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## **Play in Public Schools**

Casey Yanella

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# **Play in Public Schools**

by  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Science in  
Education  
Bank Street College of Education  
2008

## Play in Public Schools by Casey Yannella

### Abstract:

This is a research paper and literature review on the issue of play and developmentally appropriate practice in the public schools of New York City during the era of No Child Left Behind. It begins with an examination of the theory surrounding play in the primary grades, along with discussion of studies dealing with play in today's public schools. The work includes school visits and an ethnographic description of the models of play environments in these schools. Finally, it also includes recommendations for programmatic actions to be taken in order to reinstate play in public schools.



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## **I. Introduction:**

### **Background**

## **I. Introduction: Background**

A quick walk through virtually any New York City public school provides visual confirmation of a painful reality. Play has virtually disappeared from the curricula and programs of all but the bravest, most daring, most high-performing schools, with the most powerful networks of administrators and parent-advocates. In a *New York Times* editorial, schools advocate Clara Hemphill wrote of a charter school kindergarten class, in session during the month of July: “The classroom has no blocks, dress-up corner or play kitchens. There is no time for show and tell, naps or recess. There is homework every night. For much of the day, the children are asked to sit quietly with their hands folded as their teachers drill them in phonics, punctuation, and arithmetic” (2006). The American Academy of Pediatrics echoes the sentiment: “A 1989 survey taken by The National Association of Elementary School Principals found 96% of surveyed school systems had at least one recess period. Another survey a decade later found that only 70% of kindergarten classrooms had a recess period” (2006).

I became a teacher through Teach For America, which places recent college graduates in low-income communities for two-year teaching commitments. Following five weeks of training, I found myself in a kindergarten classroom, structured in much the same way as the one described above. Students wore uniforms and, beginning in the second week of school, received homework, in multiple subjects, on a nightly basis. The room was virtually devoid of materials for art and dramatic play and lacked any equipment with which to play music; the block center seemed to be a paltry afterthought, the lone concession to child development, located in a corner.

I soon discovered that the physical reality of the classroom simply made evident the curriculum and expectations of the school. Each day, students were to receive instruction in a number of subjects: phonics, writing, reading (in a whole-group and a small-group setting), mathematics, science, and social studies. Social studies and science were not based on students' interests; rather, the curriculum was built around a kindergarten social studies textbook. It was a place focused intensely on academic achievement, though not on development. The expectation was that students would meet state standards, not that students would move towards greater levels of cognition and abstract thinking. Students are expected, throughout the day, to sit quietly, listen to lessons, and complete independent work. To reinforce these expectations, each classroom maintained a system of consequences, and, eventually, a first- and second-grade detention was instituted to deal with problem behaviors.

The kindergarten that Clara Hemphill describes, then, while extreme, and certainly a departure from the kindergarten programs that characterized the experiences of earlier generations, is not unique. Rather, it exists throughout New York City, and the country, spurred on by an effort to enable students to reach higher academic levels and younger ages. While teachers and administrators may be able to point to the academic gains made by young students, something is severely lacking from these classrooms: a sense of purposefulness and joy from the students.

It was at Bank Street that I first began to critically examine the deficits in the current system of kindergarten education and early childhood public education more

generally. As my classes introduced me to unit blocks, dramatic play, and folk games through classes, I became more interested in finding a way to incorporate play and other developmentally appropriate modalities into the curriculum. This interest ultimately led to my decision to pursue this independent study project. This work first explores in greater detail the theoretical foundation of play (beginning with thinkers such as Vygotsky), then progresses to an examination of play settings at two noted New York City progressive schools, one public and one independent. Ultimately, I will use this independent study to reflect on my own classroom practice and consider ways to incorporate play, and, on a broader level, joy and a love of learning, in public school classrooms.

## **II. Theoretical Foundation of Play**

## II. Theoretical Foundation of Play

The first kindergartens, as created in Germany, were extremely respectful to the needs and development of young children. Norman Brosterman (1997) writes of Froebel's vision of kindergarten:

Froebel discerned that harnessing the natural activity for children, often referred to in kindergarten literature as children's 'work,' was the key to educating the young...All of the kindergarten activities, the singing, dancing, gardening, storytelling, gifts, and occupations were play. This early acknowledgment of children as something other than simply small, stupid people engaged in useless activity set the stage for acceptance of child psychology" (p. 33).

The Kindergarten Movement of the mid-nineteenth century, then, was based first and foremost on children's development. The break seems so severe at this point, then, that it seems appropriate to question what ultimately happened to the vision of Froebel and his assistant. It seems that we are, in fact, teaching a new kindergarten, one that has departed entirely from Froebel's vision.

Many questions ultimately surface. What happened to play and other open experiences (such as art and music) in kindergarten? What happened to the Deweyan idea of giving children experiences that will ultimately enable them to learn and grow? What about Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, within which play exists? Most importantly, though, why is it that the so-called new kindergarten seems to exist only, or most predominately, in low-income communities? What does it mean for us, as a democratic society, and as teachers striving to create a democratic society, that social class ultimately determines one's ability to have a developmentally appropriate and nurturing kindergarten experience?

Most ironically, it is perhaps low-income students that could benefit the most from play in the primary years (defined here as kindergarten and first grade). All children, including those in low-income communities bring to their first years in school, a great range of experiences. However, many might argue that they lack the type of experiences that are necessarily to provide the foundation for further academic work and a productive existence in school. Many kindergarten students at my current setting did not attend pre school, many first grade students did not attend kindergarten. While such students do not have letter recognition skills or a large sight word bank, they also do not have other (less assessable): the oral language necessary for storytelling, knowledge of the conventions of print, concept of number, or the experience of working with other children and cooperating.

It is play, not twenty-minute silent reading blocks, that would enable children to reach such profoundly important developmental milestones. Play, particularly dramatic play, is powerful within the development of oral language skills. Dramatic play, by its very nature, demands conversation and the telling of stories. All play, whether outdoor play, block play, or dramatic play, teaches children to work with each other by directly encountering situations that demand cooperation: What should you do if somebody is using a block that you need? Should you wait for somebody else to finish before you go down the slide? What happens if you accidentally knock over somebody else's block structure? Play ultimately demands that children develop the ability to answer such questions, and to act on those answers. Children are forced to ask and answer other



questions, though. Perhaps most importantly, play is about making sense of the world, about discovering one's own roles in various situations, and about processing understandings, and misunderstandings, of common situations.

