooke, one of the kindergarten teachers, noted, "It's frustrating. When you're sitting there with a group of colleagues, and their children are receiving 3s, 4s, and 5s, and your children are receiving 2s, it's discouraging."

When we focus on rankings and normalizing benchmarks, we reinscribe children's subjection and our own. Uncovering the power relations beneath the conflict between work and play reveals how we as teachers not only face marginalization within institutional systems, but how we participate in reproducing the system as institutional subjects. Incompatible demands keep us distracted, chasing small solutions: finding ways to squeeze in time for play periods, getting permission to make curricular decisions in our own classrooms, juggling the paperwork generated by the need to document our compliance, and generating a range of compromise strategies to find more time for play-based learning (Erwin & Delair, 2004). However, by recognizing the scope of clashing discourses and challenging institutional double talk, we can mitigate paralyzing effects and shift the burden of large-scale change from individual teachers back to institutions.

In addition, recognizing this squeeze as a discursive clash rather than an individual teacher's responsibility gives us a little emotional space and allows us to stop blaming ourselves. Such rational understanding is only a first step. We also need to move past frustration and free ourselves from the emotional drudgery of defending impossible goals. Although some teachers seize autonomy in classrooms

by "closing their doors and just teaching," this practice further isolates individual teachers, masks institutional responsibility, and forestalls the collective action necessary to produce change. One alternative is to form teacher study groups or other ongoing support structures that provide opportunities to build community and to critically examine the roots of these dilemmas. If instead of closing our doors, we support each other, affirm our professional knowledge, and pool our collective resources, we might teach past contradictory institutional policies and free ourselves from these "stuck places."

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"INVISIBLE INK"—
A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF SCHOOL MEMORY

lisa farley

"Although an only child, for many years I had a brother." So begins Phillipe Grimbert's little novel, Memory (2004, p. 3). Previously published under the title Secret, the story suggests something elusive, and unspoken, about history and its passage through the generations. On one level, little Phillipe's "brother" is an imaginary friend who embodies all the qualities that Phillipe lacks, and that he fears his father would prefer: "Stronger and better looking. An older brother, invisible and glorious" (p. 3). Then Phillipe makes a discovery in the attic that reveals the terrible secret of the family's history. When the attic trunk yields a stuffed toy dog, we learn that Phillipe actually did have a brother, Simon, though they could never have met. Simon was, together with his mother, Hannah, murdered the day after the pair was delivered from the Pithiviers transit camp to Auschwitz. The plot of this history becomes more complex when we learn that after the death of his wife and child, Phillipe's father, Maxime, remarried, and that his second wife—Phillipe's mother—is also, (and here is the thick of it), Hannah's beautiful sister-in-law.

The excavation of this hidden history—the weight of grief, forbidden love, and wrenching guilt—adds a second layer of meaning to Phillipe's imaginary brother. Phillipe now understands that his invention is no longer just good company (though he is also this), but also a symptom of, or a way of coping with, the affective aftermath of the family's haunting past: "I had put off the moment of knowing for as long as I could, scratching myself on the barbed wire of a prison of silence. To avoid it, I invented myself a brother, unable to recognize the boy imprinted forever in my father's taciturn gaze" (p. 64). When Phillipe turns fifteen, he finds his opportunity to "meet" Simon—not, of course, in actual fact, but in the form of a remembered history. This meeting occurs in part through a series of events, including watching a Holocaust documentary at school, and also through conversations with a family friend, Louise, who helps Phillipe piece together the stray bits of his past into a narrative, a life history. And, of course, Phillipe undertakes the narration of this history once again, in adulthood, in writing his novel. At both times, history is made when Phillipe can see himself as an author of, rather than authored by, his past. Phillipe's narrative raises three big

questions that echo my interests in this paper: What does it mean to speak of histories that are largely unspoken? In what ways do unspoken histories nonetheless haunt the present? How might one move from the position of being authored by history to becoming its author?

This essay raises these questions in the context of education. This focus emerges from my interest in thinking about teaching as a form of memory—and specifically, how teachers might think well about the ways in which our educational histories linger, haunt, and shape the pedagogical present. While a number of theorists in education have explored how both teaching and teachers themselves are shaped by locations in identity, culture, and history (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Yon, 2000), I am interested in exploring the emotional significance of teachers' efforts to excavate, and put into words, their own educational histories. This paper argues that when teachers can create narratives that symbolize the unresolved conflicts of their schooling past, they are then in a position to use that history as a source of insight that illuminates the ways the past structures the present, and how the present shapes what we remember of the past. This is what Pitt and Britzman (2003) refer to as writing in the "invisible ink" of history (p. 761).

To explore the veiled lines of this kind of history, I read Sigmund Freud's historical case study of "Little Hans" alongside Jonathan Silin's (2006) pedagogical memoir: *My Father's Keeper: A Story of a Gay Man and His Aging Parents*. In particular, I use these narratives to illustrate two dynamics of history at play in adult/child and student/teacher relations. The first refers to the child's inheritance of unresolved conflicts from a time before his own experience, while the second refers to the history one makes through reconstructive efforts in narrative, thought, and memory. To put these two ideas of history into a vernacular, I am calling the first, "the adult in the child" and the second, "the child in the adult." I argue that in noticing these dynamics at play in the classroom, teachers not only learn something about the surprising force that their own schooling past has in the present, but also discover how children, surrounded by adults (and often in spite of them), engage in the delicate work of symbolizing the conflicted conditions of their own becoming.

The Case of Little Hans

Between 1907 and 1909, Freud (1909/2002) became curious about the conflicts that preoccupied a child named Little Hans. Little Hans came to Freud presenting a complex of symptoms, including a paralyzing fear of horses biting him

and of horses falling down. Freud hypothesized that Little Hans's phobia was a sophisticated defense, or a way of coping with the Oedipus conflict. This conflict, as Freud described it, refers to the felt tension between the child's wish for the exclusive love of the first "other"—the mother—together with the aggressive wish for the removal of anyone who stands in the way: for Freud, this is the father. The Freudian child is ambivalent from the start: in hot pursuit of love and terrified of its loss. This conflict is so unthinkable, Freud argued, that it is repressed, and we cannot remember (and in fact, often deny) its part in the plots of our childhood histories. But its repression does not mean that the conflict magically goes away; rather, it returns in the disguised form of symptoms—in the case of little Hans, as a phobia of horses. As Hans's phobia became more pervasive, Freud made a bold interpretation that narrated the Oedipal history that he believed sat at its core: behind the biting horse was an image of an angry father, and behind the falling horse, a vulnerable father who, terrifyingly, had succumbed to Hans's destructive wishes. Freud claimed that once he gave language to this unconscious plot, Hans gained greater emotional latitude and his fears became unharnessed, so to speak, from the horses.

The case of Little Hans interests me as an illustration of the historical phenomena of both "the adult in the child" and "the child in the adult." In terms of the first dynamic, Freud held the view that little Hans is born into the world already old, heir to the ancient history of Oedipal conflict that has been unconsciously passed down through the generations. Freud (1909/2002) also noted the peculiar timing of the arrival of the conflict: "before [Hans] can consciously understand his unconscious desires" (p. 99). The significance of this last point may become clearer if we read Hans's phobia alongside the narrative of Phillipe's imaginary brother that began this inquiry. Phillipe describes having invented his brother as a response to the affective force of a history that could neither be understood nor spoken out loud. Hans, too, struggles with the presence of an unspoken history that is too terrible to admit consciously, though in his case, it refers to the Oedipal fantasy of loving and fearing lost love. The crucial point here is that, as we have seen, in Freud's view the child experiences conflicts far older than he is, and that arrive before and in spite of the conscious effort to know them. As Freud (1939/1967) put it: "…there exists an inheritance of memory-traces of what our forefathers experienced, quite independently of direct communication and of the influence of education by example" (p. 127, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, as much as Freud viewed history as something passed down

from above and outside us, he also saw its narration as freeing us, to some extent, from any preordained path. This brings me to the second dynamic of history, the "child in the adult." At stake in this second dynamic is the possibility of transforming the received, static past, archived in symptoms, into a symbolic narrative, in which we can discover how buried conflicts shape the present, and reshape them in light of this new understanding. I suppose we might say that Freud came close to this symbolic work when he tried to narrate into Hans's unfolding story the hidden history of Oedipal conflict that he believed manifested itself in the horse phobia. But a crucial point complicates this conclusion. It was Freud, and not Hans himself, who arrived at the construction. And in this regard, Freud's analysis of little Hans may be read as another example of the first dynamic of history, "the adult in the child." That is, in presenting the Oedipal conflict as the root of Hans's symptoms, Freud's analysis reminds us that adult narratives (and theories) of childhood are less reflections of reality and more constructions that prop up, and pass on, our own ideas and investments (Benzaquén, 1998; Boldt, 2002).

