Reenvisioning the Classroom: Making Time for Students and Teachers to Play

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Pure play is one of the main bases of civilization
— Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

Reflections on Project Time

Central Park East 1 Elementary (CPE1), located in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City, is a small, diverse, and progressive public school with mixed-age classrooms. As part of CPE1's philosophy and curriculum, Project Time (sometimes called Work Time) is a nonnegotiable part of every school day. Children work on projects of their choosing, individually or in small groups. The authors both have strong connections to CPE1. Jill is a clinical psychologist who has been a parent at CPE1 since her oldest son was in Pre-K. She currently has a daughter in the third grade. Corinthia was a 4th/5th grade teacher at CPE1 for eight years, where she taught Jill's son for two years. As our relationship developed, we had many conversations around our educational philosophies. It was through these discussions that we came to think about play and its place in the classroom, and in particular how play through Project Time allows both students and teachers the space and time to play in the classroom together and even to be playful within themselves.

Project Time provides a space for both parties involved to play with the constant negotiation and renegotiation of roles occurring within the classroom between the child and her- or himself, child and teacher, teacher and self, and child and other children. These negotiations often occur simultaneously around hands-on opportunities to make choices, explore materials and ideas that incorporate a range of disciplines, self-reflect, plan and manage time, negotiate with others and their ideas, and make sense of those ideas in conjunction with or in contrast to one's own ideas and ways of seeing the world (for a more detailed description of how to implement project-based learning, see Katz, Chard, & Kogan, 2014).

Jill: *The Lego-Market Share in my daughter's 2nd/3rd grade class was impressive. After an in-depth study of markets within the community, the children spent weeks making an immense 24-hour grocery store. There were delivery trucks, aisles filled with items, and even a working conveyor belt to get products from the trucks into the store! As the*

children spoke about their contributions, I could see the detail, creativity, and collaboration they put into their work. I marveled at the patience that was required after initial plans fell through.

I listened as one child discussed the huge army of security guards he and his peers had made. There were several soldiers with guns guarding the front of the store. It seemed this group of boys spent hours of class time playing with Legos, making the same army-style creations they would make if they were playing at home. The parent in me began to think that this work was not very academic or educational.

Then it was my daughter's turn to describe her contributions. Sadie entered CPE1 an extremely shy pre-K student, speaking only to immediate family members and a few other people when necessary. And now there she was, speaking with confidence and pride in front of students and parents!

As I reflected on the experience of the children, my own child included, the psychologist in me thought about how they had been given the opportunity to play with and explore feelings of strength vs. weakness, power vs. vulnerability, and safety vs. danger and to deal with their fears and uncertainties around these big experiences. I considered the many children (from independent and public schools) I work with who do not feel safe at school, afraid to make mistakes and get bad grades. They have little time in their highly scheduled, busy lives to play imaginatively. They have few outlets to playfully express aggression and grapple with fear and vulnerability. I see children who, instead of developing confidence, are dominated by anger and fear. I suddenly felt a deep appreciation for the type of learning and education my children were receiving. In addition to teaching academics, the safe and playful walls of their school also fostered

the children's socioemotional development, which is critically important and, as reported by the American Academy of Pediatrics, actually enhances the ability to learn (Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012).

Corinthia: *Project Time is that invitation, as Jill said, "to play imaginatively"— with materials, ideas, and others. It is a time and space when we help children and even ourselves as teachers to take a lead in exploring new scripts and contexts and support each other in embracing these invitations. Last year, one of my students, Justin,[1] decided to study the history of a sport and present his findings at the Search Project Museum. He wanted to study each team: their statistics, performances, game history, plays, and comebacks. Although I knew nothing about this sport, I knew the enormity of what he was suggesting.*

Earlier in the year, Justin had been involved in several incomplete projects, each being replaced by the next whenever he became stuck. The challenge of working through these projects, even with support, was daunting. It was easier to start anew. Knowing what had stopped him in his previous projects, I now feared his latest proposal. I felt like I had to counsel him out of pursuing his idea because I feared its immensity. I tried to convince him of what I knew, even though I often consider how present I should be in students' projects, given that those are their projects, not mine. Choice is so much a part of Project Time. It's not about indulging students' every whim, but rather about considering which role(s) I am going to play in the moment: observer, stage manager, mediator, player, scribe, assessor, communicator, or planner (Jones & Reynolds, 2011) and how to move between them in the context of what emerges.