Barbara Biber (1903-1993), an eminent and important thinker within Bank Street's history, who has perhaps produced the most important, succinct, and eloquent writing about the value and importance of play for young children. Once play had been firmly ensconced within thought on early childhood education, Biber (1951) synthesized the profound importance of dramatic play for children. She writes: "He [the child] projects his own pattern of the world into the play and, in so doing, brings the real world closer to himself. He is building the feeling that the world is his, to understand, to interpret, to puzzle about, to make over. For the future, we need citizens in whom these attitudes are deeply ingrained" (1951, p. 189-190). She adds, discussing the other growth need of play: "The chance to express negative feeling through play can save the child considerable anguish...the child does not necessarily play out what his actual experience has been. He may instead be playing out the residue of feeling which his experience has left him with" (p. 191). Ultimately, Biber sums up beautifully the two most valuable benefits of play for children: making sense of the world and expressing, and beginning to understand, emotion.

Considering Biber's association with play, it may be appropriate to discuss the inclusion of play within the tradition of progressive education. Indeed, it seems that many of the most progressive institutions are often those that incorporate play in the most

extensive ways, for instance, the City and Country School (once called the Play School, although the name was changed at the request of children, who did not feel the name reflected how hard they worked at the school (Bloom, 1989)). I question, though, whether or not the use of play can be categorized as progressive teaching, or if it should simply be categorized as good, developmentally appropriate practice. Play, first and foremost, is about meeting the child's developmental needs and reaching a child where he or she is, ultimately moving the child forward from that point. Ultimately, I am not sure that play resides exclusively in the domain of progressive and should thus be excluded from the umbrella of mainstream educational practice. Ultimately, we, as educators, need to define our goals. Are we speaking of reading levels, of demonstrated mastery of math standards, or do we want children to understand the world and move to greater levels of cognitive understanding?

For Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934), play was not a free form, open activity. Rather, it serves very important and specific functions. First, the function of play is to elevate the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky wrote:

In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his unusual everyday behavior; in play, he is, as it were, a head above himself. Play contains...all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his unusual level...Play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximal development (in Bodrova and Leong, 1996, p. 126).

The authors go on to describe how this might look in a classroom. For instance, a five-year-old child may have trouble sitting during whole-group instruction, and can only focus for three minutes. In play, though, as she plays school, she may be able to focus on

the imaginary teacher for ten minutes. Thus, play serves as a sort of “scaffolding,” enabling a child to move her development above its current level (p. 127).

Furthermore, Vygotskian play enables children to separate idea from object, ultimately enabling them to achieve one of the most important developmental milestones: the ability to think abstractly, to focus on symbolic thought in the empirical, abstract world.

“According to Vygotsky, the object substitutions that characterize make-believe are crucial in this process [that of relying on ideas to guide behavior]. When children use a stick to represent a horse, or a folded blanket to represent a sleeping baby, their relation to reality is dramatically changed...separation of meaning occurs because children change the substitute object’s usual meaning when they behave toward it in a pretend fashion” (Berk and Winsler, 1995, p. 55).

Vygotsky was referring to very young children (two- and three-year-olds) when he made these declarations; nonetheless, the move towards abstract thought is one that occupies years and takes on a special importance in the early primary years, especially in terms of work in mathematics. Symbolic thought was also important to Jean Piaget (1896-1980), also a proponent of symbolic play in order to promote the child’s move to greater levels of concrete, abstract thinking throughout the early years (see: Labinowicz, 1980). Therefore, in the way that it promotes higher-level thinking, this application of play ultimately retains great relevance for children in the primary years.

It is important to note that, within the ideas that sprung from Vygotsky’s work, play is not an open-ended activity, free of adult intrusion, as it is often viewed within some circles, especially when it is contrasted with more productive activities. In fact, in

order for play to truly exist within the zone of proximal development, it seems that some adult intrusion would be necessary, as the teacher would need to continually scaffold the child's experiences to ensure that he or she is still learning from play:

In Western industrialized societies, play first appears between caregivers and children; pretense and games are initially learned under the supportive guidance of experts. From these interactions, children appropriate the communicative conventions, social skills, and representational capacities that permit them to carry out make-believe on their own (Berk and Winsler, 1995, p. 63).

According to Vygotsky scholars, then, adult scaffolding is eventually removed, and play becomes a social experience, with children receiving scaffolding from their peers, as opposed to adults.

Within Froebel's work, play was also a structured experience, based on the experience of working with certain "gifts," each of which had a specific developmental function. He wrote:

Each plaything is, in a certain point of view, a complete one (as, for example, each of the senses of the human being is itself a unit, and the senses collectively form again a whole of a higher kind). So each plaything has its appointed task to accomplish in the development and education of the child to the stage of maturity, and this task is to be accomplished by means of this development and education (1899/2001, p. 192).

Again, the play that this thinker describes is a structured experience, this time based on specific materials provided at certain times in a child's development. Each of these materials has a specific developmental purpose and prescribed use. For instance, he states, about the solids he prescribes for kindergartners:

these solids and the play with them give many opportunities for the observation and consideration of form, size, and number (particularly for a

somewhat advanced stage of childhood), and in many ways introduce the child into the phenomena of Nature and life around him (1899/2001, p. 317).

Much like Vygotsky, Froebel places the adult in an important role within the child's play and development. Froebel believed that adults interaction was so important that he composed a series of songs for mothers and caregivers to share with their children. The gifts were also given to children by adults. Froebel gives us a vision of play that is developmentally-focused, structured to meet the needs of individual children, and includes adults in very specific, important roles.

If the ideas of Froebel and Vygotsky underscore any concept: it is this: play is not an unstructured experience that simply allows children to indulge their whims. In all actuality, play, in its greatest form, is a structured experience that involves some careful adult intervention, such as conversation and choice of materials. Ultimately, play should not stand in contrast to academic pursuits or productive activities. In fact, in order to help children truly grow, play demands some specific structure. Play, then, should not be, and is not, an activity that allows children to pursue any activity of their choice, in any manner that they may choose, for any length of time and for any purpose. Rather, play requires specific goals, specific developmental objectives, and methods of scaffolding or extending an activity.