Freud's rush to an Oedipal answer has a lot to do with the history of psychoanalysis. At the time of his work with Little Hans, Freud held an optimistic view of the function of his interpretations: he believed that the right one could save patients—young or old—from the burden of their conflicts. Today, teachers may recognize both the lure of this rescue fantasy and its risks, for to assert a definitive decision about the meaning of a child's experience—in the name of development or enlightenment—creates the risk of shutting down the life history a child may construct from her own experiences. In the final section of my paper, I turn to the work of Silin (2006), whose views would startle Freud. Silin describes how children may go about the difficult work of constructing a life history for the self, in spite of adults' efforts and failures. And in so doing, he challenges teachers to notice the many ways that students give expression to the conditions of becoming, including by resisting the texts and narratives offered in the official curriculum.

Little Jonathan: On Writing the "Invisible Ink" of the Schooling Past

Indeed, Silin (2006) begins his memoir with just such a tale of resistance. Silin's earliest memories of school are anguished. He hazily recalls "hushed, concerned conferences between…mother and…elementary school teachers" (p. 72). There is an image of second grade in which he is pretending to read, "hoping to appear gainfully employed" (p. 73). Still another memory takes Silin back to the fifth grade, where he decides reluctantly on a Hardy Boys novel whose plotline dis-

appoints his hopes of "illicit intimacy" between the boys pictured on the front cover (p. 74). Despite his initial interest in it, Silin admits that he could neither "remember" nor "finish" the book (p. 74). By high school, these literary scenes coalesce into a "terrain of interpersonal struggle" (pp. 74-75), and he reports nightly battles with his parents over editing his homework. These struggles over periods, commas, and paragraphs have the effect of confusing the voice—the authorship—of the writing: "In the end, I am never quite sure who is the real author of these anguished collaborations" (p. 75). At some point in twelfth grade, Silin pens a coming of age—and coming out—story as part of a project for English class. This adolescent effort is a work symbolizing the sexual conditions of his becoming—this time, with "no parental editing required" (p. 76).

Silin's memoir offers examples of both "the adult in the child" and "the child in the adult." In terms of the first dynamic, there is the inheritance of the grammar "principles" that structure the way Silin can string together words on a page. There is also the legacy of the books in the school library. And, as Silin's narrative makes clear, these inheritances also contain exclusions—links to historical repression—that structure and limit the possibilities of who can love whom. Returning to Freud, we see that Silin's account bears an uncanny resemblance to the case of Little Hans. Both boys seem to shoulder the weight of an inner history of conflict made from the ambivalent desire both to connect to and break from the relation with their parents. For Hans, you will recall, this silent history took the form of a horse phobia, while for Silin, it returned to shape his struggles with the written word.

And yet, Silin approaches the second dynamic of history—the "child in the adult"—when he turns to language to refashion a relationship to the conflict underlying his early struggles. There is the literary effort of his twelfth-grade English project, of course, but there is also the memoir in which he continues to construct meaning from these experiences. Looking back, Silin (2006) recasts his memory of literary struggle in a new light:

> [The] reluctance to claim my ideas on paper, I now believe, was connected in some complicated and still incomprehensible way to my recalcitrant and unacceptable sexuality. The written word was both the medium that tied me to my parents in endless battles over periods, commas, and paragraphs and the medium that eventually allowed me to see myself as an independent agent with a unique story to tell. (p. 75)

Here, Silin reads the "invisible ink" of his early school memories, scripting into his childhood plot a very old conflict—between the desire for his parents' recognition on the one hand, and the wish to become "an independent agent," the author of his own history, on the other. Silin offers a further insight when he reads his early difficulties with reading and writing as structuring his contemporary advocacy for children, for the values of progressive education, and for the inclusion of representations of queer identity and experience in the early childhood classroom.

Louise and Freud, respectively, were among the important adult figures in the lives of little Phillipe and little Hans. In Silin's (2006) account, we meet an entourage of teachers: the second-grade teacher who is audience to his practiced reading "performance," the school librarian who demands he select a book that he doesn't want, and the high school English teacher who returns his "homoerotic" narrative without a single comment. We read Silin's memoir in a course I teach on the emotional life of the teacher. In considering his literary struggles, the focus of our discussions tends to center on the failure of Silin's teachers to help him make meaningful connections to curriculum or to use curriculum that reflects his sexual identity and experience. If Freud was heavy-handed in his interpretation of Hans, it seems that Silin's teachers exemplify the opposite stance: indifferent, unconcerned, even inert. Ironically, the effect is the same: both sets of adults seem to be repeating their own conflicts in relation to the other who is the child.

While there might be some benefit in thinking about how we could do better in our work with children than either Freud or Silin's teachers did, or perhaps even become some child's Louise, ultimately my thoughts about such possibilities are a little less consoling. What makes learning to read and write in the "invisible ink" of history so difficult is that it asks teachers to tolerate an unruly notion of history that cannot be laid to rest or settled once and for all. Here, the past is never simply a progress narrative or a chronology, but rather a presence that returns unbidden, and that both beckons and requires a working through of its repetitions in the classroom: How is the pedagogical present (one's hopes and anxieties) structured by what has already happened? In what ways does the present shape what can be known as history? How can teachers distinguish between the child who stands before them and the child they themselves once were or wished to be? It is not that the answers to these questions can arm teachers against the disguised return of the past in their work with children. And it is not (as Freud's rescue fantasy would have it) that in working through our own histories, teachers can somehow prevent the conflicts that constitute the conditions of becoming somebody. On the other hand,

neither does it follow that teachers can remain indifferent (as Silin's teachers did) as students struggle to narrate their histories, which, while not yet made, nonetheless demand a witness.

To work through and respond well to the conflicted conditions of our own becoming and of our students', we need to consider narratives, such as little Phillipe's or Hans's or Jonathan's, that contain the painful conflicts that make history, and to resist, as much as we can, the wish to prevent them with the right pedagogy or interpretation. Quite divergently, pedagogy resides in the tensions between the past and the present, between the history we can recall and its "invisible ink," and, if all goes well, in narrating the meeting point between "the adult in the child" and "the child in the adult." What allows for these conflicts to be meaningful is the teacher's capacity to symbolize them, rather than school them away, both in herself and in students.

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IMAGINARY STORIES IN SCHOOL:
FIRST STEPS TOWARD LITERACY

gillian dowley mcnamee

In a preschool classroom, a few weeks into the school year, a shy three-year-old named Hala dictates the following narrative to her teacher while watching two new school friends, twin sisters, playing together nearby.

> My mommy and my daddy and my sister and Hala are eating at home. Lana and Sharice are eating cookies in their home.

A few minutes later at large-group time, the teacher narrates Hala's story and guides the children in acting it out. Hala, who has said very little in school to date, mimes the actions along with the other children. Hala's narrative captures a moment of awareness about her classmates' out-of-school lives: that when the children are not in school together, each one is at home doing similar things (in this case, eating).

Preschool children who dictate stories that are acted out with peers in a classroom setting that also includes opportunities for pretend play are primed for written, as well as oral, language development. The teacher leading these activities anchors children's thinking, narrative, and social skills in activities where peers and teacher help individuals grow "a head taller" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102) through interactions in the group. This essay examines the ways that Hala and the other children in Vivian Paley's classroom grow a head taller from participating in these activities, and the role their classmates and teacher play in this process.

Paley is a preeminent early childhood teacher who has written twelve books documenting young children's learning through play and storytelling. Her writings explore several types of narratives in school, including pretend play, the pivotal experience for children listening to each other while also creating and expanding into narratives the ideas that fill their minds all day long. Paley illustrates how play in school affords children the chance to gradually harmonize the many disparate experiences and thoughts each brings to the classroom, creating community activity with common purposes, and more specifically, literary ones (McNamee, 2005).

The connections between the goals of schooling and children's learning in play and storytelling are controversial. Learning through play is child directed, following the path of children's own thinking, and therefore not easily assessed using current testing and experimental study designs. Since the result of such learning cannot be predicted, standardized, or controlled by adults, teachers are pressured to eliminate time for play. Children listening to adults is the preferred primary discourse pattern of learning in schools. This essay holds that to forgo opportunities for children's pretend play and conversation around storytelling in school is to distort the very nature and development of language and literacy. Narratives from Paley's classroom are examined to demonstrate the rich learning taking place, and how educators can track children's imaginary stories in play and story dictation for evidence of the learning central to the goals of schooling: learning to develop and articulate ideas while listening to and responding to both peers and teachers.