In retrospect, I saw that my anxiety about Justin's sports project had to do with my knowledge of the limited amount of time we had until June, and that people generally expect a presentation to look a certain way: finished. Polished. I became fixated on this until a colleague of mine said, "Perhaps narrowing it down is the project." And there it was; more than the content, that had been the project all along. Until then, I hadn't considered that my own fears around visibility (my student's and my own) and time (the perceived lack of time) were dictating the choices I was making and preventing me from seeing both the potential of our work together and how the value of that work was based on a limited notion of what could be deemed academic.

Providing Time and Space for Play in the Classroom

As adults we make subtle and not so subtle statements to children about what parts of their identity we do or do not accept. In thinking back to Justin, we are struck by Winnicott's (1971) statement that when he, as an adult, makes a "dogmatic" intervention, it "leaves the child with only two alternatives, an *acceptance* of what I have said as propaganda or a *rejection* of the interpretation and of

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1   A pseudonym.

me and of the whole set-up" (p. 10). What results is a protection of the self. Children have to own their work; otherwise, they're doing someone else's.

Project Time allows children to build that sense of agency, with support. It is a time and space when students learn to trust their own instincts, identify their limits, and consider their potential. However, they can only truly identify their limits and potential if given the time and space to play—to explore, to do, to succeed, and even to fail. To do that alongside an adult who remains engaged but at the same time knows when to back off provides just enough of a sense of security for this exciting and sometimes scary endeavor. Jones and Reynolds (2011) outline developmental stages of play in early childhood: exploration, play, investigation, and dialogue. Project Time repeatedly engages us in each of these stages of play, as each project either takes on a new script or revises and builds upon an old one.

Corinthia: *Narrowing down an idea was new for Justin. In my role of observer, I noticed Justin was a researcher. He didn't lack initiative. Left to his own devices, he would have spent hours researching. The more he found, the more he wanted to delve into this topic. I also observed how he approached this work with a certain coolness, which was in such contrast to my own approach. While it was partly a reflection of his work style and personality, I also realized that it was a natural result of not having had previous experience presenting at the Search Project Museum. Having experienced several iterations of this work, I was coming from a completely different vantage point. In light of this, why he wanted to tack on more work even though the museum was now only a few weeks away made sense.*

For Justin, doing a project he was interested in within a time constraint was something yet to be explored. As his teacher, I had to stop interrupting his play and instead be a stage manager. I had to provide a space for him to feel what all this meant inside his mind and body and help him find the language for this new experience. He was, in a sense, in the early developmental play stage of exploration (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). *It wasn't that Justin hadn't done this before, but rather that he was learning to play all over again, while engaging in a new script. It required me to be a planner and sit alongside him to help him negotiate between what he wanted to keep doing, what was required, and what could actually be accomplished in a set amount of time. Using a calendar, we outlined what would need to be done and how much time it would take him to do it and then set reasonable conditions.*

The other big task for Justin was to organize his research. Although he had practically memorized everything he'd read, we had to find a way to compile it so that it would be visible to others attending the museum. According to Jones and Reynolds (2011), the mark of play, their second developmental play stage, is that in the midst of the experience, the play moves toward finding ways to represent that experience. Representation "makes possible both looking back and looking ahead, rather than just living in the moment; and communication removed in both place and time, rather than

only face-to-face" (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p.10). *Again, although Justin had previous experiences of moving beyond direct encounter to representation, within this project he was experiencing this transition anew.*

We spent the next few weeks experimenting—playing with ways to record his work:

- Gathering a list of websites

- Choosing 1–2 resources on each topic

- Deciding how many and which articles needed to be printed

- Writing important information on Post-its

- Placing Post-its on poster board and arranging them in a web that consisted of main headings, subheadings, and related information