Froebel and Vygotsky both established the importance of play in emotional and cognitive development. Burke writes convincingly on the importance of make-believe play. According to her article, children who engage in make believe play of the purest

kind (that is, the kind scaffolded by adults, though not necessarily intruded upon by adults) develop cooperative skills, memory, language, and self-control. There is also a strong link between the imaginative play of the preschool and kindergarten years and the more rules-driven activities of middle childhood. According to Burke, imaginative play gradually becomes more rules-focused as children become more conscious of the social rules and goals of their fantasy situations. Burke also writes of play as essential for movement towards the rules-governed games of middle childhood and, with those rules-governed games, cooperative, self-regulation, and goal-setting skills (1994). We see, through Burke's work, that there is a definite developmental thrust within play. No play activity or stage exists by itself; rather, they, and the skills gained, spiral, ultimately leading children to a greater capacity for self-control and self-awareness, abstract thought, and interaction with peers and adults.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, though, children were not expected to learn to read at the age of five and six. Although some may question the developmental appropriateness of this objective (or certain efforts made to achieve this objective), it is an objective that is supported by play. Lucy Calkins (1994) has written about the possible inclusion of writing activities into play, such as creating signs during block building and, within the dramatic play area (which the author calls "the area best suited to functional writing), shopping lists, menus, phone messages, and books for dolls (p. 65-66). Vivian Gussen Paley (2004) describes story telling in the preschool classroom, whereby children's stories from dramatic play are written down, retold, acted out, and enjoyed by the whole class. She also describes a sort of textual innovation of the works

of Beatrix Potter by young preschool students (2004, p. 52-53). Unfortunately (perhaps most unfortunately for the children), these activities may not necessarily result in an immediate upswing in reading levels. However, these activities do result in an increase in the fundamental skills of literacy, for instance, oral storytelling and the knowledge that writing is used to communicate information.

Sara Smilansky, an Israeli scholar of child development, has written extensively about the benefits of dramatic play in two important areas: future success in school and cognitive development. Echoing Vygotsky's emphasis on abstraction, she writes:

Problem solving in most school subjects requires a great deal of make-believe: visualizing how the Eskimos live, reading stories, imagining a story and writing it down, solving arithmetic problems, and determining what will come next. History, geography, and literature are all make-believe (1990, p. 25).

Smilansky also argues that dramatic play is one experience that would enable children to move forward in cognitive tasks. Looking at three important studies, she points out that "a significant relationship was found between the child's ability to pursue a theme in the framework of sociodramatic play and the ability to look at picture content, organize it into a summary, and formulate a narrative so that it could be described verbally" (1990, p. 26). Smilansky takes Vygotsky and Froebel's more general idea that play is beneficial to children and makes it specific and current. We see how dramatic play endows highly desired and necessary skills for young, primary school children.

We return to Paley's work, though, in how she demonstrates the relevance of dramatic play for children growing up in today's world. She tells the story of a young

boy wrestling with the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as well as with his own family's complicated story of immigration:

'This was a plane,' he begins. 'Then it went to O'Hare and it picked up my grandpa last year. And my grandma was at Madras and then she went to India and we went to the Westin Hotel Building. And the plane crashed into O'Hare. And into the Westin tall building. And they fixed the plane and they had to fix all the people...but they couldn't fix the building. It was on fire' (2004, p. 5).

Here, Paley shows how a child sorted through one of the most important historical events of his generation, as well as a profound chapter in his family's history. We see what a powerful activity dramatic play can be for preschool children, and even for kindergarten and first grade children. Dramatic play ultimately enables children to explore what is happening around them in a safe, non-threatening setting, and on their own terms. Instead of chiding children to pursue serious, constructive activities, we need to ask the question: What could be more productive and important than a child's beginning to understand the world and the significant events happening in the world.

Harriet Cuffaro, an influential educator and Dewey scholar writes about the dramatic play in Elizabeth Hirsch's *The Block Book* (1996). This is an especially appropriate consideration for older children. She writes:

In a housekeeping area the child *finds* the set of refrigerator, stove, sink, bed, table, chairs, and other props. In the block area, the child must *create* the set or context for the play that will unfold...the child not only enacts a role but also is called upon to design and produce the setting (1996/1984, p. 79).

Blocks, then, ultimately add another element to dramatic play. Cuffaro points out that dramatic play now has three tasks: "To create the context for play rather than finding it already prepared; deal with reality and scale in translating ideas to the medium; and



gradually step outside of the self to a symbolized self in play” (p. 77). The author also points out such complex play is most likely to emerge, not in preschool-aged children, but in children who have already reached the age of cooperative play, that is, children who are five and six years of age. Even if a child had play experiences in preschool, it is evident that depriving them of play in kindergarten and first grade takes away the experience of synthesis suggested in Cuffaro’s writing.

Cuffaro also writes very specifically about the community-building, cooperative aspect of block play (as mentioned above, children reach the age of cooperative play around kindergarten or first grade). Blocks, by their very nature, and by the work that it would take to construct serious block structures and extend work over several days, demand group work and participation from several children. Most importantly, though, blocks grant the child *choice* in their social interactions. Children may build alone, work with others, work in a small group, or work as part of a “common challenge” (p. 84). Therefore, a child’s work in the block area can ultimately support his or her social development and move towards becoming part of an interdependent classroom community.

Finally, Cuffaro makes it clear that the social nature of block play has cognitive benefits, helping children to reach even higher levels of self-regulation and symbolic thinking. She writes, describing the block play that she had observed: “Each child in that block scheme had created not only a structure but also a set of rules that governed behavior and was appropriate to the role being played. In each encounter she had to deal not only with her rules but also with the rules of others, and there were instances when

she found encounters with these other realities difficult to accept” (1984/1996, p. 83). Such block work is especially important for children in kindergarten and first grade as they move towards the last phase in Piaget’s stages of play: one focused on rules, whether coming from adults or other children.

Within the elementary school curriculum, though, blocks also have many academic applications. Elizabeth Dreier (in Hirsch) points to writing and research skills (noting that a group of nine-year-olds created a series of storybooks that took place in their block city), the use of science (through simple machines and basic mechanics as well as considerations of balance), mathematics (concepts of size and scale, proportion, and measurement) to show some ways that blocks can be used in the elementary school classroom (1984/1996, p. 108-112). The further applications for enrichment are virtually limitless in all areas of the curriculum.