In pretend play, young children take on imaginary roles while creating and imitating actions, gestures, and/or the talk of characters. Its most fully developed form in school involves collaboration with at least one other person (Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2009). In such play, the emphasis is on children working together to coordinate roles of various characters within a play episode. Together, children create a story with problems and resolutions that ebb and flow as they sustain interaction inside an evolving story line. They negotiate character roles, circumstances, and possibilities for how a story will unfold. Such play requires flexibility in thinking and acting while reconciling multiple points of view about a hypothetical situation being constructed in the moment.

Pretend play has value and place in school because it depends on and is built out of words, which are the foundation of literacy development. In the pretend scenarios children construct, talking is the building block: "Pretend this is the place where the animals live and this is their food…" Children elaborate, edit, revise, and start anew, assigning meanings and identities using available props: blocks, scarves, cups, and plates.

Paley (1990, 2004) discovered that a powerful role for teachers is to invite children at play to dictate a short story to them. That same day, the teacher gathers the class to act out those stories. Children's dictated stories derive from several sources: their imagination, play and other interactions and conversations with peers in the classroom, family experiences, stories or books they have heard, and—as in Hala's case—thoughts they have as they play. Story dictation gives children

practice in taking the raw material of imagination, thinking about it, and transforming it into the currency of schooling: spoken and written language. During dramatization, the child's mental image of action and dialogue become embodied in words and gestures. Story dictation and dramatization help young children enter the school culture of reading and writing fueled by their imaginations and curiosity about how ideas work; when they take the hypothetical stance that the medium of play invites, they develop those ideas in words. How might learning and development happen in such activities?

Assessing Children's Narratives for Learning

Accounting for young children's learning and development as a function of their interactions with one another as well as with their teacher is a challenge for educators. How can we trace the influence of multiple sources of thinking on the path of an individual child at a moment in time? While almost every developmental theory of the twentieth century ascribes a central role to play in children's development, only that of L. S. Vygotsky (1978) includes an explanation for the influence of the group on an individual's development. His theory begins with the premise that "it is through others that we develop into ourselves" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 161). He reversed the commonly held notion that development begins within the individual and gradually becomes subject to the influences of socialization and one's culture. Instead, in his view, the child's mind is undergoing transformation in relation to interactions with family and community right from the start. It is others—siblings, peers, and adults—who provide the incentive, vision, and means for how we step out into the world in more challenging, sophisticated ways. Vygotsky (1978) called this progress from a current stage of development toward the next *activity in a zone of proximal development.*

Vygotsky went further, saying that play creates the zone of proximal development. It is the capacity to be lead into interactions with objects, people, and ideas in new ways, beyond what we have currently envisioned, that marks us as uniquely human. Vygotsky's theory offers the opportunity to consider more closely the dynamics of learning among young children who play and tell stories in school. In the following set of narratives from Paley's preschoolers, the paths of learning from individual to the group and from the group to the individual are illuminated as images are developed and examined over time in the children's imagination, play, and dictated and dramatized narratives.

Children's School Stories

During one of the years that Paley was teaching in preschool, she became ill and was hospitalized. When it became evident that she would not be returning to the classroom for several weeks, she asked if I would join her assistants in working with the children. As her former student teacher, I was comfortable accepting. I was familiar with the routines she had established for the early weeks of school, and other than not being able to play the piano (as she did daily), I was ready.

The school day began with play activities in various areas of the classroom. During that period, the teacher was available to write down children's dictated stories. Stories dictated on 5.5 x 8.5 inch paper limited the time a teacher spent with individual children. This also contributed to children creating more focused, well-developed narratives over time, as opposed to rambling strings of events. Next, when they heard the piano playing begin, the children came together for group time. This included singing, movement activities, performing children's dictated stories, a read-a-loud that the group often acted out, and sharing news about projects that had developed that morning. The children came from their various activities, skipped or danced around the edge of the rug to music, and then sat down, leaving the center of the rug clear for the story dramatizations.

The following stories were dictated and acted out by three-year-olds at group time, during their teacher's absence.

I have a finger puppet show. (Lana)

While she spoke, Lana wiggled her first two fingers to indicate that her story was recreating the finger motion we had been doing for several days to accompany a poem about a rabbit hopping. That same day, her close friend Sharice, sitting near her at the story table, elaborated on the finger puppet show idea as she told the following story:

The puppet jumps. The puppet's going to be in my hands.

When acting out both stories, the whole class participated, holding up their hands to act out the rabbit hopping with their fingers.

The next day, Nicole told a story where she listed as many names of children as she could. She also named the action she wanted everyone to engage in:

shaking their feet around. This recalled a moment from the day before, when we sang the "Hokey Pokey," where "you put your right foot in and shake it all about."

> Everyone goes in my story: Benjy and Nicky and Sam and Dawn and George and they all shake around their feet.

Several days later, Sam told a story which began with what was becoming a favorite story routine: naming as many children as one could and inviting them to "go in there," that is, to go in the middle of the rug to participate in the dramatization.

> Then Randall, Rob, and Katy, and Nicole can be in there. Andy can go in there. They shoot with their fingers. Shoot shoot shoot shoot shoot! Sarah can go in there. And Chloe can go in there, and Nicky. Benjy can go in there. Then they make designs with their fingers.

The shooting with their fingers was a reference to the farmer chasing Peter Rabbit out of his garden at gunpoint. The making a design with their fingers was a reference back to the poem of the hopping rabbit.

Rob, who was sitting next to Sam during the dictation, revisited the puppet show action and the gun shooting in the following narrative.

> I am going to do a puppet show story and just me and using my fingers. They all shoot the bad people. They go on the bridge.

Soon after, Benjy dictated a one-word story: "Water." When the class acted out this story, the group made various swimming gestures as they pretended to be in water. The next day, George created a story using the water idea that became the children's benchmark for comedy.

> An elephant and an alligator fell in the water with shoes on. They then fell back in the water.

The children roared with laugher at this idea of falling in the water with shoes on. They asked to act this out many times.

Several days later, Lana dictated a narrative that held the group spellbound.

> I want water in my story and a puppet show too. I would like to run
> around while people play the piano and sing "The Train Is A Coming." All
> the people can go in my puppet show. They all run around. Everyone can
> bring pictures they painted and pasted and drawed.

Lana's narrative contains references to many of the story ideas that had emerged
over the past few weeks in this community of authors: water, puppet shows, every-
one being in the story, running while holding pictures. She also signaled her wish
that her first teacher return to school, the one who played the piano and lead
them in singing, "The Train Is A Coming." She did not name Mrs. Paley, but she
knew how to reference the activity that only this teacher could lead. This story
was a significant one for everybody; children and teachers alike "got it." The
power of its message could not be measured in terms of grammatical cohesion,
dramatic episodes, or any conventional standard. Yet, this child's skill in gathering
up the important class rituals, story themes, and the memory of their absent
teacher brought the group the gift of togetherness that a work of art achieves.

In subsequent weeks, the children's stories continued to reference and
expand upon their favorite themes: the puppet show, falling in the water with
shoes on, and bringing pictures to the group. They had found a common set of
images to further their thinking in playing, storytelling and acting together.

> If anyone makes some pictures they can bring them to my story. They
> shoot the bad people. There's a puppet show and we sing "The Train Is A
> Comin" and it is great fun. (Randall)

> A wicked witch falls in the water with her shoes on and she laughs. She
> falls in again. She does that again. 2 wicked witches, 3 mans, 4 ladies, they
> fall in the water. (Katy)

> Cinderella put on her raincoat to go outside in the rain to the ball. And
> then she meets Prince Charming. She falls in the water with her shoes on.
> She comes back home. She washed her clothes. (Sarah)

Cookie Monster eat all the cookies and then he eat all the carrots. And then he eats all the chocolate chips. Then the people fall in the water with their shoes on and they take off their dresses. And Cinderella puts a raincoat on her head and the big cheese falls in the water. (Hala)

In each of these stories, the children developed as authors of oral and written narratives. They advanced their imagery, sense of humor, and language skills, framing episodes of action as their friendships, playfulness, and eagerness to come together in school to think further about emerging ideas in a sustained way deepened. Their play, storytelling, and acting provided common ground for this learning.

