

Reading to Play and Playing to Read: A Mediated Discourse Analysis of 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? In an ethnographic study of literacy play in one kindergarten classroom, I discovered that young children regularly combined reading and play practices to make the meanings of texts more accessible and to take up empowered identity positions in child-ruled spaces. An introductory example, excerpted from the data, illustrates how reading a book while playing the teacher transformed a classroom meeting area into a pretend school space where children could assume identities as readers and leaders.

EXAMPLE 1: READING TO PLAY

1 In a quiet corner of the kindergarten classroom, a small blonde girl in a
2 bright pink jogging suit perches on a wooden chair, reading. As Emma pages
3 through *The Tree* (Jeunesse, 1992), she confidently invents a sentence for each
4 illustration. She holds the book off to one side and reads, “It can be every kind of
5 tree in the whole wide world” for a picture depicting several varieties of trees.
6 “Hey, Emma!” Peter’s shout interrupts her solitary reading. His call is an implicit
7 challenge and a playful invitation to engage in a tussle over classroom rights; he
8 wants her to notice he is sitting in the child-sized rocker across the room. Sitting
9 in the rocker is an honor reserved for the “Helper of the Day,” the child
10 appointed to carry out coveted classroom chores. Affronted, Emma marches over
11 immediately to reclaim possession of her space, “Hey, Im the helper of the day!”
12 Grinning, Peter scrunches his sturdy frame deeper into the squeaky leather
13 cushion. He won’t budge. After giving several ineffectual commands to “get outa
14 there,” Emma improvises. She walks across the room and resumes reading
15 invented passages but in a noticeably louder voice. When her volume attracts the
16 teacher’s attention, Emma points to Peter and explains, “I’m pretending he’s the
17 helper of the day and I’m the teacher.” As Emma reads, she adds teacherly asides
18 to Peter. Finally, she directs him to “Get right here,” tapping and pointing with
19 her sneakered foot to indicate the space on the carpet where Peter should sit.
20 Obediently, he leaves the rocker and sits cross-legged at her feet as she continues
21 to read. (from fieldnotes and video data, Wohlwend, 2007)

This research situates Emma’s combination of reading and play within *nexus of practice* (Scollon, 2001), webs of seemingly natural combinations of ways of interacting that are shared by a community. In this article, I argue that when reading and play practices combine, they support

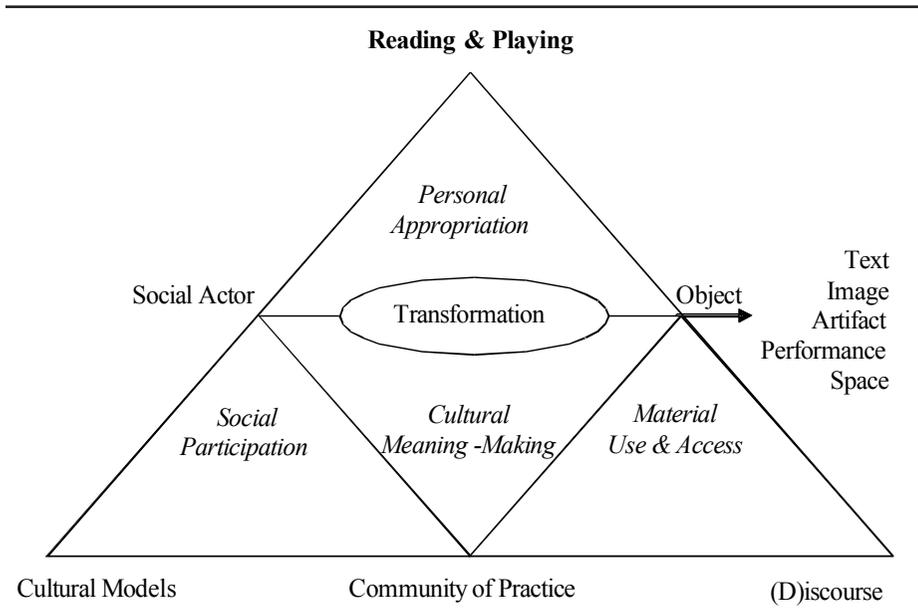
and strengthen each other, proliferating ways for children to “do school” and increasing access for diverse learners. When kindergartners engaged in the commonplace activity of playing school, they produced a *reading/playing nexus* where 1) reading supported play goals—*reading to play*—as children read books and charts to make play scenarios more credible or to gain the cooperation of other players, and 2) playing supported reading development—*playing to read*—as pretending to be the teacher and teaching pretend students enabled children to share and explore reading strategies. The article is organized by two examples of the reading/playing nexus: Reading to play in the opening example illustrates four theoretical constructs in a proposed activity model of early literacy apprenticeship. Mediated discourse analysis of playing to read in a second example reveals how playing school and pretending to be the teacher enabled children to represent meanings of print and images in books, to recontextualize classroom materials and space, and to reverse their relative social positioning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONCEPTUALIZING EARLY LITERACY APPRENTICESHIP

