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Welcoming Play in Times of Trauma: A Response to Cassie Brownell

Karen Wohlwend

I'm honored and delighted to welcome Cassie Brownell to a growing community of early childhood play researchers. In one sense, welcoming implies an unequal power relation where an established member of a community introduces an unknown newcomer. This feels a bit disingenuous. Cassie is already a rising star in our field and really needs no introduction! Her work is part of an exciting new trend in literacy research that blends play with social activism and community building.

Cassie is a part of a group of emerging scholars who see and build upon brilliance that is already there: Children do not need to be taught to play or to take play seriously.¹ In this special issue, the notion of welcoming is greatly enriched by Jonathan Silin's scholarship, which invites an opportunity to open up our thinking, as well as our arms.

Welcoming activates the generosity, unflinching self-criticality, and openness that permeates Silin's work. This kind of welcome reaches outward toward newcomers—whether young children or emerging scholars. A welcome can be a compassionate gift and the beginning of a connection. We feel this in Cassie's reflection on her first year of teaching when a group of Black teachers embrace her as a new member of their school community and New Orleans neighborhood. We feel the impact of their care and support.

After Cassie evacuates to safety, she expresses her longing to return to her month-old teaching position in a hurricane-torn community that she already considers home. We feel her grateful appreciation of the teachers as professionals and scholars with accumulated experiences that deeply inform their teaching. This welcome is ethical action, infused with respect for learners and teachers and empathy attuned to both their pleasures and their pain from “losses [that] mark our lives from the earliest years” (Brownell, this issue).

A welcome is also an opening of self that reaches inward, an act of making oneself vulnerable to the world. Through Cassie's narrative, the teachers' respect for children's realities is palpable; children are welcome to bring traumatic life experiences into the space of the classroom. This is no small thing. It requires adults to recognize and acknowledge their own discomfort and to realize that welcoming play invites children to narrate their pain. Play invites children's sense-making of trauma and brings the raw realities of their lived lives out into the open, engaging taboo topics that often make teachers uncomfortable.

1 See also the work of these emerging scholars who take a critical perspective on play: Beth Buchholz, Nicholas Husbye, Julie Rust, Jaye Johnson Thiel, Jon Wargo, Christy Wessel Powell, Annette Wood, and Haeny Yoon.

Cassie points out how play simultaneously engages joy and pain. Her poignant examples of children replaying the global pandemic with physically distanced Lego figures and dolls lining up and staying apart show how children mirror the world outside. Anthropologists have long chronicled examples of children replaying the global disasters of their lifetimes, from the Titanic to World War II, to building and knocking down wooden blocks simulating the collapse of the New York World Trade Center twin towers in the September 11, 2001 tragedy (Beresin, 2002).

Death is a topic that is rarely welcomed into early childhood classrooms (Silin, 1995). Cassie notes that teachers in her school did not squelch children's play imitating floating bodies in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. This work aligns with early childhood scholars Gail Boldt (2002) and Stephanie Jones (2004), who honestly and self-critically acknowledge their own discomfort when children play or talk about taboo topics in the classroom. These scholars look beyond what's safe and familiar to focus on building a safe space where children are trusted and supported to work through the uncertainty in their worlds in times of pandemic or natural disasters.

Welcoming is an opening of possibilities that anticipates what is wished-for and improvises on what is already present. Cassie notes that whether or not play is welcomed at school, children find a way to play and play finds a way to leak out, to transverse and transgress classroom norms. Cassie illustrates this with the example of children's pretend duels with paper light sabers that suddenly turn into "electric eels" whenever the teacher comes around (Wohlwend, 2013). Through play, children flex their imaginative prowess and become adept at making the most of opportune moments to sneak play into school, "under the radar."

To open educational spaces in this way necessitates a critique that justifies time for play and views young learners' diversity and developing abilities as strengths and resources. "Accept children where they are" is a familiar adage for early childhood professionals that aims to build on children's current abilities as strengths rather than needs. This strength orientation recognizes that learning cannot be confined to a universal lock-step sequence of developmental stages but takes many paths (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004). To create welcoming spaces in schools, we must move away from testing and monitoring of both children and teachers that sees differences as deficits to be corrected. Instead, as Cassie so powerfully illustrates, welcoming spaces allow children's and teachers' creativity to thrive and honor the diverse cultural and linguistic resources children bring to school.

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