Summary

In play, storytelling, and acting, thinking is public and shared—open for input while simultaneously offering ideas for the taking. When children participate in dramatic play in a prepared environment rich with opportunities for literary, mathematical, and artistic experiences, they try out their thinking against a diverse set of possibilities provided by their peer group and teachers. Ideas are offered, exchanged, abandoned when they are not working, and expanded on in daily interactions with others who are eager to participate in the give and take. The doing of stories in play opportunities, dictation, and dramatization helps children listen to one another and examine ideas and their logic as they take on different roles in various scenarios. Three-, four- and five-year-olds who are not yet masters of the written word are quickly drawn to and build upon the mechanisms of the oral storytelling culture that play offers. They benefit from their teacher's assistance in creating their written narratives, which they then listen to, modify, and transform in play and subsequent dictated stories.

The stories presented here point to a complex landscape of learning, shaped by the children who are guiding one another as well as receiving guidance from their teacher. The key to the children's learning is the connections and shared references they develop that derive from their history of experiences together. The few weeks of storytelling from Paley's classroom provide evidence of the rapid progress that children made in representing and discussing their experiences and transforming their insights, given time, support, and acknowledgement from a willing teacher. In giving children time to play each day, and in facilitating storytelling and dramatization of children's narratives, a teacher allows ideas and insights to be opened up for consideration in a way that lets the larger group

benefit from the experience. Through play and storytelling, participants share ideas and approach subjects from many points of view. When a new idea emerges, the insights run deep, as they did in Lana's story. Everyone contributed to that story in some way, and everyone benefited from her poetic expression about the past and present. This study of children's play and related stories in school suggests that a class of children who are listening, imagining, and investing in each other's learning are pursuing goals for schooling that we may want to ensure are a part of every early childhood classroom.

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IN DEFENSE OF PLAYFULNESS

peter nelsen

"SHHHH. Follow me!" Bruce didn't wait for a response. He sprinted to a nearby oak and hid behind it.[1]

"No—Follow ME!" Kim retorted, diving behind a bush. To my surprise, the rest of our eleventh-grade American Literature class followed suit, hiding in the woods around us. Some mimicked their leaders' slapstick camouflage routine more eagerly than others, but they all participated—and laughed. It was a start.

Now my usually "cool" students were prowling the woods, giggling self-consciously. Though I had often witnessed students responding positively to group activities, I remained amazed when the class followed playfully. That mood carried into the activity itself, which had been designed to frustrate individual effort and encourage group success. The activity required students to traverse sections of wire cable strung two feet above ground, zigzagging among several trees. After I described safety guidelines, the boys turned the activity into individual tests of cable-walking prowess. Only when a usually quiet girl suggested creating a human chain did a breakthrough occur. She questioned the boys' assumptions that they needed to cross the cable expanses on their own. Her question allowed the group to try a new organizational scheme and, after trial and error, helped them succeed.

In this article I will consider what might seem the least important aspect of what had occurred: playfulness. I will develop a defense of playfulness within schooling, especially within reading and literacy instruction. I do this in response to the accountability and testing measures many schools across the nation have embraced, eschewing playful pedagogy in favor of such "serious" methods as direct instruction and test preparation (Cornbleth, 2008; Cuban, 2007; Dillon, 2006; Pedula et al., 2003; Pressler, 2006). The previous vignette occurred twelve years ago when I taught high school English; it troubles me that if I were teaching today, I might not be allowed to take an English class into the woods. This concern arises from accounts I read and hear now as a teacher educator in North Carolina. My students report that their schools have increased the time spent on language arts and mathematics instruction, at the expense of subjects associated with playfulness: art, music, and physical education. Such narrowing may happen

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[1] This and subsequent student names are pseudonyms

throughout the year or episodically during periods of focused test preparation. My students' experiences reflect national reports; their schools devote instructional time solely to subject-specific test prep in the weeks prior to state-mandated tests.

While it is common for elementary school teachers to spend more time on literacy, many are also specifically required to follow prescriptive "pacing guides" that mandate content and instructional strategies, thereby limiting or eliminating playful engagement with literacy (Cornbleth, 2008; Cuban, 2007; Dillon, 2006; Pedula et al., 2003; Pressler, 2006). Secondary school teachers may not have to use the same sorts of preapproved curricular materials, but subject-area mandates are so tightly packed that many high school instructors limit their instructional strategies to lectures, drills, and tests, with no space for innovation, student engagement, or playfulness. As Nolan and Anyon (2004) argue, these practices foster "regimented and superficial rote learning in schools serving students who have historically underachieved on standardized tests, that is, African Americans and other students of color" (p. 141). Even schools enrolling affluent, middle class students increasingly adopt the prescriptive teaching methods and curricula associated with mandated assessment (Cuban, 2007; Dillon, 2006; Pedula et al., 2003; Pressler, 2006).

Into the Woods

Such prescription is particularly problematic within the context of literacy instruction: it effectively restricts literacy to decoding texts and symbols. In the current climate, I would most likely be pressured to remain focused on test prep and curriculum coverage, despite the fact that the cable-walking activity was connected to the curriculum. It occurred during an analysis of Olsen's *I Stand Here Ironing*, a short story in which a single mother reflects on her struggles to raise her daughter. The mother describes her enduring love for her now nineteen-year-old daughter, despite the difficult decisions she had to make as a single parent. The mother's acquiescence when social workers wanted to institutionalize the girl especially troubled my students. The story inspired many intense personal reactions. One male student remarked that the mother was irresponsible and shouldn't have been allowed to have children. In response, many girls attacked him for his lack of understanding. This incited other boys to defend their friend, angrily objecting that charges of sexism are overblown relics of the past. After unsuccessfully trying to negotiate some discussion boundaries, I decided to change approaches. The atmosphere in the classroom was too tense to allow the students

to examine sexism and gender issues together. Hence, I took American Literature to the woods.

I wasn't surprised that my students had personal reactions. Reading is a personal act. Gee (1996, p. 128) argues that literacy involves more than merely possessing the skills to decode text; it taps into ways of interacting with the world that run deeply into socially mediated senses of identity. Olsen's story tapped into my students' struggles to define themselves as gendered people negotiating the adolescence-adulthood border. Tension was an inevitable and welcomed part of the expanded notion of literacy instruction guiding my teaching. Critical projects move beyond traditional reasoned analysis to help students make judgments about the personal and the political—connecting reading and writing with examinations of power and political issues that are highly personal. On the surface I was inviting them to critically analyze the gendered content of Olsen's story, but I was also asking them to consider their own gendered identities and ways of being in the world. Some resisted because the performance of such analysis entails confusing and potentially identity-altering tasks.

I return to the playful cable-walking outing because I worry that today's schools deny students opportunities to explore complex textual practices that help them understand themselves and their sociocultural worlds. Such opportunities are especially important for marginalized students, since research demonstrates that they describe school as a place where they either go to find or to lose themselves (Reay, 1997; 2001; 2002). Reducing literacy instruction to textual decoding, and divorcing it from the analyses of linguistic and literacy practices we find in our cultural contexts, helps students whose home preparation matches the skills and codes of the classroom to "find themselves." It also leads those whose home experiences differ from experiences offered by the school to see themselves as unequal and undervalued. The former are described as bright, the latter as "problem" students, who may come to understand themselves as not "belonging" in school (Brantlinger, 2003). This widens the achievement gap and enables us to blame students for their inadequacies, rather than to examine how schools define academic knowledge and sanction particular literacy practices.

By inviting my students into the woods, weaving fantasies for them and inviting them to play together, I intentionally laid the ground for classroom playfulness. Playfulness has the potential to create the background condition necessary for the complex analysis that moves between texts, individual identities, and sociocultural power relationships. Our discussion about interacting on the wire cables

and the assumptions about social rules began a more complex discussion of gender norms and how they govern interactions in our daily lives. Playfulness alone, or an activity like cable walking, was not a sufficient basis for examining sexism, but it supported more complex thinking by providing a vehicle for ongoing critical work. We carried that analysis of the "rules" into our ongoing textual examinations of other topics like race, social class, and homosexuality. But there is more to be said about the relationship of playfulness and critical approaches to literacy. In what follows, I turn to Sutton-Smith (1997, 2001, 2003) and Lugones (1987) to argue that my students' playfulness is a first step toward establishing more open and fluid analyses of complex sociocultural issues like sexism.

Play, Playfulness, and Critical Literacy

First, a distinction must be drawn between the activity of play and play as an *attitude*. As Sutton-Smith (1997, 2001, 2003) argues, the two are often conflated, leading to confusion. This may stem from the problem of defining play. Play is an ambiguous concept, and as a result, it can represent the different hopes and beliefs of those who draw on the idea of play to advance their disparate aims. Defining the spirit of play—playfulness —is less daunting, although one could still argue that definitions of playfulness emerge from particular sociocultural contexts. In any case, I agree with Sutton-Smith that playfulness is concerned with "meta-play"; it "plays with the frames of play" (p. 147). As such, I define playfulness as an *attitude of creative rule engagement*.