With the Post-its, I initially played the roles of scribe and planner to model possible ways for Justin to organize his ideas. Having tried other kinds of organizers early on, we found that the choice to use Post-its yielded many advantages. It allowed Justin to investigate through concrete means the physical movement of his ideas without having to rewrite them each time. While he was familiar with computers and we might have been able to accomplish the same thing using the cut-and-paste function, seeing his work arranged on a poster allowed Justin to literally see (and play with) the overall picture of what it meant to organize his thoughts. At the Project Museum, we laid out his work across the table to try to capture this. We also practiced different ways of keeping all this information together (taping, stapling, paper-clipping, etc.) and how to store it so that he could use it to reference and more readily communicate his work and ideas.
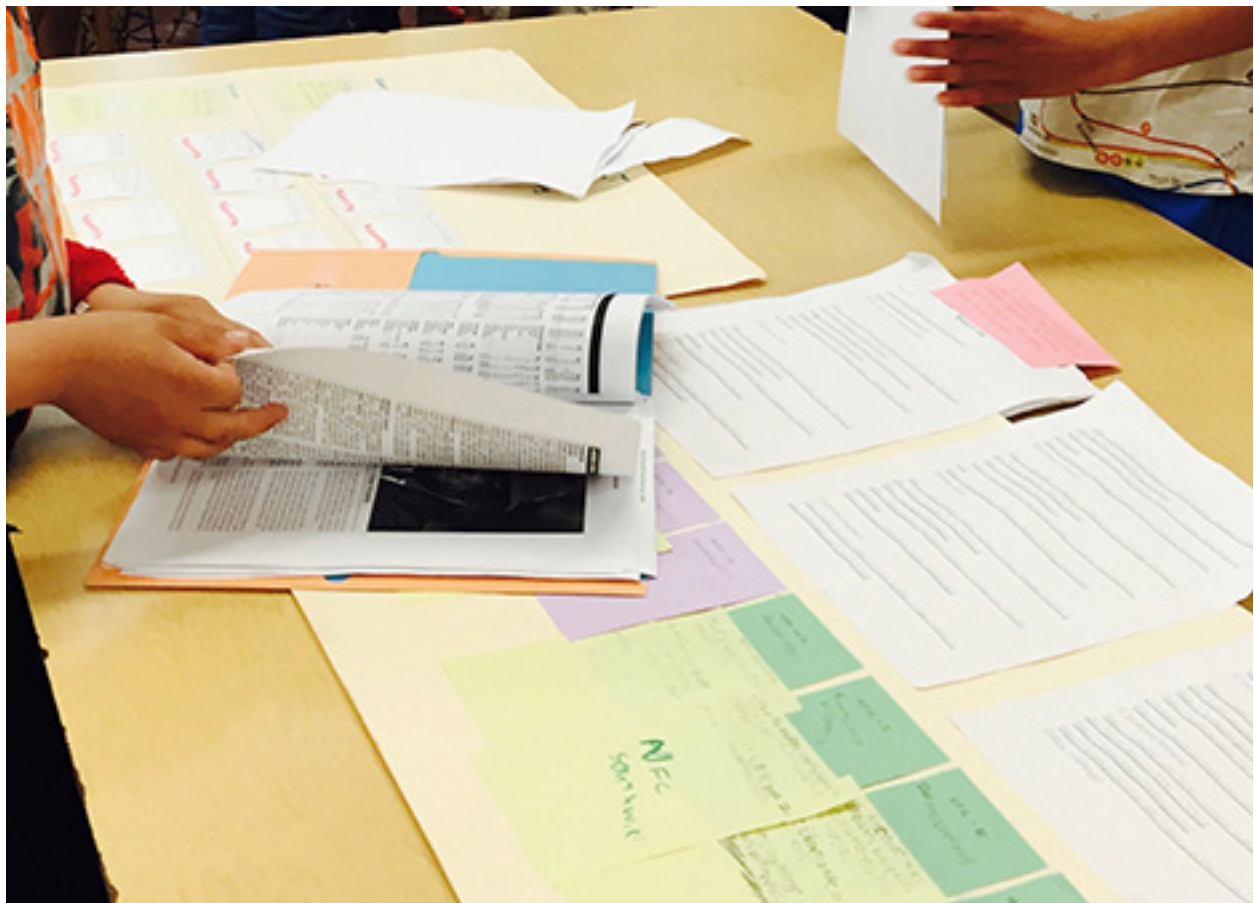
Upon closer inspection, I could see that the arranging and rearranging Justin was doing was evidence of a natural progression toward investigation, Jones and Reynolds's (2011) third developmental stage of play, where the child becomes an "intentional learner, capable of product—as well as process… [where] they can be guided to set goals for themselves and evaluate their learning, and to design how they will improve or build on this learning at the next opportunity" (p. 12). This move also marked a simultaneous entry of teacher and *student into the roles of assessor and communicator. I was assessing both Justin's work and how I was working/playing with Justin as I navigated how to help him communicate his work to the wider school community, and Justin began to assess his own process for communicating his work to others.*