This analysis brings together Vygotskian (1935/1978) concepts that frame learning as increased participation through mediated activity (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Leontiev, 1977; Wertsch, 1991). I draw upon an activity model (Engeström, 1990) of apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1995) supported by ethnographic and critical sociocultural perspectives (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) that: 1) frame play as a cultural and transformative force (Göncü, 1999; Schwartzman, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1997) in peer culture (Corsaro, 2003; Kyratzis, 2004); 2) analyze discourse through close readings of talk, actions, materials, and contexts (Gee, 1999; Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004), and 3) investigate early literacy as ideological practices situated within social spaces (Dyson, 2003; Kress, 2003; Street, 1995).

In this research, kindergarten is conceptualized as an *early literacy apprenticeship* where children are invited into literacy through mediated encounters in which teachers gradually release responsibility for learning (Rogoff, 1995; Wells, 1986). Literacy apprenticeships are situated in embodied classroom communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that expect members to engage and combine certain practices. Expected combinations of valued practices, or *nexus*, make up the usual ways of doing things in a community and are foregrounded for novices so that they can acquire them (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). As children acquire foregrounded literacy practices, they also acquire the community’s backgrounded ways of talking, handling materials, and positioning selves and others that are expected to accompany reading, writing, drawing, playing, or other message-producing activity (Gee, 1996; Rogers, 2003).

As children read while playing, they negotiate tensions between individual, cultural, material, and social relationships as they grapple with constraining yet enabling materials within a social context permeated by cultural messages. Figure 1 illustrates how I’ve adapted Engeström’s (1990) activity model to conceptualize a literacy apprenticeship situated within several dimensions

Figure 1. Kindergarten as Apprenticeship in an Activity Model

suggested by Scollon's (2001) concept of nexus of practice. The stacked triangles represent four planes that shape literacy and play practices: cultural meaning-making, personal appropriation, material use and access, and social participation. The model shows how social actors: 1) attach cultural meanings as 2) individuals appropriate and transform physical actions and materials into practices and artifacts 3) according to existing shared histories of material uses and 4) social participation among a group of people.

Cultural Meaning-Making

Cultural meaning-making is a process that turns physical actions into meaningful social practice, always/only according to the surrounding cultural context. For example, reading and play practices consist of multiple *mediated actions* (Wertsch, 1991), discrete physical behaviors with objects for making meaning. As Emma pretended to read the print in a picture book, she carried out simultaneous mediated actions: handling a book, turning pages, tracking print, looking over illustrations, inventing phrases to fit illustrations, etc. (Example 1, Lines 2-5; 16-18). In some kindergartens, the cultural interpretation of this set of actions is "immature pre-reading" or "playing around." However in literacy apprenticeships, the mediated actions clustered in this set of actions-and-language-with-a-book constitute a valid reading practice for making sense with a text through inventions that approximate conventional forms (Whitmore, Goodman, Martens, & Owocki, 2004). In Example 1, Emma's invented phrases (Lines 4-5) and behaviors (Lines 18-19) are neither wild guesses nor mere imitations but represent agentic transactions (Goodman, 1994) and strategic improvisations (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

Personal Appropriation

Personal appropriation is the agentic and strategic use of available materials for one's own purposes (Kress, 1997; Rogoff, 1995). Early literacy researchers (Bomer, 2003; Dyson, 2001, 2003; Kendrick 2005; Rowe, 1998, 2000) demonstrate young children are not passively enculturated through unidirectional apprenticeship of schooling but that they use literacy play to enact identities and to produce social spaces that blend school and peer cultures. Children appropriate "textual toys" to cross social boundaries in school culture (Dyson, 2003) or to play empowered literacy users in "communities to which they hope to belong" (Kendrick, 2005, p. 9). As Emma pitched her voice across the room, she appropriated a book and a teacher role to strategically position an uncooperative classmate (Lines 14-15).