An important caveat: just as Froebel suggested certain materials, and Vygotsky referred to scaffolding, block play demands some specificity. This is important particularly in terms of materials. Three-year-olds work with blocks differently than do five- and six-year-olds. Therefore, five-and-six years require certain materials, a variety of different block shapes, and a certain proportion of shapes. Again, play becomes not a completely free, unstructured activity for children, but rather a structured activity subject to some carefully planned and executed adult intervention, in this case, in the choice of materials and the specific use of those materials.

## **The Role of Culture and Folklore**

In an essay on folklore, Dan Ben-Amos lays out what he refers to as a “triumvirate of attributes” consisting of irrationalism, ruralism, and traditionalism. These characteristics logically lead to other traits: anonymity, communality and communal ownership of origin, and universality. Alan Dundes (1965) provides an extensive list of what could be folklore. His list includes street vendor’s cries, names, and oral epics, as well as myths, legends, and folktales (although this list could be expanded to include children’s games and songs and a host of other mediums). We can view folklore as an experience, or a set of work, that is both specific and unique to cultures. However, folklore is a universal experience as well—each culture has its own special lore that is consistently shared throughout that culture’s history.

Given the reality of today’s classroom (in my own classroom, children represented Dominican, Puerto Rican, Bengali, Ghanaian, Trinidadian, and Guyanese culture), we, as teachers, must include our students’ backgrounds and cultural identities without our instructional program. Folklore is about identities, about shared experiences, and about the history and shared experiences of a cultural group (Jaffe, 1996). Children deserve the opportunity to experience, in a concrete way, other cultures, and to share the important experiences, games, stories, and songs of their own culture. Children and their families should have the opportunity to share the family lore and the forms of play traditional to their cultural backgrounds with other children in the classroom community. (an important theme and takeaway from: EDUC574: Folklore in Education, Spring 2007)

The specific play activities of folklore are readily available (beginning with the folklore available from the students themselves), plentiful, varied, and always adaptable to the needs and interests of a specific class. For instance, many folk games, such as hopscotch (which exists within many cultures) are capable of underscoring math concepts. Other songs may be useful for producing rhymes or writing poetry. Allowing students to hear stories for enjoyment enriches their language, vocabulary, and early literacy skills. This is not only another reason to integrate folklore into the classroom, but also an indication of the true value of play. Folklore provides the opportunity for enrichment throughout the grades in an effort to meet the developmental, or academic, needs of the classroom.

### **III. Play in Today's Schools**

### **III. Play in Today's Schools**

An American Academy of Pediatrics clinical report entitled *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds* (2006) discusses why play has declined so much, and it seems that many of those reasons may be related to our drive to create talented and intelligent children from their first moments of life. For instance, the report reads: "Parents receive messages from a variety of sources stating that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need from the earliest ages." The report, in its discussion of very young children, also blames the increasingly competitive college admissions process, which has created panicked parents who pursue admission to increasingly selective preschools and kindergartens and encourage older children to build a resume of activities and volunteer pursuits.

Of course, it could be argued that the problems mentioned above are unique problems of the privileged (although they should still be viewed as troublesome trends). However, the report does concede that play has been reduced in an effort to create brilliant, well-educated, academically successful children across the socioeconomic spectrum. Again, we return to *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB): "This trend [towards an intense focus on academic fundamentals], spearheaded by the NCLB Act of 2001, is a reaction to the unacceptable educational performance of America's children in some educational settings. One of practical effects of the trend is decreased time left during the school day for other academic subjects, as well as recess, creative arts, and physical education." Most heartbreakingly, though, the report also mentions: "In many

communities, children cannot play safely outside of the home unless they are under close adult supervision and protection. This is particularly true in areas that are unsafe because of violence or other environmental dangers.”

Ultimately, the bottom line seems to be that we have forgotten that children are children, and are developmentally different than adults. Instead, we want our children to behave as adults, promoting “sedentary styles of learning” (AAP, 2006), forcing them to develop their skills from very early ages (perhaps hoping that this preparation will benefit these children as they move towards adulthood), and, for children in low-income neighborhoods, expecting them to deal with the burden of adult problems and take on adult roles in terms of childcare and household management.

We see, then, that we cannot place the blame squarely on schools. Furthermore, we also see that this is not an inner-city problem, or an issue of “rich” or “poor.” Our national culture across the spectrum seems to be one that has uniformly rejected play as a legitimate childhood pursuit. Instead, we, as a culture, have chosen to focus on developing our children’s academic talents from an extremely young age. However, we, as educators, are in a unique position. While it may not be possible to change the currents of our national culture, educators (including administrators) have the power to provide to children the play experiences that are wholly lacking.

Educators, however, find themselves in a position of having to defend the value of play to parents, administrators, and colleagues. What does a teacher say to a parent who

is concerned that there is not enough “academic” work in a kindergarten classroom full of blocks and art supplies? How should an administrator, concerned about the reading levels of first graders, be approached with regard to the value of play? What would be the best way to handle a colleague concerned about the noise level that emanates from a classroom where children are given an open work time in the morning?

A 2005 *Young Children* article discusses “play policy,” an idea pioneered at the Hampshire (England) Play Policy Forum in 2002. According to the article, a play policy is designed to articulate the importance of play for all children, acknowledge that play is an inherent right of childhood (as per the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child), and enable all children to have access to good-quality play programs in their own neighborhoods, schools, and communities. A play policy, argue the authors, would enable teachers, parents, and other professionals to serve as advocates for their children and students’ needs: “We early childhood professionals must be prepared to assume an advocacy role in the area of play policy. Parents, teachers, and administrators must be willing to speak up and speak out on behalf of the play needs of our children” (2005).

The crisis in play ultimately illuminates one of the most important jobs that we as teachers and educators hold. We are, indeed, responsible for creating safe environments and pushing students to greater levels of cognitive understanding and social interaction. However, classrooms do not exist in a vacuum, and children have lives outside of the classroom. Therefore, it becomes clear that teachers and educators need to be advocates for their students. Although the arguments had with colleagues, administrators, and



parents may seem tedious and difficult, they may be among the most important of our careers. Teachers should bear in mind their power to, at the least, maintain a classroom that upholds the intention of their own vision, and, on a greater level, transform a school culture and force others to question their own practices and beliefs.