Looking back, I now realize that I had also entered into the role of player. I was learning how to play with Justin. I too had a new script to learn. And I was having fun doing it! Huizinga (1955) described play as leisure which does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome "only" feeling. Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. (p. 8)

The point was no longer about getting Justin to the next stage by a set time, even though that did end up happening.

The dialogue we were having together and perhaps even with our own selves is what I strive to have with each child. While the play at Project Time varies for each child and/or each group, Project Time is a type of reenactment of play's developmental trajectory. Each project, each choice, moves us toward playing with our ideas and making them happen in a community of learners.

Our responsibility as educators is to be a "child-watcher" who "observes the child pedagogically… who guards and keeps in view the total existence of the developing child" (van Manen, 2002, p. 26). And yet, in today's competitive academic climate of high-stakes standardized testing, does a teacher feel safe enough to do that? To allow students the time and space to play—to go through their own process, when she knows that the final result might appear to an outside observer to be a failure and that others (students, parents, colleagues, principals, departments of education) might judge her and her student negatively? As Winnicott (1971/2005, p. 60) noted, "Children play more easily when the other person is able and free to be playful." But in today's educational climate, are teachers able and free to be playful with their students? And are they able and free to be playful within themselves?

Jill: *It's fascinating to hear this backstory, because Justin's project stood out to me. At first glance it appeared to be completed in haste and I wondered what he learned. As a visitor to the museum, I had no idea of what actually went into this project. I can only imagine your anxiety about how others might judge both of you. I certainly made unfair judgments about the overall project without knowing anything about what actually went into it.*

Discovering the Self Through Play

According to Erikson (1950/1993), play is the ground on which an "early source of a sense of identity" (p. 237) is built. He states, "The playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery... the child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experimenting and planning" (Erickson, 1950/1993, p. 222). Winnicott (1971/2005) shares this view: "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (p. 72–73). When we don't provide time or space to play, projections and pretensions, instead of the questions, insights, and intuitions of the students and teachers, drive our classrooms. This can effectively take away a child's ability to play with reality and to develop, to its fullest potential, a sense of self.

Unfortunately, this time and space is not given much attention in today's educational hierarchy. The play in Project Time is different from the play that occurs during the periods we usually earmark for it in the school day, such as recess, gym, and dance. And even the opportunities for those are increasingly rare in schools across the country (Koplow, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009; Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012). Research has shown that to boost standardized assessment scores, children as young as those in preschool and kindergarten are being taught scripted reading and math curriculums as well as test-prep lessons and are spending increasingly less time playing in activities such as art, sand and water tables, blocks, science, imaginative play, and recess (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). Yet given that creativity and identity are developmental processes that continue throughout the life span, even adolescents and adults require play to develop "long-term life skills and a rewarding sense of fulfillment—and yes, performance—[which] are more the by-product of play-related activities than forced performance" (Brown, 2009, p. 111). Despite our knowledge that "to control what is outside one has to *do* things, not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing" (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 55), current educational practice increasingly takes this time away by focusing solely on indicators of achievement: grades, test scores, and even teacher evaluations.