Social Participation

Social participation is a process of belonging to a community by engaging in its valued practices. In a literacy apprenticeship, increased participation signals learning so that children's competence with literacy practices directly links to their social identities and status within the classroom (Christian & Bloome, 2004). To be accepted as a credible performance, literacy practices must not only incorporate conventional forms valued in the classroom but must also be accompanied by other expected, albeit backgrounded, practices. In Example 1, a foregrounded reading practice was accompanied by backgrounded practices of playing the teacher and following school rules. As Emma read and tapped with her shoe to indicate a spot on the floor (Lines 18-19), she copied the way teachers control errant students through backgrounded nonverbal directives that run concurrently within the foregrounded spoken lesson. When valued practices like these link and strengthen each other, their combination comes to be expected and their intertwined performance serves as a marker of membership and insider knowledge (Scollon, 2001). These nexus animate *Discourse* (Gee, 1996), a community's set of shared tacitly-held beliefs that signal membership and shape what counts as appropriate. Emma's foregrounded reading practice, accompanied by play enactments of backgrounded ways of doing school, signaled her competence as a student and her status as a lead player.

Material Use and Access

Material use and access is constrained by an object's embedded histories that invoke expectations for its proper uses and appropriate users. Books, toys, and tools are tangible texts with durable, portable, Discourse-laden meanings (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). Books activate implicit expectations for right-side-up orientation and front-to-back page-turning by ideal readers (assuming English language conventions). As a child acquires the desire and practices to read a book, the book acquires the child by invoking its concretized "theories of the task" and "theories of the person" (Holland & Cole, 1995, p. 482). In Emma's book, the contrast of large colorful illustrations

beside nondescript black print directed her attention to the pictures rather than words. Her picture reading (Example 1, Lines 3-5) responded to the “robust materiality” and “unintended affordances” in literacy tools that prompt pivots to playful, unexpected uses not always envisioned by teachers (Bomer 2003, p. 231).

RESEARCH CONTEXT: THE TEACHER AND THE TEACHER-PLAYERS

Emma and Peter attended kindergarten in a K-6 public school in a university community in a rural midwestern state. Abbie Howard, an experienced teacher with 17 years of early childhood classroom experience and a master’s degree in developmental reading, worked to establish an atmosphere of mutual respect and learner independence. In a typical morning meeting, Abbie welcomed the class, explained her planned activities, and adjusted the day’s agenda displayed on a large pocket chart to include activities that children suggested. Following shared reading of big books and poetry charts, children worked on self-selected projects during three consecutive 45-minute activity periods—literacy choices, writers’ workshop, and choice time centers—separated by short class meetings to share projects and always, to listen to a story.

In Abbie’s classroom, several affinity groups loosely coalesced across the course of the school year. An *affinity group* (Ferne, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995) is a grouping of children who mutually choose to play together based on common play practices, themes, and interests. Each group collaborated to read, write, play, or design together using preferred practices centered on a particular theme. The *teacher-players*, the affinity group featured in this article, enacted the role of teacher as they read and played school together in “Family Circle,” the class meeting area. The six children in the featured vignettes in this article represent the demographics of the classroom: Lubna’s family emigrated from Sudan; Peter’s family emigrated from Russia; Emma, Adam, Colin, and Amy did not self-identify ethnically and their shared European-American blondeness is naturalized in the midwestern United States as commonplace and unremarkable. Teacher-players showed their strong connections to Abbie through their enactments as they emulated her voice, songs, and phrasing during play.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Following case study methodology (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I used purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998) to locate this kindergarten, asking knowledgeable informants in three school districts to recommend specific classrooms with child-directed literacy-play periods. I used early literacy classroom environment scales (Wolfersberger, Reutzell, Sudweeks, & Fawson, 2004) and print literacy surveys (Loughlin & Martin, 1987) to assess the materials in each classroom, and conducted pilot studies in two of the classrooms (Wohlwend, 2004) to locate the kindergarten with the most potential for observing children’s combinations of literacy and play practices.

In 24 weekly visits to Abbie's classroom over one school year, I used fieldnotes, audiotapes, and videotapes to record children's use of literacy tools, toys, materials, talk, and physical action during child-directed choice periods (e.g., centers), blended teacher-directed and child-directed choice periods (e.g., literacy choices, writers' workshop), and teacher-directed periods (e.g., shared reading, shared writing, authors' chair). Visits lasted two to three hours, during the morning play-integrated periods. Ethnographic methods of participant observation consistent with mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) located where and when children combined practices of reading, writing, design, or play. To identify nexus of valued practices, I used constant comparative analysis to establish a coding scheme, checking my emergent coding and initial frequency counts of observed practices against the children's reports of their favorite locations and activities. After teacher-players emerged as a focal group with reading/playing as a focal nexus, I regularly recorded this affinity group's activity (100 instances recorded during the three daily child-directed periods). For frequency counts and coding purposes, an instance consisted of observed activity with a set of objects (e.g., teacher's chair, books, story easels, and pocket charts) among children in a location (e.g., on the circular rug that bounded Family Circle) from the first child's arrival until the last child left.

