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Squeezed, Stretched, and Stuck: Teachers Defending Play-Based Learning in No-Nonsense Times

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

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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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