Jill: *The projects in my son's Project Museum were centered around the theme of genius. My son's genius was athleticism. He spent the year researching and making a soccer ball with a partner. At times, I felt disappointed as he spent much of Project Time in the hallway kicking around a soccer ball as a means of studying it (engaging in exploration and play). I thought, "Seriously? This is how you spend Project Time?" My parent-self was worried my son wasn't learning enough and that he'd fall behind his peers from other schools once in middle school. Yet my more objective psychologist-self trusted that real learning was occurring, even if it wasn't immediately visible. And sure enough, by year's end, my son and his partner had spent hours researching the components of a ball and the cost-effectiveness of the materials, undertaking the tedious process of sewing the ball (engaging in investigation), and ultimately, tolerating the frustration of not being able to make a ball as perfect as the ones they purchase.*
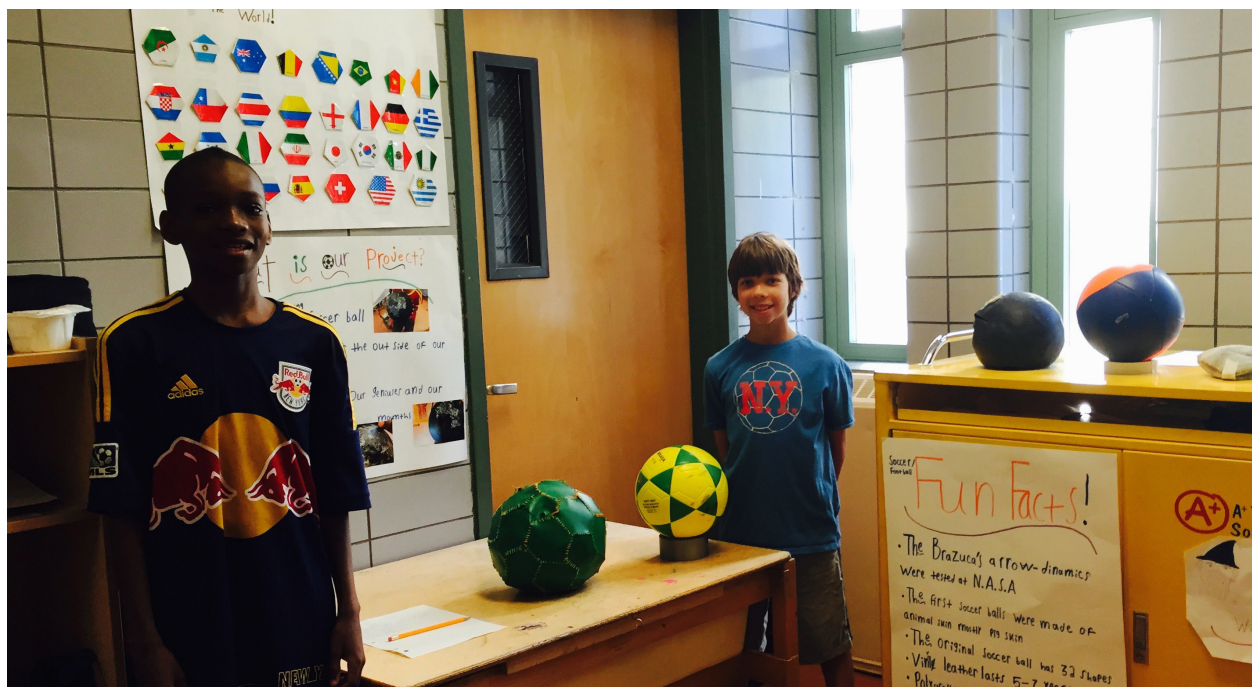
Some children at the museum had not accomplished their initial goals. Yet I was impressed by their creativity, perseverance, and collaboration. Some students built, while others wrote. Some took on grand projects that ultimately needed to be modified and made more manageable. One student said, "I learned I have to organize my materials and notes, otherwise, I can't find anything." Another said, "I learned I have to take notes on all my data. Even though I think I'll remember, I don't!" Many students acknowledged asking others (peers, teachers, parents of other students) for help. As I dialogued with them, I witnessed the pride and ownership students felt as they spoke, even as they also acknowledged the flaws and imperfections of their work. I recalled youngsters I'd worked with in my therapy practice who lacked pride in their work (despite getting A's) because their parents and teachers had supplied so much input that the students no longer felt a sense of ownership.