I used mediated discourse analysis to identify each practice by its constitutive mediated actions and meaning-making process. Three reading practices, excerpted from a larger set of reading categories in the coding scheme, exemplify the range of categories and the overlapping nature of mediated actions across practices. The practice *invented reading* (Example 1, Lines 3-5) involved mediated actions such as holding a book in one hand and casting a quick sideways glance at an image to create a meaning inspired by but not necessarily matching the picture. *Approximated reading* included mediated actions that tangibly matched speech to text (e.g., touching print, framing a word, tracking across line of print) as readers predicted and revised meanings to fit pictures or print. *Conventional reading* involved less discernible mediated actions (e.g., tracking text without touching print) as readers internally transacted meanings and coordinated strategies to read text. Using qualitative data analysis software (QSR N6), I located and examined reading/playing nexus, that is, instances when two or more children combined these reading practices with play practices (e.g., enacting roles, animating objects).

Micro-analytic tools of mediated discourse analysis revealed transformations at the level of mediated actions in reading/playing nexus. Specifically, fine-grained observation and transcription of verbal and nonverbal interactions revealed how talk, body position, gesture, and manipulation of books and toys affected the meanings of objects, texts, and children's play identities. For example, children not only talked to each other as they played, they also talked about, through, or to objects (e.g., to define which gap among the housekeeping furniture represented "the door," to animate a flannelboard character as a howling wolf, or to scold a troublesome pair of scissors). Figure 2 shows the transcription scheme that recorded each turn (row) and its constitutive elements (columns):

Figure 2. Transcript of Excerpt from Example 2: Three Little Pigs: Turns 1-5

	Action/Context	Talk at Each Turn	Classroom Identity	Play Identity	Effect on Meaning	Effect on Participation
1	Lubna* cues Adam who is holding the book open to the first page, then points at him. [Printed text on page 1: Once upon a time, there were three little pigs. They lived with their mother. One day, the mother pig said, "Little Pigs, you are big now. You must build your own houses."]	Lubna: [Sing-song] "And the mama says..." [normal voice] You're supposed to read it!	Lubna as mediator/teacher Adam as apprentice reader	Lubna as Teacher prompts Adam as student	Improvised opening based on illustration and the array of characters placed on the flannelboard	Implicit and explicit directive by Lubna as leader and Adam as follower
2	Adam looks at the page, opens his mouth, closes his mouth, flips the first page around to show Lubna and back to himself as she cues him again.	Lubna: [rising intonation to invite completion] "And the mama says..."	Lubna as mediator Adam as apprentice reader	Lubna as Teacher prompting Adam as student	Repeats improvised opening; Omits opening sentence, first paragraph	Implicit directive [for sentence completion] by Lubna as leader; Adam as expected follower
3	Lubna straightens the three pig characters which form a line to the left of the mother pig.	Lubna: I'll help you read it.	Lubna as competent reader; Adam as "stuck" reader	Lubna as nurturing teacher Adam as needy		Peer mediation offer by Lubna as cooperative friend
4	Adam brings the book closer and rests it on his knee, and puts his finger on the word "Once," the first word in the top line of the book.	Adam: OK. I don't know that word.	Adam as apprentice reader	Lubna as nurturing teacher/ Adam as needy child	Decodes printed word, Restores first paragraph, Restores, then cedes authority of printed text	Acceptance of need for help; Take-up of Lubna's offer of mediation
5	Lubna crawls forward across the flannelboard, on all fours to look over the top of the book at the page which is upside-down from her point of view. Lubna smiles encouragingly at Adam. Adam lowers the book and smiles	Lubna: When I don't know a word, I just, I just say something I just say it! Don't look and make it up	Lubna as inventive reader and mediator Lubna as cooperative friend	Out of character, as self	Authority of text meaning: attend to flow of story Permission to alter text: Invent own meaning, ignore print	Peer mediation: personal experience example; advice by Lubna as cooperative friend Directive by Lubna

*All names are pseudonyms.

1) context with children's actions, body positions, and manipulation of objects, 2) talk at each turn, 3) classroom identities, 4) play identities, and effects on 5) the meaning of the text, and 6) classroom participation.

Critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004) linked microanalysis to Discourses, showing how interaction moves (e.g., proposing, affirming, rejecting, ignoring) drew power from differential gender, adult/child, and ability relations. For example, teacher-players positioned each other through teacherly gestures, phrasing, and book-handling that indexed cultural models and identity positions (e.g., nurturing adult, needy child, regulating teacher, obedient student) associated with discourses of gender, nurture, and child need (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997).