For example, although childhood play is commonly viewed as wildly spontaneous and unconstrained, research shows that all play is marked by consistency and reference to agreed-upon rules that define boundaries for action. Adults play tennis using specific rules; similarly, when children play imaginative games, they do so within the implicitly agreed-upon play rules that sustain the play framework. We should not equate playfulness with an absence of rules, because it describes a stance *toward* rules: to the extent that they contribute to a specific instance of play's creation, rules are viewed as useful. Otherwise, they are mutable. This was a key to the link between critical literacy and our cable-crossing experience. I presented students with only enough rules to sustain the activity. The rules they then established became as influential as the ones I had given them. For example, one section offered a fixed hand rope to aid their progress. Unfortunately, the rope's position relative to the group's starting angle made it more a hindrance than a help. The boys insisted the group had to use the rope,

that it was part of the challenge itself. The girls countered by offering a different conceptualization: if they abandoned the rope—altering a perceived rule—the activity became one that turned from an emphasis on individual skill to the service of group success. The boys' view of immutable rules defined the nature of their experience and success, while the girls playfully questioned the boys' assumptions.

Our discussion after the cable activity centered on the gendered rule-based assumptions that students brought to that challenge. I wish that this one activity had heralded a new era in gender relationships in my classroom; it did not. However, it began a process in which we examined the rules governing gender within our classroom, the school, and our community, and considered the influences of those rules on students' understandings of themselves as gendered people. The activity helped us examine how unwritten social rules influence how we perceive ourselves and what is possible to think and to do. We used textual resources and other activities to extend such analyses, and continuously returned to the metaphor of the cable crossing to represent the need to examine rules about gender in any given context. This reveals the importance of playfulness to critical literacy: throughout our engagement, I hoped to help students develop a more fluid understanding of fixed gender rules, and to allow them to approach such analysis playfully. Thus, Sutton-Smith's definition of playfulness—an attitude toward creative rule engagement—entails an epistemological position inviting students to analyze how rules support or hinder what happens in social spaces.

I contend that the current context for schooling makes developing such an epistemological outlook more difficult. Current policies that embrace prescriptive, test-focused instruction seemingly lead to embracing an epistemological stance that school policies and academic curricular "rules" are sacrosanct and immutable. Test-driven classrooms stress specific educational practices, denying opportunities to negotiate the rules governing academic inquiry. In contrast, a playful approach views school policies and curricular "rules" as serving the larger aim of academic inquiry and remaining flexible and revisable. Our playful approach to American Literature, for example, left much of what we studied and how we studied open for negotiation. Again, using the cable-challenge metaphor, we continued negotiating our way through the curriculum—examining different assumptions about curricular and school "rules" that we each brought to our collective engagement with each other. That meant I had to be open to revising and/or dropping aspects of the curriculum I had established.

Becoming World Travelers

Embracing the playful approach to engaging with the rules of the many games we play together in our social and text-based worlds invites students to see themselves as what Lugones (1987) calls *world travelers*, who understand how specific social contexts provide resources for being different sorts of people. "Those of us who are 'world'-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different 'worlds' and of having the capacity to remember other "worlds" and ourselves in them" (p. 11). For example, when I asked my students to read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as playful world travelers, they engaged with the text on personal levels, reflecting on racism, the demands of friendship, and what it would be like to be either Jim or Huck traveling on that particular raft. Reading in this way means that we are not satisfied with interpretative details, or with decoding and what Clinchy (1994) calls separate knowing. Instead, we want to explore subjectivities revealed to us in their complex existential fecundity, and to use such experiences to explore our own subjectivities and the rules that define them. An important goal here is to reveal how those rules influence both who we become and the social rules guiding the "games" we play together.

It is here we see a profoundly troubling aspect of the accountability movement's prescriptive schooling that reduces complex academic literary study to textual decoding. We fail to provide students with opportunities to analyze the connections between differing social contexts and different types of literacy practices and how those contexts and practices intersect with aspects of how they understand themselves as people and students. Standardized exams are literary practices, powerful ones regulating classroom interactions by driving teachers to limited literacy explorations, eschewing playful, critical engagements with texts.

The importance of such engaged playfulness forming the background for serious critical inquiry becomes even clearer when we reconsider Reay's (2001) argument that marginalized students often internalize the message that they are unfinished and incomplete in some way. They turn to school to "find themselves" without realizing how school is implicated in their losses. Instead, in the Foucauldian sense, they may discipline themselves to become the students that schools value, or failing to do so, internalize pernicious beliefs about themselves. We see this in the words of a sixth grader who scores a below-normal test score on a major grade-level exam. The girl defines herself as the score; she states: "I'm a 3, 3, 3," then remarking that she is a "nothing." Like my students who understood their beliefs about gender rules to be immutable, this girl's beliefs about her-

self need to be challenged. I argue that we need to embed such work within a comprehensively playful epistemology that spans the curriculum and helps students see how rules influence the people them become.

Playing with Rules

Asking students to engage playfully in learning, both in and outside classrooms, can be justified because it creates an inviting atmosphere or because it may alter relationships among class members. But that misses an additional, important epistemological point: critically playful learning entails examining the rules of play, the rules governing the social engagement students face, including those that govern textual encounters and the topics those texts explore. Critical approaches to literacy can help students examine the intersections of their self-understandings and the varieties of literacy practices in their differing social worlds; it is particularly important to explore tools like the educational labels and tests employed by schools. Playfulness aids such textual and metatextual explorations by helping students engage in textual analyses with creative openness.

As Lugones (1987) describes, we want to invite students to world travel playfully, deeply exploring the subjectivities revealed to us through textual analyses. Furthermore, we can use such experiences to explore our own subjectivities and the rules that define them. An important goal is revealing how social rules influence the people we become and the social games we play. Making the rules of our social engagements visible through the background of playfulness draws our attention to rule mutability and the possibility afforded to those who creatively alter rules to enhance the serious games they play.

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MOUTHY STUDENTS AND THE TEACHER'S APPLE:
QUESTIONS OF ORALITY AND RACE IN THE URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

alyssa d. niccolini

"Lead them by their mouths."
— Jean-Jacques Rosseau, Emile; or Treatise on Education

"One's eyes are what one is, one's mouth is what one becomes."
— John Galsworthy

Denicia won't stop talking to Arette. I give her my most menacing stare. She flashes a toothy smile. Clenching neon blue gum within a grin that at once expresses aggression, defiance, and affection, she drawls, "I love you, Ms. Nikki," and then slaps the arm of her confabulator, who proceeds to emit an ear-piercing shriek. The gum, that most illicit school contraband, is brazenly visible. The smile, forced and imbedded with all the aggressivity of a bite, is intended to charm and challenge. The proclamation, wholly inappropriate (yet admittedly deeply gratifying), is wielded to disorient and disarm.[1]

When I make my way down the corridors to my classroom, I traverse a glittering landscape of food wrappers. In my room, graffitied desktops conceal nebulous underbellies of gum. Daily I wage battle on orange soda, chewing gum, and profanity. I dole out points for proper speech, punishment for verbal slip-ups. I model the Standard American English usage of "to be" and encourage "Accountable Talk." After class, I stoop over to pick up waste, sifting through a multicolored testament to adolescent hunger. On my way out, I pass through the cafeteria and sidestep neatly swept mountains of half-eaten hamburger buns, plastic bottles, and the remains of Styrofoam trays. Schools are spaces marked by oral desire, and I have become a guardian of the mouth.

The scene with Denicia epitomizes the deeply fraught space of orality in the urban public school. In an age of accountability and standardization, this space is embattled by school mandates on everything from gum to participation; federal initiatives on how to nourish urban minority youth (and low-income students in particular); conflicting student and teacher desires; and, as the incident with

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[1] All students mentioned have been given pseudonyms and any staff or personnel mentioned do not represent my current school and/or administration.

Denicia demonstrates, deep-seated ambivalence. If a collective of students is rhetorically figured as a body, it is a body arrested in the oral stage. This psychical stalling is engendered by administrative and pedagogical imperatives that are fixated on standardizing language, controlling consumption, and regulating "appropriate" oral expression. At once encouraged and strictly controlled, orality becomes a site of what Burke (2005) deems "contested desires" (p. 576).

This paper will seek to investigate this oral fixation—especially in the context of an inner-city, low-income and minority-populated school. Why are so many classroom battles centered on control of the mouth? Why is so much teacher/student language marked by metaphors of orality? How is controlling what goes in and what comes out of students' mouths linked to the imposition of "wholesome" moralities and white middle class ideologies on poor inner-city kids? How has the accountability movement intensified this teacher/student gnashing of teeth? This paper in the end may raise more questions than it answers, but the open questioning mouth is the first step to satiety.