I realized that while it was valued, the final product was secondary. The learning was in the process. As the students came to know themselves as thinkers, doers, and community members, they were striving to develop a sense of self, even when the final product was, in one child's words, an "epic fail."

Vygotsky (as cited in Berk and Winsler, 1995) points out that "in play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior...as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 52). Play also makes room for all people to experiment with themselves at any age and in a variety of contexts, both real and imagined. Jones and Reynolds (2011) point out that

In their play, children invent the world for themselves and create a place for themselves in it. They are re-creating their pasts and imagining their futures while grounding themselves in the reality and fantasy of their lives here and now. (p.133)

In play, children are engaged in the work of the world. Unfortunately, in most schools play does not seem part of the agenda. Gray (2013) coined the term "play deficit," signaling the push "toward more school, more testing, more adult direction of children, and less opportunity for free play" (para. 5; see also Chudacoff, 2007). Given the importance of play and its links to cognitive performance, including (but not limited to) memory, learning, motivation, initiation, self-regulation, problem-solving, innovation, and creativity (Brown, 2009) why is it that schools prioritize obtaining factual knowledge and test-taking skills at the expense of play?

Playing with the Boundaries of Play at School

So what if we tried something different? What if we provided a space like Project Time to make room for this type of play? Project Time is a fluid space that is constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed—played with—by students and teachers based on their needs at any given moment. And for those of us willing to play with that idea and consider offering a space like this in our classrooms, what if in the same way that we provide our children the space to play, we also use Project Time as a vehicle to play ourselves?

Brown (2009) states that "new discoveries and learning come when one is open to serendipity, when one welcomes novelties and anomalies, and then tries to incorporate those outlying results into the broader field of knowledge" (p. 142). We acknowledge that we have been fortunate at CPE1, which, while subject to all sorts of outside pressures, has also remained a protected learning space for over 40 years. But if we can push even further, could Project Time and/or project-based learning

possibly allow us to reenvision our practice as educators through the lens of play—to play with reshaping the boundaries and ideas of what is/can be considered valid and valued work in school? And can engaging in the play that happens during Project Time—the same play we ask our students to engage in—bring us to another conversation, one about how to reconstruct the school day so everything we do encompasses a form of play?

The fluidity of a space like Project Time lends itself well to any aspect of the school day— for example, to incorporating playful, project-based learning into read alouds, the social studies curriculum, or both, as in the following exchange:

Corinthia: *That same year, our read aloud,* The Red Pencil, *was about a young girl, Amira, in search of hope in Darfur. Prior to reading it, we researched the situation in the Sudan. After hearing from several groups, one girl came to me completely despondent. "Is the whole world just motivated by money?"*

I took a deep breath before answering her. Before I spoke, she said, "Amira's world is not familiar to me." I could see worry lines forming on her forehead.

Finally, I spoke, "Yes. Sometimes the world is motivated by money. But," I paused, "it doesn't have to be. You could try to change the conversation."

I could see her playing with that idea. "I can change the conversation."

Anything—ideas, materials, people, and even time and space, can be played with. Such play might offer us a way to transform ourselves and think more expansively. According to Brown (2009):

> Play, by its very nature, is a little anarchic. It is about stepping outside of normal life and breaking normal patterns. It is about bending rules of thought, action, and behavior… Bending rules and pushing through limits should happen within the realm of play. They aren't the dark side of play—they are the essence of play. (p. 193)

When we stop and ask ourselves to make room for play in the school day for our students and ourselves through Project Time, or anytime for that matter, we too are playing. And with that said… anyone wanna play along?

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Corinthia Mirasol-Spath is a 4th/5th grade teacher in an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) classroom at The Neighborhood School in New York City. Her interests lie in the role of play, particularly in Project Time, which she came to know during her eight years at Central Park East 1 Elementary. It was there that she, with her colleagues and students, played with the potential of Project Time to create a space and time in the classroom to enable us to realize and build our capacities as learners, workers, and people.