A written, or at least well-thought-out play policy, would enable teachers to serve as the best advocates for their students' interests. It is a teacher's job, then, to be both well-informed and well-prepared, and to communicate certain messages to administrators. There should be a definite intended outcome for play activities, a continued emphasis on standards (in public schools), and a purpose for each activity of the day. Regardless of the extra work involved in maintaining such a classroom, the dividends reaped by students in terms of developmental advances, opportunities for physical movement, and growth in linguistic abilities.

This portion of my work looks at schools that have, in fact, formulated some sort of a play policy. These two schools are ones that have kept children's current developmental needs—as opposed to misguided interest in their futures—at the forefront of their philosophy. As a result, children are still engaged in play in its purest form. Children experience play without regard for state standards and narrow academic objectives. Nonetheless, they are different schools with different approaches, providing wonderful fodder for viewing various theories and beliefs on play in action.

## **IV. School Visits**

#### **IV. School Visits**

##### *The Central Park East School (New York City)*

The Central Park East School was founded in East Harlem in the 1970s and quickly became well-known for its progressive ideals and the deep commitment to the philosophy upon which those ideas were built. While Deborah Meier (*The Power of Their Ideas*) believed deeply in the educational philosophies of progressive thinkers such as John Dewey and Jean Piaget, it was her fervent belief in democracy that truly led to the creation of Central Park East. She writes of efforts to privatize public schools: “If we abandon a system of common schools—through apathy or privatization—we deprive everyone, not just the least advantaged, of the kind of clash of ideas that will make us all more powerful...reinventing our public schools could provide an exciting opportunity to use our forgotten power to create imaginary worlds, share theories, and act out possibilities” (p. 11).

Central Park East began as a public school with a faculty of six teachers (including one director-teacher), and, eventually, two other schools were created in its model, along with a middle school and a secondary school. That model is one based on a number of powerful principles, among them, a collaborative environment (for both teachers and students), the importance of a small school population, heterogeneous groupings of students, high expectations for students (as opposed to the “dumbing-down” that had been going on in public schools for decades), and, perhaps most importantly, an expectation that teachers have a deep knowledge of their own students and an understanding of their developmental stage and needs. Perhaps key to that philosophy is

the latter aspect. Central Park East, from its first day, placed the needs and education of its students first and foremost.

*But When Do You Teach?*

Today's Pre-K/K classroom at Central Park East bears numerous similarities to the one that probably existed in 1974. The first thing that the visitor may notice is the large block area, which, on a Thursday afternoon (towards the end of the block-building week), was crowded with structures that range from ones that lay flat on the floor to those that are far taller than an adult, included accessories, such as literal representations of people and small, colored, square blocks, and that were built with a humungous range of blocks (this range was developed throughout the year), such as simple, square "half unit" blocks, "butter sticks," and ramps.

The day's schedule began with block building as a whole group, allowed a small group of children to return to the block area for further work after writing time, included a "choice time" (choices included "pretend play," puzzles, cooking, art activities with other teachers, and observation of a class pet), and had ample time for the weekly block clean-up (the entire class spent a substantial amount of time sorting and stacking blocks, returning those blocks to their designated shelves, and holding an "assembly line" to deconstruct an especially tall tower as a whole class). There was no time for what would be termed "direct instruction." Rather, the students, who had letter recognition skills, were writing conventionally, "sounding out" words, and answering mathematical questions, had been taught through 1-to-1 lessons and, ultimately, having constructed

their own knowledge through their interactions with materials, teachers, and their own peers.

Although students are free to make choices and make decisions about how they work with materials, there is some teacher intervention in terms of the developmental needs of play. For instance, as discussed above, there is a very specific and structured method to block clean-up. The selection of blocks changes throughout the year, with only several shapes available in September; more shelves are added as the year continues. The teacher discussed the fact that she had modeled the use of various representations of moving objects using blocks. Play is not an activity without structure. Rather, it is an activity that demands certain decisions of teachers, specific materials chosen for certain materials, and a set of expectations for children.

Children were also offered the choice of “pretend,” or dramatic play. The dramatic play center, although not integrated with the block area, as *The Block Book* suggests, is large and includes the traditional kitchen set-up and table. It also includes another innovation: technological materials. Students had access to computer keyboards and cellular telephones, and the telephones were the first materials that they reached for upon arrival in this area. Dramatic play is an activity that is designed to enable children to make sense of the world, so it seems that such materials would make sense in today’s dramatic play areas. The presence of such materials, though, runs in contrast to traditional progressivism (such as that present at the City and Country School), which requires that students use non-representative materials.

Above all, the classroom is one that communicates a profound respect for children, their abilities, and their work. There are virtually no purchased materials present, with the teacher opting instead for the work of children or teacher-produced materials. As discussed in Meiers's book, there is also a noticeable lack of "dumbing-down" of materials. Four- and five-year-olds are permitted to work with all of the materials in the classroom, including glue, and, with adult supervision, work with a needle and thread, acrylic paint, and a hot-glue gun. Children also prepared the snack for the class (and had done so since the beginning of the year) and were expected to read and follow a recipe using actual kitchen materials, such as a cheese grater, measuring cups, and silverware.

Play fits into this equation and philosophy perfectly for several reasons. First and foremost, it is respectful of children's developmental needs. As Vygotsky suggests, children at play are always in their Zone of Proximal Development. It provides the concrete operational experiences that young children demand, and it fulfills their need for movement and imaginative work. It also respects the needs of certain types of learners. Kinesthetic learners have the opportunity to have hands-on experiences with materials. Other children who benefit from other modes of learning have the chance to speak with and listen to their peers or explore and utilize their emergent literacy skills. Ultimately, play proves its respectfulness by giving children the opportunity to learn and to meet expectations. Play provides the context for children to develop appropriately and via their own modes of learning.

I am forced to question, then, the true respectfulness of our current mode of educating children. Students are placed in a classroom, forced to work under a system that demands of them things that are not possible for them to provide. Is it truly respectful to ask six-year-olds to sit for extended periods of time? Is it respectful to deny them opportunities that they need? How can we deprive young children of opportunities to socialize, to run and exercise outside, and to play and work with materials that have proven, perhaps more than any other mode, to have a positive impact on development? Ultimately, we need to question how it can be called respectful to act as imparters and bearers of knowledge, as opposed to partners in the child's explorations of his or her environment.