Mouthing Off

"The unsaid part is the best of every discourse." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

In cinematic portrayals, poor inner-city schools are often loud, chaotic spaces where teachers struggle to be heard over yelling students, blaring boom boxes, and a background of wailing sirens. In contrast, the ideal classroom is presented as a monologic rather than a dialogic space, a quiet realm dominated by a lone teacher's voice. In film, teacher-saviors like Hilary Swank and Michelle Pfeiffer gradually tame the aggressive orality of poor minority kids and instill the sanctity of quiet repositories of Western thought.

The threat of minority orality was recently made evident in the teacher's lounge of my urban, public school. An educational consultant, entrusted with helping teachers integrate data-driven instruction and the workshop model, [2] shook her head over lunch and declared to the group of teachers around her, "This is the loudest I have ever heard this school." Her diagnosis of the school's deterioration was based on the noise she heard emitting from classrooms. According to her logic, a good classroom is a quiet classroom, while noise signals pedagogical

[2] In an effort to achieve standardization, certain regions in NYC mandated that all English classrooms adhere to the Balanced Literacy and workshop models. Ideally, according to these models, an English classroom in East Harlem should be shifting into shared reading at precisely the same moment as one in Rockaway Beach does, like synchronized swimmers.

decay. This thinking seems pervasive. A colleague of mine admitted that he had never been formally observed at his former school. His principal had awarded him satisfactory ratings after observing that his classroom was "quiet" when she passed by it.

Having been entrusted with an all-boys English class last year, I quickly had to overcome my own aversions to loud classroom spaces. Noise became part of my pedagogy. Rhythmic beats on desks, boisterous chants, and heated "Yo-Mama" metaphor contests would often shatter the celestial silence of the school's hallways. To an outside ear, this vociferous classroom space, dominated by student voices rather than my own, probably sounded like pure pandemonium. According to the ideology of accountability that the consultant advocated, noise levels can (and should) be measured, controlled, and contained. Yet, it was at the loudest moments, where my room bordered on the uncontrolled and uncontained, that the greatest student engagement and most authentic learning—while more diffi-cult to identify and assess than decibels—took place.

Later, the same consultant heard yells down the hallway and remarked that a teacher was being "*eaten alive*" in that classroom. (I later learned that a game of Jeopardy had been in progress there.) Although she considered herself as a "pro-gressive educator," the consultant was blind to the very regressive and racist ideol-ogy at work in her statement. In a school with a student population that is over 85% black and 14% Hispanic, the idea of a white female teacher being "eaten alive" evokes the classic trope of the white female body as passive and endangered by black desire. It also conjures, of course, racist fantasies of cannibalism. As Tompkins (2007) argues in an article investigating tropes of anthrophagy in ante-bellum literature, "Across modernity, cannibalism has signified the total primitive otherness against which (white) Western rationality measures itself" (p. 204). The consultant's statement, although intended to insult the teacher, instead figures the students as primitive, savage, and irrational. In the same conversation another teacher described the class referred to as a "bunch of animals."

Students seem to have internalized these racist tropes of savagery and ani-malization. A common epithet used for disruptive peers is that they are "mon-keys." Similarly, loud and unruly students are described by classmates as "wildin' out" and "beastin'." Tompkins (2007) explains, quoting Sánchez-Eppler, "that the popular understanding of children as little primitives…represents 'the felt simili-tudes between the project of raising good, white, middle-class Christian, American children and raising an economic and cultural American empire' " (p.

204). These could be read as tacit projects of the accountability movement; consider how often test scores are analyzed statistically according to race and class. When black children are relegated to the categories of cannibals or animals, they can be described away as aberrations in the context of that project, and positioned as threats to American capitalist ideals. And as we will see with the rhetoric on obesity, this language also dehumanizes non-whites as bodies that, like slaves, need to be disciplined, controlled, and regulated to ensure the preservation of (white) American ideology.

"Eating alive" also evokes infantile orality, especially the cannibalistic devouring of the mother's breast and milk. Interestingly, sycophantic students are chided by their peers for "suckin' [the teacher's] nipples."[3] These same students are often the ones accused of acting, sounding, or trying to be "white." For if the white female teacher is the surrogate mother, she is also the conveyor of normative white culture. "Eating her alive," or sucking her nipples, is a form of oral incorporation, and of willingly imbibing white culture. As colloquial wisdom has it, *you are what you eat*.

Perhaps underlying the consultant's language, and even student slang, is Tompkins'(2007) argument that, "black bodies, here rendered in the most extreme representation of objectification and dehumanization, must nonetheless enter into and change the white body (and thus the white body politic) if it is itself to enter into modernity" (p. 207). The idea of the white body (politic) "absorbing" blackness as a necessary step toward modernity is a central theme in Tompkins' work. In her paper, she traces imagery of the black body as an "edible body" in white discourses. She examines the orality of white incorporation of blackness, writing:

> …I wish to point critical attention toward that other cavity—the mouth—through whose metaphorical properties the porous and fictional boundaries between the races might also be represented. For in examining the alimentary, that is, oral desire for blackness exhibited by whites…we further uncover the profound ambivalence toward, and ongoing dependence upon blackness, upon which… whiteness relied. Blackness becomes something that must be absorbed into whiteness as a precondition both of white modern embodiment and of entry into modernity. (p. 206)

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[3] I've even heard the statement used about male teachers, and conversely, "sucking the teacher's dick" used in regard to female teachers. Both configure orality as a means of gaining teacher favor.

This oral absorbing of blackness can be seen today in the usurpation of "black" culture—especially at the level of language. Terms such as "beef" and "bling" and phrases such as "You go girl," are common parlance in popular media. Interestingly, one of the surest ways to get a laugh out of a majority African American class is for a white teacher to self-consciously use slang coded as African American. When black language is cannibalized, African American culture—particularly its threatening orality—is assimilated and incorporated into the white "body" politic and therefore neutralized.

The cannibalism of blackness is evident in the classroom as well. Just as the consultant figured the students as cannibals, students conversely figure teachers as anthrophagic. A common complaint is that a punitive teacher is "thirsty"—i.e., out for blood. And an overly strict teacher can be accused of "wildin' out," "beastin'," or "fiendin'," just as disruptive students are. This language figures teachers as threatening consumers of blackness. This could be read as a resistance to assimilation—a fear of being devoured, consumed, or subsumed under white culture. Similarly, a common motif in slave narratives is the belief by Africans that European enslavers are going to eat them upon capture. The young, middle-class, and often predominantly white teachers that many urban hiring programs are employing to teach in hard-to-staff and failing inner-city schools might be viewed as a new breed of colonizers setting foot into uncharted reaches of poor and black America. In this light, it is little wonder that turn-of-the-century tropes of cannibalism are resurfacing in the present-day idiomology of the urban classroom.

Food Fights

"A full belly makes a dull brain." — Benjamin Franklin

Perhaps nowhere are the pedagogical anxieties over orality more pronounced than in regard to food. A colleague described one of the banes of her middle school teaching experience as the daily battles with students over gum chewing. During my first year of teaching, I was oblivious to the war on gum waged in classrooms around the country. In my second year, my blindness suddenly ended. I became fixated on clenched jaws, the surreptitious passing of gum under desks, and the neon flashes in my students' mouths. My former laxity on punishing for gum chewing was shocking to my colleagues, and they implied that it threatened to undermine the power matrix of the school. And as I soon discovered, the prohibition on chewing gum and eating in the classroom is the first rule

in my school's discipline code, more important than the ban on carrying a weapon or inflicting physical harm. This seems to be a common trend in schools and public institutions. Why is the control over student orality the founding rule in many educational settings?

In her eloquent essay investigating the history of the "edible landscape of schools" in working class England, Burke (2005) offers some insight. She writes:

> Rituals and symbolic practices in all cultures involve food and drink in large measure. Social practices surrounding eating and drinking are associated with the cementing of bonds, differentiation according to privilege or status, and recognition through reward and punishment. The formal and informal edible landscape is a foundation of culture and in the school it forms in large part the distinctive culture of the institution. (p. 573)

Food spaces, she argues, are often "'forgotten spaces where informal learning occurs'" (p. 573). If a school, a microcosmic society, is marked by its eating practices, it becomes clear why the regulation of consumption takes a preeminent role in their discipline codes and what the hidden curriculum is. In an age of accountability concerned with the (bio)statistical quantification of student bodies, there is the implicit notion that if we can nourish urban youth, we can edify them and thus ensure a healthy social body. A school where student appetite runs wild, or gum is defiantly snapped, represents an anarchic socius resistant to quantification and measurement.