TEACHER-PLAYERS IN THE READING/PLAYING NEXUS

Teacher-players' reading practices ranged from invented (e.g., brief looks, fluid meaning) to conventional reading (e.g., very close match to text). Although reading practices overlapped and changed from moment-to-moment, the teacher-players' most frequent mediated actions clustered in the practice approximated reading (43 of the total 100 recorded instances for this affinity group). In approximated reading, children negotiated the tension between inventing a personally and culturally sensible meaning about the text and complying with the conventions of print or image on the page (Goodman, 1994; Whitmore, Goodman, Martens, & Owocki, 2004). Children used approximated reading to read familiar texts on sign-up charts, poems, song charts, pocket charts, class schedules, daily messages, and oversized big books from shared reading.

Teacher-players combined reading with *enacting*, acting as a subject who is pretending to be another person, transforming their identities from students into pretend teachers. Enacting clearly involves transforming identity just as reading involves transacting a text and transforming a representation of the author's idea into a personally meaningful form according to one's personal history and cache of social and cultural contexts (Rosenblatt, 1978). Teacher-players engaged in enacting more often than other play practices (38 of 100 total recorded instances).

Pretending to be Abbie often required children to transform into imagined readers, who in turn transformed texts to make the printed representation of meanings in books and charts accessible. As pretend teachers, they taught each other new forms and strategies for interpreting texts, analyzing pictures, and handling books. It was not uncommon to see children head-to-head puzzling over a word that didn't come out right as they attempted a one-to-one matching of spoken words to the written words on a page. Example 2 sketches an 11-minute instance of playful peer mediation in which Lubna's inventive picture reading mediated Adam's word framing in a small primer, *The Three Little Pigs* (Parkes & Smith, 1987), as the group collaborated to enact the story using a flannelboard set of felt characters. This is a particularly rich example of literacy play: children enacted two levels of pretense, a "play within a play," by playing flannelboard characters as they played school.

EXAMPLE 2: PLAYING TO READ

- 22 Four kindergartners sit on each side of a large black flannelboard; in its center
- 23 three pink felt pigs cluster on a red felt house. The felt pieces are oriented so that
- 24 Lubna is the only one who sees them positioned right side up. Amy sits along the

25 right edge, leaning on one hand and watching Adam who sits opposite Lubna and
 26 twirls the wolf character around his index finger. Colin sits on the left. Lubna
 27 holds the book and reads, inventing words and remembering phrases from the
 28 familiar story as she draws out words for dramatic effect, “And huffed and
 29 blew the house down.” She stops periodically to direct Adam, Amy, and
 30 Colin to put their characters on the flannelboard. When the story ends, Lubna
 31 reassigns materials, ignoring Amy’s request to play a fourth little pig. Finally,
 32 Lubna hands the book to Adam, “Your turn now,” prompting, “And the mama
 33 says...You’re supposed to read it!” Adam stares at the print on the page: *Once*
 34 *upon a time...* After a moment, Lubna adds encouragingly, “When I don’t know a
 35 word, I just say something. I just make it up!” (from video data and fieldnotes)

In this instance, the physical placement of objects reinforced play identities and relative power relationships, affecting who controlled the text and ultimately, which text versions were authorized. Lubna’s place at the flannelboard authorized her view as the official view and positioned her as teacher (Gee, 1999). Where Lubna sat determined the baseline so that the other children viewed the story action on the flannelboard from sideways or upside-down perspectives (Lines 22-26). As Lubna distributed materials, she also distributed their associated roles and practices: books for narrators to read, felt pieces for actors to animate (Lines 30-32). As teacher, Lubna held the power to manage role negotiations for the story, to start and stop the text (Lines 29-30), to control moves in and out of the inner play frame (flannelboard animation of a folk tale) (Lines 32-33), and to lead explicit metacommunication (Bateson, 1955/1972) about co-constructed play action (Göncü, 1993; Sawyer, 2003) (Lines 30-31). The children gave little attention to maintaining the outer play frame, that is, the enactment of teacher and school. Teacher play was so much a part of their affinity group activity that almost no effort was needed to maintain play identity relationships.