The example of Central Park East provides a lens for looking at play as requisite to enacting democratic values within education. It seems that education, especially of the "underprivileged" in the "inner-city" has taken on a sort of civil-rights fervor. Current rhetoric from leading advocacy organizations, charter-school management groups, and teacher education venues stresses the need for closing the "achievement gap," perhaps at the expense of necessary dimensions of teaching and learning. For instance, Teach For America's theory of change reads:

We believe we have this problem (the "achievement gap") because socioeconomic challenges in low-income communities...put added pressures on schools that generally don't have the systems, capacity, and resources, to compensate...For example, there are not enough hours in the standard school day to catch up students who have fallen behind...we need as many teachers as possible who are willing to go above and beyond the constraints of the system to ensure our students excel (Teach For America—Our Theory of Change).

Unfortunately, such rhetoric leaves out an important dimension—that of the needs of children and the importance of sound, developmentally appropriate teaching practice. Central Park East, however, provides a phenomenal example of the way democratic values can be endowed in the theory and practice of a progressive school.

In contrast, Linda Christensen, in her speech at Bank Street’s Distinguished Speakers Series (18 March 2008), defined what a classroom for equity and social justice would look like. In contrast to a high-stakes mandate of testing and restrictive curriculum, classrooms must be grounded in the lives of students. They must be participatory and experiential. They demand a spirit of hope, joy, kindness, and vision. There should be present a high degree of academic rigor. Although she speaks for high school students, these principles certainly apply to the education of students as young as primary school-age.

Play is a fundamentally participatory experience (far different from the direct instruction that exists in many “early childhood” classrooms). Play is also grounded in the lives and experiences of students. Considering what the democratic classroom should look like, then, it becomes clear that our current classrooms are not places where democracy is enacted. Play would provide one of the essential elements of an early childhood classroom, endowing the child’s environment with relevance and participatory engagement.



### *The Calhoun School*

My first impression of Calhoun's lower school building is that it is a place that children love coming to. Lacking in the institutional, militaristic feel of many public schools, the building features brightly-painted walls, open spaces for theater and movement (even at the lower school, where students participate in theater and movement, as well as yoga), two outdoor play areas, and classrooms that are filled with light, artwork, and productive noise. Above all, it is a welcoming place for children, and a place that keeps their needs in mind.

The feel and atmosphere of this building are consistent with the philosophy of the Calhoun School. An independent school (preK-12) located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Calhoun describes its goal as to "inspire a passion for learning". A cursory reading may give the impression of a focus on text-based academics as the educational goal and philosophy (<http://www.calhoun.org/page.cfm?p=15>, accessed 2 June 2008). However, that same mission statement emphasizes "learning through experience" -- providing children with a series of rich, deep experiences, including sensory input, and inquiry appropriate to developmental levels and areas of interest."

For my visit to the school, I observed classroom designed to provide open-ended, integrated curriculum. Although early childhood classrooms include distinct learning centers for art, science, and mathematics -- teachers encourage interdisciplinary connections. In kindergarten, for instance, as part of a social studies "self study,"

students used art materials to create life-sized self-portraits and made “paper people,” employed throughout the year for various play activities, including, inevitably, dramatic play. In science, students studied plants, created plant booklets, and eventually planted their own seeds, some of which were transferred to the school garden on the terrace. Similarly to other progressive schools, students’ contributions were continually accepted and respected, for example, in the continued use of inventive spelling (including in students’ own writing and in charts hung throughout the classroom).

Students in kindergarten began their day through a sort of “open choice” time. Instead of choosing a specific activity, materials were laid out before students’ arrival, in this case, a selection of watercolor paints on one table, with all other areas of the classroom open. Students could choose any activity, as the whole classroom was open, with the understanding that they could request other materials from the teachers. During this time, teachers spoke with students and parents, and one teacher allowed students to work on a specific activity with her. Unlike the playtime that took place at Central Park East, students could choose one activity, and, without asking the teacher, switch to another.

The benefit of this was clear in the work that students did. One student, after having worked at the painting table, chose to move to the block area (interestingly, no other students were present in that area). She worked rapidly, layering double unit blocks (with two on each layer) to create a tall structure. She did not state an intention. Another child, who had also been working on his paper person, quickly came to the area and

began adding half unit blocks. Quickly, it became clear that they were creating a house. Soon, questions began to arise: “Where will we put the ceiling?” “Where will her bed go?” Of course, disagreements also arose: “That won’t work for her bed because she doesn’t have a pillow.” “Stop using those blocks for the ceiling, it needs to be littler.” “Don’t let her go into the basement. It’s dirty down there.” This interaction underscores the way the structure of play in the classroom brought out two of the most important functions of blocks: socialization, and interaction with dramatic play activities.

“As block builders become more experienced, their social interaction becomes more complex as well. They argue, they give and follow suggestions, they offer ideas for the consideration of others. Language development, interpersonal understanding, and social development go hand in hand” (Brody and Hirsch, p. 64). The interaction of these three children seemed to be a sort of “Vygotsky in action.” One child eventually took the structure that another had created and, creating a scaffold with his paper person, pushed it to another level. The structure, instead of the simple, predictable creation consisting of one type of block, became one that had symbolic value (as a house, complete with a bed, ceiling, entrance, and dirty basement) and utilized other block sizes, shapes, and functions (such as the ramp to reach the bedroom). Furthermore, instead of relying on a teacher to solve the problem and provide words for them, these children ultimately used and advanced their problem-solving and cooperation skills.

Like Central Park East’s setup, the dramatic play center exists completely separately from the block area. Although there is certainly value to a shared setup, the

interaction observed at Calhoun demonstrates the value of a separate setup. This approach is supported by Harriet Cuffaro, who writes (1996/1984): “In the block area, the child must *create* the set or context for the play that will unfold. In the former instance [with an adult-prepared dramatic play center], the child enacts a role in a setting established by others; in the latter, the child not only enacts a role but also is called upon to design and produce the setting” (p. 79). Therefore, in this interaction, we saw the complete range of possibilities within the block center. Initially, the structure was a simple one with no context. Later, through collaboration, it became endowed with a context, which was expanded upon from there. In a simple, quick interaction, then, we saw how powerful block building can be for children with extensive experience.

