

IRA OUTSTANDING DISSERTATION AWARD FOR 2008

Kindergarten as Nexus of Practice: A Mediated Discourse Analysis of Reading, Writing, Play, and Design in an Early Literacy Apprenticeship

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How does “playing school,” an ordinary childhood pastime, shape children’s reading abilities, classroom identities, and relative social positioning? This ethnographic study of kindergarten literacy play situates children’s combinations of play, reading, writing, and design within a *nexus of practice* (Scollon, 2001), the web of seemingly natural combinations of ways of interacting shared by an embodied community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). When literacy and play practices combine, they support and strengthen one another, proliferating ways for children to “do school” and increasing access for diverse learners. For example, playing school produces a *reading/playing nexus* where (a) reading supports play goals—*reading to play*—as children read books and charts to make play scenarios more credible or to gain the cooperation of other players and (b) playing supports reading development—*playing to read*—as pretending to be the teacher and teaching pretend students enables children to share and explore reading strategies.

To reconceptualize kindergarten as nexus of practice, this dissertation draws upon cultural–historical activity theory and models (Engeström, 1990; Leont’ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978) and practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) supported by critical sociocultural perspectives (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) to (a) frame play as a cultural and transformative force in peer culture (Corsaro, 2003; Marsh, 1999); (b) analyze discourse through close readings of talk, actions, materials, and contexts (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Gee, 1999; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Scollon, 2001); and (c) investigate early literacy as ideological practices situated within overlapping social

spaces (Leander, 2002). In early literacy apprenticeships, children as novices learn to take up reading and writing practices through mediated encounters in which expectations for participation are implicitly or explicitly expressed and responsibility for learning is gradually released (Bomer, 2003; Rowe, 2008; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2004). Children also engage in writing, play, and design practices to appropriate and display peer-valued popular media and to participate in peer culture (Dyson, 2003). Nexuses of practice in events and spaces that blended children’s culture and classroom culture were located to examine the following:

- How play and design practices function as meaning-making practices within an expanded definition of early literacy
- How nexuses of play, design, reading, and writing practices expand and/or restrict opportunities for diverse learners to mediate materials and meanings and to participate more fully in peer and school cultures

Through network sampling, teacher interviews, classroom visits, and classroom environment surveys, I identified a focal classroom in a U.S. midwestern public elementary school: an all-day kindergarten where literacy, play, and design opportunities were integrated in a daily two-hour period. One teacher and 21 children (12 boys, 9 girls; all 5- and 6-year-olds; 8 immigrants from China, Russia, the Philippines, Mexico, and Sudan) participated in the research. Data collection and analysis was organized through a three-pronged

research design. Mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) of talk and action in key nexuses triangulated with multimodal analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) of relevant material artifacts and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) of cultural models expressed through play identities and classroom positioning. Field notes, audiotapes, photographs, and videotapes recorded children's talk and physical action with literacy tools, toys, and materials. Emergent coding identified frequent reading, writing, play, and design practices, facilitated by qualitative data analysis software and informed by previous pilot studies that were conducted in other primary classrooms (Wohlwend, 2006, 2007, 2008). Close interactional analysis of language and visual analysis of objects in key nexuses (integrated practices, e.g., reading to play and playing to read) linked valued practices to classroom participation.

Results and Conclusions

Maps of meaning-making practices and peer groups demonstrated that key nexuses varied among three peer groups, characterized by their shared preferences for particular materials and activities.

1. *Reading to play/playing to read.* One group of girls and boys regularly merged reading and play practices as they pretended to be the teacher while reading books and charts in the classroom meeting area. These children enhanced teacher performances by using exaggerated expressive reading while flipping books around to show illustrations to imaginary students. Through pretense that reproduced school routines and nurturing/need discourses in developmentally appropriate practice, children accessed empowered classroom identities as they mediated the meanings of texts and playfully taught one another to read.
2. *Writing to play/playing to write.* A culturally diverse group of girls and boys merged play and writing practices to appropriate and revise Disney Princess texts. Children stretched gendered identities in consumerist and creative expression discourses as they animated dolls and authored books, puppet shows, and plays during writing workshop sessions.
3. *Designing to play/playing to design.* A group of boys merged design and play practices to “make stuff” and enact college sports events, creating a classroom space where boys could manipulate discourses of child obedience and learner agency to exclude girls and resist teacher mediation and

feminine nurturing by describing their projects as “just a design.”

Through these nexuses, children made sense of books and multimedia through improvised play performances that affected their access and standing within peer and school cultures. Microanalysis showed that as children read, wrote, drew, and played they negotiated their interpretations of book and film meanings, vied for valued play roles and empowered classroom identities, maintained joint play scenarios, and protected child-controlled social spaces. Children used nonverbal actions as well as language to position one another through silence, removal of objects, tacit recognition of play roles, and shared use of materials. While enacting a teacher read-aloud, a child could exert power over another student by tapping her foot as a directive to “sit right here,” combining mediated actions to turn book-handling into “book-wielding.”

Nexuses within this early literacy apprenticeship merged school and peer cultures, producing social spaces where children upheld, reproduced, and transformed expectations that indicated how kindergartners should act as readers and writers, leaders and followers, or girls and boys. As children negotiated and agreed upon play contexts, they reinscribed and resisted gendered discourses, cultural models of childhood, and naturalized histories of practice that constituted accepted ways of participating in this classroom.

Expanded definitions of literacy, such as the nexuses described here, challenge current trends toward scripted, reductive curricula and the related erosion of play periods in early childhood classrooms. This reconceptualization of classrooms as nexuses of practice supports integrated curricula that blend literacy and play practices as interconnected and interdependent ways of interpreting and producing texts, images, artifacts, and social spaces that enrich meaning-making and expand opportunities for diverse ways of participating at school.

Notes

The International Reading Association's Outstanding Dissertation Award, which has been given annually since 1964, recognizes exceptional contributions made by doctoral students in reading or related fields. Candidates are self-nominated or nominated by their dissertation advisors. Applicants must be current members of the International Reading Association. Each submits a monograph based on the dissertation, which must have been completed during the previous academic year. These monographs undergo rigorous review by the Association's Subcommittee on the Outstanding Dissertation Award. The winner and other finalists are recognized at the Research Awards Luncheon held at the Reading Research Conference, a day prior to IRA's annual convention in April or May. The award also carries with it a monetary prize made possible by a donation from Pearson Scott Foresman, a U.S. educational pub-

lishing house. More information about the award is available at the Association's website, www.reading.org.

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