The children also tacitly accepted the differential positioning that came with playing a teacher or student. Each teacher-player in this scenario had regularly played the teacher and knew the expectations for both roles; obeying the teacher’s directives without objection was customary and almost automatic. Lubna, the pretend teacher, not only dictated who could handle the materials throughout the play sequence but also what elements of the text could be altered. When Amy proposed a departure from the book’s storyline with the addition of a fourth little pig in Lines 30-31, Lubna ignored Amy’s proposition and upheld the cast of characters depicted in the book. However, she later gave Adam considerable freedom when she urged him to improvise and “just say something” (Lines 34-35). This pattern of proposition-rejection-reversal was not unusual in children’s literacy play negotiations. Corsaro (2003) suggests young children take the content of their play seriously as imaginary scenarios are built through heavy expenditures of ideas and social capital. Children invest deeply into play frames, pouring in time, talk, and friendship bonds to develop a collective plan. These social costs determine who is allowed to join a group, driving exclusionary tactics as young children attempt to protect the fragile play frames that they co-construct (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). My analysis of the reading/playing nexus extends Corsaro’s theorization of children’s play motives. I found that when play practices linked and integrated with readings of text, children’s protection of a co-constructed play frame was complicated by a need to

protect their individual or collective interpretations of the story text. The negotiation of a tension between improvisational play and conventional reading of text shaped more than play scenarios and text meanings; it also shaped children's identities and social spaces. For example, Lubna's efforts to preserve the authority of the text and to keep the play going strengthened her own authority as the pretend teacher as children looked to her for help.

To examine how reading practices and story interpretations interacted with children's play goals, I looked closely at one of three moments when Adam's mediated action *framing a word* contrasted with Lubna's mediated action *inventing a phrase for an image*. Because Adam was concerned with matching spoken words to print in a familiar but difficult book, his reading stalled while Lubna, who invented readily and referred to the pictures more than the print, moved through the text quickly and confidently. Lubna's inventive reading and play-based mediation supported Adam's almost conventional reading as he stopped to frame a word and she responded by inventing phrases or offering advice to prompt him to move forward. The transcript in Figure 2, excerpted from the complete microanalysis of this play event, consists of five turns within 30 seconds (summarized in Lines 32-35 in Example 2) that reveal the contrast in the two children's approaches to reading as they tackled the problem of "getting stuck" and attempted contradictory mediated actions. Adam mediated print on the page by isolating a word for closer visual inspection, focusing on the grapho-phonetic details of the text. He framed the word *Once*, first making an 'O' with his mouth (Turn 2) which didn't help him decode its initial /w/ sound and then pinning it down for closer inspection by placing a finger on the *O* (Turn 4). He didn't apply his knowledge of the story's events or draw upon his repertoire of remembered openings for folk tales that might lead him into "Once upon a time..." In contrast, Lubna focused on the holistic meaning of the text. She mediated the illustration on the page by inventing a phrase to narrate the image and mediated the print for Adam by recommending verbal improvisation (Turn 5). She leaned over the top of the book, looked briefly at the upside-down print, and advised Adam not to look [at the print] and "just say something," to just "make it up."

Play expectations for teacher/student roles reversed classroom identities and allowed Lubna, an expressive and inventive player/reader who made up stories based on the pictures, to coach Adam, a nearly independent reader who was beginning to read simple chapter books (e.g., Henry and Mudge series, Rylant, 1987). In Turn 1, Lubna offered a shared reading teaching strategy: she said the first part of the sentence and trailed off to let him fill in the rest. The sentence she said, "And the mama says..." did not match the sentence printed on the page: "*Once upon a time, there were three little pigs.*" Instead, it was an invented version that corresponded to the expected dialogue for the first character on the flannelboard. Lubna's directive, "You're supposed to read it," caused Adam to look closer at the text and then to show Lubna the print. The story playing stalled as Adam focused on accurate decoding of a single word. At Turn 3, Lubna offered to help Adam read the text. It's important to note that her focus was on Adam rather than the text, "I'll help you read it" instead of "I'll read it." It was a teacher-like offer to share responsibility in order to read a tricky part rather than a move to take over his role as narrator. Interestingly, Lubna's strategies for helping Adam to read aligned with my informal analysis of his reading. When Adam read this book to me, he often stopped reading when he came to unknown words or asked for my assistance rather than checking illustrations or using story context. My own recommendation as a literacy teacher would

echo Lubna's advice to invent and keep going through the tricky spots to help keep the meaning of the story intact.

ANALYZING DISCOURSES ON FOUR PLANES

Discourse of Child Agency: Personal Appropriation and Cultural Meaning-Making.