One thing that children learn from their experiences with block-building is the importance of clean-up and cooperation. There are many models of cleanup for block building. For instance, students can sort blocks into stacks and then return each “stack” to the shelf. Blocks can be returned individually or by the whole group. Children can take down their own structures, or it can be more of a collective activity. Very similarly to the more unstructured nature of play at Calhoun, clean up was also more unstructured. When the block structure was first knocked down, children simply left it until cleanup time. At cleanup time, *all* children in the classroom (although only three participated in block play) were included in the cleanup. As opposed to following specific sorting and stacking instructions, children were simply told to pick up ten blocks and return them. When they had fulfilled this responsibility, they could move on.

The children also had time for outdoors play. A quick look at the outdoors area of City and Country reveals some very specific, structured outdoor play. Children at that school work with large wooden blocks in the school courtyard, extending the school's focus on block building. Teachers at Calhoun, though, describe their outdoors play as a chance informal recreation with expansive and spontaneous play and physical movement. Indeed, both are important, and this does not mean that the outdoor play that exists at Calhoun is not rich. Indeed, children to have access to toys to work with and friends to play with during play. The school has a play area with a climbing structure and slides, as well as interlocking objects, wheelbarrows, and a collection of other toys, such as balls and hula hoops.

This type of self-guided and physically active play provides many important benefits to children. Benefits include: focus, cooperation, and practice in spatial and kinesthetic problem-solving. Houses were constructed (perhaps underscoring the fact that children will use anything they can to make certain creations, blocks became guns and other, more everyday, objects, and children took on different roles and modes of acting and using their own imaginations.

Note to the Reader: Progressive education is often considered the domain solely of independent schools. However, the two schools profiled here are of different types, one being independent, the other public. Nonetheless, both provide models for educating children in progressive and developmental environments.

**V. Reinstating Play in the Public Schools of N.C.L.B.: A  
Proposed Plan of Action**

## **V. Reinstating Play in the Public Schools of N.C.L.B.: A Proposed Plan of Action**

For the sake of children, public school classrooms must change. Children simply must have places that respect their development, input, and needs. This is no easy task. Ultimately, we, as teachers, must change our vantage point; we must now think of ourselves as facilitators, not as providers of knowledge. Administrators, at the school and district level, must first *learn* about the needs of children, then think of innovative ways to work with those needs to ensure that they are met within the context of the classroom. Of course, public schools have a certain obligation to standards and a series of student achievement measures. A greater challenge will be to create truly progressive, child-centered spaces while continuing to meet the prescribed academic needs of children.

There are certain things, though, that should be present in the primary school classroom. As has been discussed, primary school children play and work differently than preschool children, and it is the teacher's task to determine from what materials these children would derive the most benefit. Developmental needs must be considered, though. For instance, children at this age still need to experience movement activities. Dramatic and fantasy play still provide children with the cognitive developments and cooperative experiences necessary to move to greater levels of abstraction and peer and group work. Academic needs (and the fact that children, by this age, are learning to read) demand some games that may promote academic ends. Finally, many children, especially towards the end of first grade, will be interested in rule-focused games, and these should be part of the classroom.

1. **Block building.** As shown at the City and Country School, block building can and should continue through first and second grade. By this age, though, there should be a great variety of blocks and accessories, such as small colored blocks and fabric. Students are also ready to work on a block building for more than one day, and, therefore, structures should be in place in the classroom to enable students to work on the same structure for more than a single day. At this point, blocks should be integrated into the curriculum. For instance, children studying their community should have the chance to build structures in their community, older children looking at New York City should build some of New York City's more famous structures. Of course, literacy and science connections should continue. Children should have the opportunity to write within (for instance, signs) and about their block structures and to discuss the science (cause and effect, gravity) they witness while building.
2. **Other construction materials and materials to promote spatial reasoning.** Spatial reasoning is an important developmental task of the primary years, as is a basic understanding of geometry and the interplay of objects. Undoubtedly, blocks promote this end; however, other materials may as well. Puzzles (both three-dimensional and jigsaw) promote spatial reasoning and, as Lucy Sprague Mitchell mentions, serve as the basis for map-making in the early years. Other construction materials for making models of people, places, and things might include empty boxes, paper tubes, and pieces of cardboard.
3. **Recess and physical play.** Movement should exist in two realms. First and foremost, children should play outside and have the opportunity for a free recess,



free from adult intrusion. There should be materials available to enable them to take advantage of the possibilities that exist during outdoor play. Children should have free and open access, as they do at Calhoun, to balls and other materials for team play (such as a baseball bat), as well as more general playground equipment, such as slides, swings, swinging bars, and rings. Put simply, when children are working intensely throughout the day, they deserve time and materials to relieve stress and enjoy their childhood and their friends.

4. **Movement.** There should also be some more specific time for movement, perhaps within the context of an already-present music program. During music, children should play folk games that would enable them to both sing and move, for instance, “Johnny Brown” and “Draw a Bucket of Water.” This would make music a far more valuable time for children than the worksheets that are used at this point. Children would be introduced to ideas of culture and cultural experiences, as well as have the chance to fulfill their needs for movement and develop an early sense of musical literacy.
5. **Rules-Driven Games.** Classrooms should have “Choice Time” each day when children can select an activity to complete. These choices should expand as children grow older, and one of those choices in the primary years should be rules-driven games. These games can include checkers, Chinese checkers, Guess Who?, child-friendly versions of games such as Scrabble and Monopoly, other board games, such as Candy Land and Chutes and Ladders, and card games. I hesitate to include these materials, since not all of them would be teacher-created. However, children require the experience, and, at this age, have a growing desire

to, work within the confines of rules, and board games would provide this experience. Furthermore, many board games offer important math connections. Children practice counting in Candy Land. More advanced children use addition and subtraction to play Monopoly Junior.

6. **Literacy games and activities.** Beginning perhaps in kindergarten and, undoubtedly, in the first grade, children are expected to learn to read. Learning to read involves memorization of numerous pieces of information, among them, the appearance of letters, the accompanying sounds that letters make, and high-frequency words (it is suggested, in some communities, that kindergarteners learn up to one hundred high-frequency words). There are also many skills that go into reading: identifying beginning and ending sounds, segmenting words that are heard, and blending written sounds to create a word. There are some games that can assist in these skills, and that students can play at center or choice time:
  - a. Sight word board games
  - b. Memory (also called concentration) using sight words
  - c. Sight word go fish
  - d. Fishing for letters and for sight words
  - e. Sight word and letter lottery, bingo, and checkers (which would also fulfill the important need for rules-driven activities that allow children to practice following directions)
  - f. Meaningful, child-directed interaction with materials such as magnetic letters, words for phonetic and concept sorting, and tactile letters.