In an article tellingly entitled "Targeting Interventions for Ethnic Minority and Low-Income Populations," Kumanyika and Grier (2006) discuss the obesity "epidemic." They use the rhetoric of war to discuss "the fight against childhood obesity in minority and low-income communities" (p. 200). In their medical discourse, overeating is described as violent and self-destructive, on a par with drug abuse. Similar to arguments made in discussions of the War on Drugs, the War on Poverty, and even the war in Iraq, the researchers' contention is that this battle "pose[s] a major challenge for policymakers and practitioners planning strategies" (p. 187). "Winning the fight" will require more than transforming black and brown bodies; it will also "depend on the nation's *will* to change the social and physical environments in which these communities exist" (p. 187, italics added).

In an attempt at "Understanding and Closing the Gap" (p. 191) between low-income African American and Hispanic and "advantaged" (p. 187) white and

Asian children, Kumanyika and Grier (2006) point to poor critical literacy skills as being at least partly responsible for the health crisis. This demographic split interestingly mirrors the racial divisions in the frequently cited educational gap. Kumanyika and Grier write that, according to research, "African Americans and Hispanics spend significantly more time watching TV and movies and playing video games than do white youth," and that "Consumers in low-income households…are more likely to view television advertising as authoritative" (p. 192). By possessing what the authors deem inferior media literacy skills, disadvantaged minorities are posited as passive and willing consumers of destructive media and marketing. Education (to borrow the researchers' medical discourse) is offered as a possible 'cure' for the 'deficiency.' "[S]chools can reduce the negative effects of advertising on minority and low-income children by teaching media literacy courses" (p.193), they argue. By linking obesity to inferior critical thinking skills, the medical experts mirror the subtle racist ideologies proclaimed by the educational consultant. Minority students are again configured as more body than mind, with unchecked appetites for both food and dangerous media.

Kumanyika and Grier (2006) argue that, in addition to honing literacy skills, schools can further address the epidemic by infiltrating Burke's (2005) "forgotten spaces of learning"—food spaces. The school cafeteria is an ideal battleground for the fight against obesity and for force-feeding "wholesome" ideologies. As Burke observes, in the United Kingdom:

> Certainly there was a concern to instruct, through feeding, 'correct' modes of behavior in relation to food and drink consumption and the imposition of discipline and control around the school meal was regarded as one importantmeans of challenging working-class habits and replacing them with middle-class norms. Children brought with them practices around food learned often in homes… were considered by educational professionals to be uncouth, coarse and ill-mannered. (p. 574)

Schools today provide "alimentary" education to poor minority students under the aegis of federally sanctioned programs, rather than through a hidden curriculum. And as Burke notes, "the project of mass compulsory education…afforded the state the opportunity to measure, know and shape not only the mind but also the body of the child" (p. 574). A body that is measured and known is an easier body to discipline and control, and inner-city schools have long struggled with how to

best "manage" their minority populations. For urban educators, it is not enough to control what comes out of our students' mouths; we are also charged with controlling what goes in.

Dyspepsia

"Indigestion is charged by God with enforcing morality on the stomach."
— Victor Hugo

The scene with Denicia is an apt example of how the projects of accountability and standardization create deep-seated teacher and student ambivalence. My own relationship with orality is thus highly conflicted. At the level of language, I must be continually on guard—carefully monitoring the utterances I let loose and controlling and deflecting those of my students. Students, on the other hand, use inappropriate exclamations and foodstuffs as tools of play and power. Their remarks are often intricately tied with race and often play with whose body is the subject of observation: "Ms. Nikki can I touch your hair?", "Look at Ms. Nikki's face getting red!", "Ms. Nikki you've got a booty for a white girl!" As Foucault (1995) observes, the "political technology of the body" (p. 26) is always slippery, and the teacher's body is never immune in the classroom. Today's culture of accountability, standardization, and data-driven instruction has positioned the classroom as a place where the rule is eat or be eaten. Teachers are pushed to observe and quantify, to medicalize and pathologize, while they and their students reach numerical benchmarks or risk being deemed unfit or left behind. The teacher's apple—that conflated symbol of both teacher and student orality—hangs precariously in the balance.

Gasping for Air

"The Americans are violently oral." — W.H. Auden

Toni Morrison describes the bleating cry of white baby dolls. A student drops an empty soda bottle. I stoop over to still its jarring reverberations. The doll is dismembered, its metallic voicebox found and destroyed. Denicia sticks out her tongue at me. I look away. "I'm not talking to you anymore," she threatens. I don't ask why. We read on about rape, blackness, and blue eyes. Denicia's book is closed, as usual, a deafening silence. She blows a big pink bubble and looks at me mischievously. Her mouth curves into a huge smile.

The bubble pops.

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CONFOUNDED AND COMPOUNDED BY LANGUAGE: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND HIGH STAKES TESTING

elizabeth park

Research literature has suggested that the language background of students may impact performance on standardized assessments. The results of data analyses from several locations nationwide support the findings of existing literature, which indicate that assessment results may be confounded by language background, particularly those with limited English proficiency. Abedi. (2003, p.x)

It's Saturday morning. I'm in a classroom in the school where I've taught for ten years, with adolescents who sacrificed their weekend morning sleep to be at school by 9:00 a.m. They're here for a prep course focused on the upcoming annual high stakes standardized test taken by every eighth grader in the state. Among the group are students new to the country and the language. They're variously called English Language Learners (ELLs), ESL (English as a Second Language) students, or Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, depending on the context. ELL, the most recent designation, emphasizes student agency, and is my preference. LEP is generally used in analytical contexts, when students are referred to in terms of their needs. ESL often describes curriculum and curricular material. In practice, distinctions aren't so clear, and the terms are often used interchangeably.

There's irony to this moment. I am often enraged at these tests, particularly when I think of Abedi's (2003) research, which clearly indicates that the language component of high stakes testing in any subject area—literature, writing, math, or science—creates interference that prevents ELLs from demonstrating what they know. In our state, only the newest ELLs take the test in their first language, and only if that language is Spanish. Those newcomers, who may or may not have experienced high stakes tests in their first countries, will deal with the pressures of this testing process on top of the confusion of adjusting to a new culture. The others, who've been in the country for over a year, are required to respond to the same prompts as mainstream students; even when extra time is allowed, the compounded challenge of taking the test and taking it in a language that isn't completely clear to them can be confounding. Sometimes it seems that they have to be

Ginger Rogers, doing everything Fred Astaire did, but backwards while wearing high heels.

The test I'm preparing my students for is part of the accountability movement that Shore and Wright (2000) discuss in their work on audit culture in education. These researchers describe the migration of this phenomenon from business to education and situate it in a Foucauldian sense as an extension of governmental power intended to create self-governing subjects. Our administrators are now subjects, and teachers are on their way to subjecthood. The adults of the school will be held accountable, not the students. However, student performance on the test is the indicator of school success or failure: it is the mercury that may indicate a fever, though it isn't the fever itself. And if, as may happen this year, the school's test scores once again fail to meet levels defined as acceptable by federal and state laws, our school may be a candidate for state action. If the state takes the school over, the administration will be the first target for change.

There is another factor to the accountability mix: the community. We are a small town in New Jersey, one in which there is a strong sense of "us" and "them." "Us" shifts deictically and can define those who are of European or African ancestry, those who are members of a long-established Puerto Rican group, those who are legal immigrants from a number of Caribbean, Central, and South American countries, and those who are here illegally. As a poor community, we are at times defensive, at times embarrassed, and at times angry. Those emotions can be directed by any group of us at any other group of us, or at outsiders. Property values are a large part of this complexity. When test scores drop, so do property values; housing in our town is comprised largely of single-family dwellings that are the major financial asset of most of their owners. The owners vote in school board elections, and their ballots can reflect their dissatisfaction.

I have lived in the town for 20 years; as the mother of a racially mixed family, I chose to be here mostly because of the cultural and racial diversity. I have never taught at another school, except for the colleges at which I've been an adjunct. In the middle school, I've occasionally taught English Language Arts to students in the mainstream, but most of my work has been teaching ESL classes to immigrant students. The latter is the work that moves me deeply. I'm entranced by the mystery of how human beings learn new languages, and compelled to know as much as I can about how that happens. I believe profoundly that reaching native-like proficiency in a new language can be among the most difficult cognitive and affective challenges a person can face. When I watch my

ELL students reach new understandings of how to express themselves in English, or see them embrace a new way of interpreting English texts or speech, I'm thrilled. I've seen them struggle, and I've struggled with them. My struggle may be empathetic; it may be analytical as I strive to identify strengths on which to help my students build learning; or it may consist of exploring different methodologies to find the right combination of teaching practices. My students' struggles open a door into a new world, creating an intellectual puzzle with affective components for me.