As the teacher-players read and played *The Three Little Pigs*, they taught each other valued reading practices that enabled them to independently produce further literacy events but also to circulate a Discourse that promoted children's agency. Agentic Discourse manifested in peer mediation and child-directed learning as children typically consulted and assisted each other before seeking out Abbie or other adults. Peer mediation enabled personal appropriation as children strategically took up materials for their own purposes and cultural meaning-making as children pooled their cultural and linguistic resources to co-construct meaning. Lubna's previous experiences as a novice within scaffolded literacy sessions supported her peer teaching, enabling her to appropriate Abbie's modeled practices; Lubna's appropriation allowed her to mediate Adam's approximated reading of the text. In Family Circle sessions, Abbie's foregrounded shared reading practices were accompanied by backgrounded teaching strategies. Teacher-players emphasized these backgrounded practices for mediated teaching through play identities as pretend teachers and through classroom identities as helpful peers.

Peer mediation produced transformative cultural meaning-making in this small excerpt from one instance of literacy play. Children transformed a book into story and play, changing print and image into action with props. By appropriating the pictured storyline and rephrasing print into dialogue for pieces of felt, children transformed themselves into fictional characters in their flannelboard play, into teachers and students in their school pretense, and into readers in the classroom. Their interactions with books transacted the tension between readers' interpretations and authors' intended meanings. They grappled with the boundaries of text: how much of the text could be changed? What words should be used? Which characters should be allowed?

Adam, the reader, worked at an exact reproduction of the print on the page, focusing on reading the words and figuring out the conventional forms but losing the meaning and the players in the process. Lubna, the player and storyteller, worked at faithfully representing the meaning of the traditional folktale, making up words to keep the flow of the story but allowing no change to the cast of characters or plot. Together, they helped one another attend to cultural conventions to interpret the book's meaning and symbols, to coordinate the whole with its parts.

Discourse of Standardized Control: Material Use and Access

Teacher-players also used books to enforce compliance and to limit each other's access to materials by indexing a Discourse of standardized control that promotes teacher authority and expectations for accuracy and conformity. Expectations for a single correct text interpretation are concretized in the material features and historical uses of a school primer (Luke, 1995). Although Lubna could invent phrases, she still worked to preserve the storyline; her personal appropriation was bounded by adherence to the traditional meaning of a folk tale and her strong sense of story. Teacher-players also activated "pervasive cultural models of reading" and teaching outside their

immediate kindergarten experience: through “sounding out” (Compton-Lilly, 2005, p. 441) and teacher enactments that emphasized teacher authority/child compliance in initiation-response-evaluation interaction patterns (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979) and an insistence on hand-raising.

An infinite number of constitutive relationships could be drawn between a classroom, its materials, and particular Discourses (e.g., the Discourse of teacher agency in Abbie’s pristine teacher’s manual in its original packaging in the back corner of the room, the Discourse of consumerism in overflowing bins of scissors, glue sticks, markers, and full-length pencils in bright red plastic tubs in expensive blonde wood cubbies). Given the profusion of concretized and verbalized Discourses in any given place, the key is to discover which Discourses are foregrounded and which are backgrounded in the interactions among social actors in that place, in this case, the children playing in the classroom. Ironically, the most backgrounded Discourses are also most powerful: naturalized expectations that operate “invisibly” (or perhaps inaudibly) at the level of practice, integrated into nexus of practice where they circulate as just the natural way of doing things (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). I suggest that in classrooms, invisible Discourses circulate through *routines*, daily automatic practices that every substitute teacher recognizes through the familiar objection, “But that’s not how you’re *supposed* to do it.”

Nurturing Discourse: Social Participation

Routines are part of the web of nexus that creates the fabric of everyday social participation, engaging in ways of belonging in a community of practice. Routines in Abbie’s classroom reflected nurturing Discourse in a concern for children’s comfort: children joined groups when they were ready, left to get drinks when they were thirsty, or sprawled on the floor during stories to get comfortable. Rather than regulating children’s minds and bodies (Boldt, 2001) through control Discourse admonitions for quiet voices and orderly work spaces, nurturing Discourse in Abbie’s routines attended to children’s physical, social, and emotional needs: need to play, need for protection, and need for activity matched to a developmental stage articulated in developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

An activity system analysis of the nurturing Discourse underlying this kindergarten’s nexus of practice reveals children (subjects) as developing learners who invent their own literacy (outcome) through exploration and play (tools) within print-rich and responsive environments (objects) in a developmental progression (rules) toward conventional forms (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Kamii & Manning, 2002; Tolchinsky, 2003). Developmentally appropriate practitioners protect children from inappropriately difficult or abstract tasks that might interrupt development (IRA, 2005; IRA & NAEYC, 1998). However, this ostensibly agentic Discourse also limits its members. Nurturing requires needy subjects; children are positioned as innocents who need teachers (women) who suggest rather than direct, teach by facilitating, protect, and comfort. Feminist poststructuralist research points out paradoxes that women face in fulfilling contradictory educational ideals of passive nurturer and strong advocate (Cannella, 2000; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Grumet, 1988; Walkerdine, 1994). Nurturing Discourse diminishes opportunities for young girls, imposing identity expectations for cooperation and passivity; girls are interpreted as teacher helpers who work while boys are interpreted as active explorers who learn (Walkerdine, 1990). Of course, many critical researchers argue that teachers and children also act as agents who strategically use Discourse and are not mere dupes of institutional systems (Blaise, 2005; Boldt, 2002; Britzman, 1991; Thorne,