Within literacy activities, students should also have the opportunity to interact with each other. Therefore, such literacy activities should be available only in a group context. This group context would also introduce the opportunities for such activities as buddy reading and reader's theatre.

7. **Art materials.** Similarly to what frequently happens to music in public schools, art becomes an activity that is entirely instructor-driven, with very little input from students in terms of project choices, materials, or even subject matter. Art should be an open-ended activity during choice time, and students should be presented with more options and opportunities during art class. During choice time, then, there should be a variety of materials available for art: clay (not necessarily play-dough), crayons, markers, colored pencils, watercolor paints, tempera paints (in spill-proof jars to promote sharing), scissors, glue, and various types of paper.

One of the messages here is that there are some materials that are absolutely necessary to promote play within classrooms. Children need access to good-quality materials, and deserve classrooms that have plentiful materials so that all children can participate in all activities. Classrooms, indeed, should be stocked with the necessary materials to make play and developmental activities appropriate and available for all children in the class.

However, there is a more important point to be underscored here: the importance of making a commitment. Perhaps this would be better stated as the importance of daring. As a play policy suggests, teachers must make a philosophical commitment to play. They must understand the importance of play, the outcomes of play, and ways to support play

within the classroom. Furthermore, teachers must be prepared to substantiate these assertions. Public schools who choose to incorporate play should have assessment structures in place in order to do so. Finally, there must be structures in place to allow for play. Children should have the opportunity to make free choices at some point during the day, and various types of play (for instance, block building and art) should be incorporated in the curriculum (including in unit and lesson plans) as often as possible.

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## VI. References

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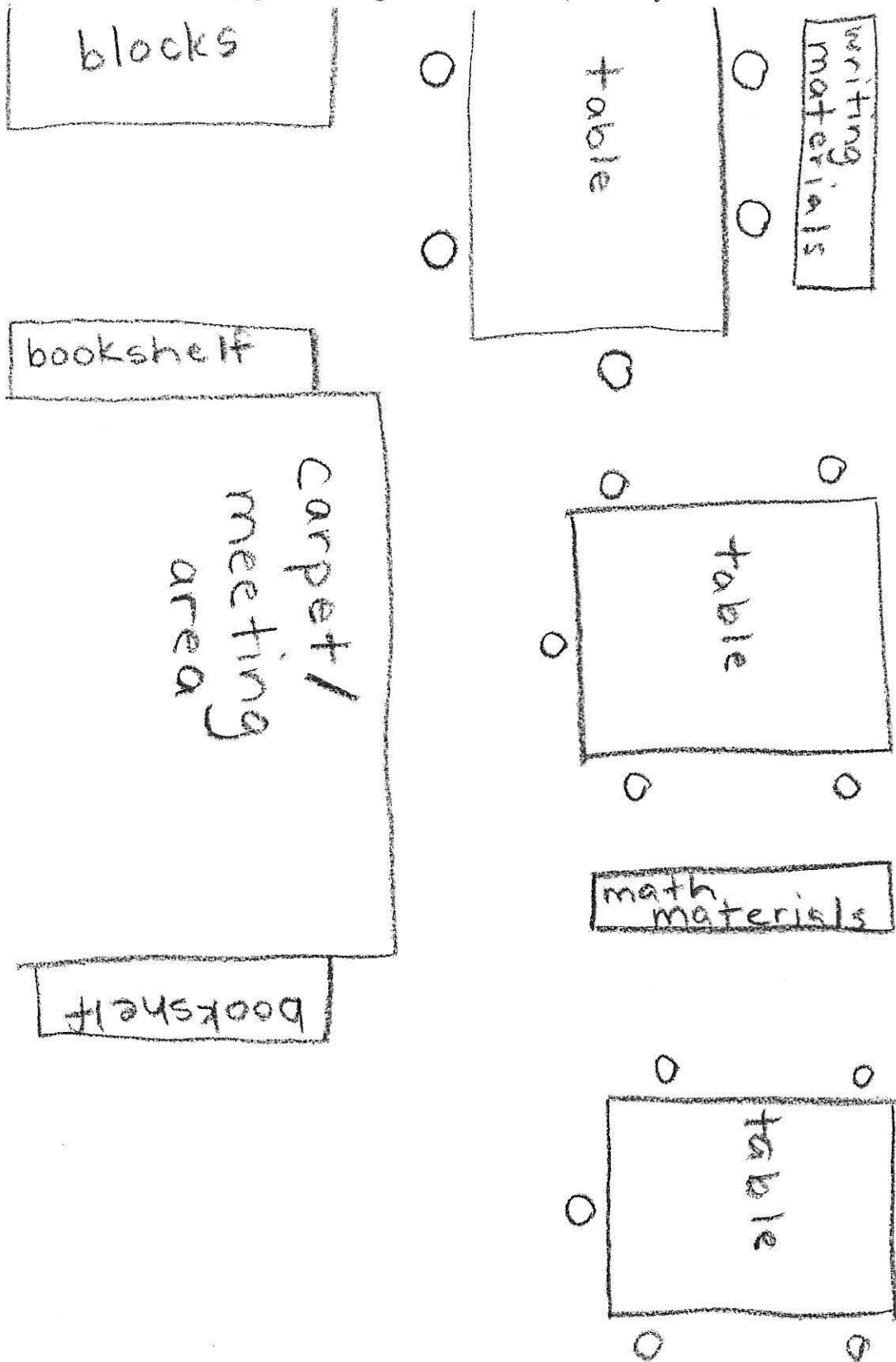
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## **VII. Appendix**



VII. Appendix

Appendix A: Drawing of kindergarten classroom, school year 2006-07



## **Appendix B: Sample daily schedule of kindergarten class, 2006-07**

8:00—Arrival time. Students are picked up from the cafeteria.

8:20—Reading workshop. Morning message, followed by shared reading, independent reading, and group share.

8:50—Guided reading. Students are in centers while two teachers work with small groups.

9:40—Science or music on alternating days.

10:30—Writing workshop. Modeled writing, independent writing, and group share.

11:05—Word wall work.

11:15—Read aloud.

11:30—Lunch

12:30—Math routines. Calendar, attendance, etc.

12:40—Math lesson and group work.

1:30—Phonics.

2:00—Social studies.

2:35—Dismissal.