At the prep course, I discuss the kinds of writing tasks the students will see on the test. I explain how the testing rooms will be organized, and the process of distributing testing materials. We talk about how they may not speak during the test, or look ahead in the testing booklet. I distribute index cards, and on them I ask the students to write down whatever worries them about the test. Then I ask them to fold the cards several times and write their names on the outside. I collect the worries in a bag and place it at the front of the room, saying they may have their worries back at the end of the session. One of the students remarks that it's a "cool" idea. I've done this in previous years, and students seem to benefit from concretizing worry and being able to put it aside.

The work for today's session is responding to a prompt that introduces characters and a problem. Students are to write a short story describing how the main character solved the problem. After describing the type of prompt, and leading a discussion on how to respond, I distribute paper, pencils, and a sample prompt. The students begin writing.

This is a perfect opportunity to do some focused observation. Over the years, I've learned that watching students and reflecting on what I've seen creates layers of rich understanding and offers insights I couldn't otherwise have. Students also find themselves more comfortable when they know their teachers watch them, not as spies or with intrusive intent, but with care and concern. Aoki (in Pinar and Irwin, 2005, pp. 193-195) explains how "pedagogical watchfulness" can be a way of witnessing that gives students a sense of connection and grounding when their worlds are sundered. Another layer of this phenomenon is the presence of a "friendly but unobtrusive observer," as Wyatt-Brown (1993, p. 302) describes the observation strategies James Britton used as a teacher and D. W. Winnicott used as a child psychologist. Hall (2000) writes "…culture in our modern urban settings is best understood discursively as an 'open text'… Identity is not already there; rather, it is a production, emergent, in process" (p. xi). It is this

emergent identity I'm looking for as I decide which student to observe more closely for a few minutes.

My gaze falls on Roscío.[1] She is staring out the window, clearly not engaged in the task at hand. She seems aware that someone is watching. She turns to me, and I try to pack encouragement and understanding into the smile I give her. I want it to be like a cartoon suitcase, bulging with clothes in the middle, a shirtsleeve or two protruding from openings that strain against buckled straps. I will my smile to communicate that I understand, that I will not reprimand her, that she is safe.

Three months ago, at 7:00 a.m., Roscío arrived at school after two days' absence. One of the teachers found her at her locker, where by all the rules she had no business being; students aren't admitted to the building until 7:30 a.m. When Roscío didn't respond to the teacher's questions, the teacher became insistent. When she still didn't respond, the teacher pressed her even further. That's when the vice principal intervened, taking Roscío to one of the Spanish-speaking guidance counselors. Roscío told the counselor she'd come to school early because she didn't want to be alone anymore. Her mother had died in the local hospital the afternoon before, and Roscío had then made her way home and spent the night alone in the apartment she and her mother had shared. Our guidance counselor drove her from school that morning to her sister's home, where she still lives.

Over the course of the next day, we learned more about Roscío's home life. She'd lived for most of her 13 years with her father in Veracruz. Her parents divorced when Roscío was seven, and her mother came to the U.S. to be near older children already living here. Roscío traveled from Mexico to visit her mother from time to time; apparently relations were cordial all around. Then her mother was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. The family decided Roscío should spend time with her mother while it was still possible, so she traveled to the U.S. and moved into her mother's tiny apartment. It was there Roscío spent the night alone after her mother's death, keeping a solitary vigil she finally broke by walking to school the following morning.

When I look at Roscío across the classroom during our prep session, I wonder how she interprets the school's focus on preparing for the test. I wonder

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[1] While these stories are true, the students' names and certain other factors that might divulge their identities have been changed.

if she had testing experiences of this kind in Mexico, and if so, what they might have meant for her. Here, though the stakes are high for the school, the results of these tests will have little academic impact on ELLs. Instead, teacher recommendations, local school guidelines about time spent in the program, and the results of assessment tools specifically designed to measure English proficiency will determine Roscío's placement for next year. In the classroom where I'm preparing students who don't speak English to take a test that may determine the fate of the school, I look again at Roscío and ask myself what I'm doing here. Why have I taken on the responsibility for showing these students what they will be facing in a month or so, for trying to give them instruction in how to take the test? I don't believe in standardized tests. I don't believe that young people should be subjected to the kind of pressure that can make them freeze, cheat, or just give up.

I think of a student from Ecuador who enrolled in school two days before the test. Placed alongside her ELL peers, given pencils and a test booklet in English, she looked around her, put her head down on the desk, and wept for the entire day. She was reacting as much to the atmosphere of her new school as to the prospect of a test in a language she didn't know.

The culture of the school changes during the weeklong battery, when each day is assigned its content area. The change is a response to the "secure" nature of the tests. The atmosphere becomes military at best, prison-like at worst. Regulations are distributed. Teachers are warned that state examiners may appear unannounced to look for infractions of the myriad rules. Stories are told of teachers in unspecified nearby districts who lost their teaching licenses because students were observed to be conversing before everyone in the room had completed a test section. The week before testing, all classroom posters are covered, lest they remind students of the steps of the writing process or hint at ways to interpret text. Administrators make the rounds, performing official inspections, ticking off what must be removed or covered, and announcing that on their return they expect to find a classroom that passes muster.

Students are called to a meeting in which they're informed that if they are tardy on a testing day, they will spend the day doing silent work and take the test the following week. They're told they may not leave their desks during the test. They're told that if they're disruptive in any way they'll be escorted from the classroom and assigned to in-school suspension. They're told the penalty for cheating will be out-of-school suspension. In both cases they'll take the test the week after their classmates do. They're told that opening a test booklet before the

teacher announces the test has started could invalidate all of the tests for the entire school, that the school could then be fined tens of thousands of dollars, and that the test would have to be readministered.

As I contemplate this harsh reality, I think of Alberto. He offers a picture of a student caught in the web of "pernicious insistence on measurable standards, high stakes tests, and accountability that has filtered down to even the youngest children and their teachers" (Silin, and Lippman, 2003, pp. 67-68).

I watched Alberto for months, hoping to understand him better. He spoke Spanish to his fellow students but never uttered a word of English in class. This isn't unusual newcomer behavior; Krashen is credited with calling attention to this "preproduction" stage of second language acquisition (Facella, Rampino, and Shea, 2003). It's a period of anywhere from a few weeks to a year, during which new ELLs may use silence as a language-learning tool. Instead of talking, they observe and listen, gathering data about their new environment and its language.

When I learned that Alberto's parents had left him in Ecuador with his grandparents when they came to the U.S. six years before, I felt he might need extra time to adjust to what was essentially a new family. When I found him cheating on quizzes and copying his classmates' assignments, I withheld judgment. When I asked him to read a poem to me in Spanish, he froze. I began to suspect that he was illiterate. Then, bizarrely, I received a report that he'd made the only perfect score in the class on the weekly online tracking assessments. I was certain it was either a fluke, or that he'd broken the code—or that a friend had. It wasn't long before it was discovered that another student had figured out the programming and shared the secrets with several others, including Alberto.

Determined to understand his problems, one day I invited Alberto to sit next to my desk and asked the students to write about their homes in their first countries. Separated from others whose papers he could copy, Alberto wrote nothing. I asked him to stay after class to talk about it. By then, I was convinced that he was unable to read or write. My observations had also convinced me that he had developed some very sophisticated perceptual and communicative techniques, often bypassing verbal communication so skillfully that you didn't notice he hadn't spoken.

I told him, in my broken Spanish, "*Yo se que el trabajo de la escuela es muy dificil para ti.*" (I know that schoolwork is very difficult for you.) He nodded, and with a half smile his face expressed a sadness that was piercing. Then I told him, "*Y tambien yo se que tu eres muy inteligente.*" (And I also know that you are very

intelligent.) Tears welled in his eyes and he began to sob. I wondered if anyone had ever acknowledged to him how hard he had worked to bluff his way through seven years of schooling without reading or writing. I was filled with respect for this young man who was mustering ways to cope, and I began to lobby hard for the special help he deserved. A year later Alberto was transferred into special education classes.

I glance at the clock. It's time, according to the script the state provides, to announce that the class has ten more minutes to work. I scan the room, gazing at my test prep class, and sigh. I do know why I'm here. I'm here to know these students and to know their stories, to provide some sanctuary from a threatening environment in which being too intimidated to perform academically becomes more than a possibility. I'm not yet ready to take on the government agencies that mandate unreasonable and unreliable assessment measures, but I can help prepare students by teaching them what to expect.

I must remember this as the test marches toward us.

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