1993). Just like Emma and Lubna, other teacher-players ingeniously invoked power by imagining and enacting nurturing but powerful play identities (e.g., teacher, mother), thereby expanding their access to a wider range of available practices and opportunities as they wielded developmentally appropriate practices and routines to position other children.

DISCOURSES, POWER, AND PLAY IN EARLY LITERACY APPRENTICESHIPS

Because Discourses often operate in the background through automatic, unexamined practices and materials, individuals do not carefully consider each mediated action in terms of its discursive power. People take up gendered (raced, classed, or otherwise ideologically imbued) practices in artful and/or innocent ways as they do what seems best at a particular time. Nurturing teachers sincerely want to do what is best for children. But when we position ourselves as responsive to children's needs, we accentuate their *need* for us. In this way, nurturing Discourse emphasizes power relations very effectively: Lubna's teacher enactment emphasized her (indirect, nurturing) power over other children as she directed them, pointed to control their gazes, handed out or removed felt pieces, repositioned their bodies, and patted their hands in a reassuring you-can-do-it way. Teacher-players not only engaged in developmentally appropriate book-handling; they engaged in *book-wielding* as means to broker power relations, using books to align themselves with the teacher and reading to other children as a way to take charge. It's telling that their teaching centered on demonstrations of shared reading (teacher as primary actor and speaker, usually standing or sitting above others, directing children's attention to an object she held) rather than on shared writing (child as primary actor, teacher as questioner, usually sitting next to child at eye level, looking at words or pictures as the child writes).

Children's ability to wield power shapes and is shaped by their literacy proficiency and classroom status which in turn affects their social access to peer culture. "In classrooms and in schools, learning to read is often who you are: how well a child learns to read in comparison to other students provides a social position in a social hierarchy of 'becoming readers'" (Christian & Bloome, 2004, p. 367). But adult-centered perspectives of schooling may overlook the ways children's status within peer culture is also shaped by children's proficiency with child-valued practices such as play. Master players in this kindergarten community of practice were valued for the creative and generative activity that they shared with peers. Anthropological research that takes "a sideways glance" (Kendrick, 2005; Schwartzman, 1978), or a child's look, at play reveals its potent social capital that often holds more currency than literacy within peer culture. Play creates alliances, produces and maintains interactive spaces, and exerts power over others, three major concerns of peer culture. Playing the teacher enabled "children [to] emulate powerful adult roles, privileged to speak with high-status control act forms, to achieve their own power in the peer group" (Kyratzis, 2004, p. 630).

Play makes new places possible through recontextualization as children create imaginary sites that are collectively envisioned and collaboratively maintained. However, a place is also the site of intersecting disparately powered Discourses associated with its situated materials, roles, and histories. When teacher-players played teacher to read books or charts, they created a child-run

school within a school, producing a lamination of prior classroom time-spaces (Leander, 2002, 2004) and associated Discourses through re-enactments of teacher-modeled practices. In the foreground, children appropriated materials and reading practices to make their teacher play more credible. The backgrounded effect emphasized agentic and nurturing Discourse over standardized control Discourse and privileged play identities over classroom reading proficiency.

Abbie's sociocultural view of literacy as a mix of storytelling and sensemaking with print recognized Lubna's play performances of reading as valid and meaningful, enabling Lubna to participate as a central player and a social leader. Ironically, at a time when literacy researchers are calling for expanded research agendas that use critical sociocultural perspectives (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) to reconceptualize early literacy as social practice (Rowe, 2006) and include multimodal ways of knowing (Kress & Jewitt, 2003), governmental policies rely on increasingly constricted definitions of literacy and achievement. Discourse of standardized control in recent national trends equates early literacy with memorization of letter/sound relationships, demands work over play, and increases pressure for reading accuracy (IRA, 2005; Stipek, 2005). These are trends that threaten to ignore and devalue the inventive and expressive reading that Lubna demonstrated. In schools, play is seen as academically useful only in the service of literacy. This is evident in recommendations that teachers add cookbooks or coupons to housekeeping corners to prompt more reading. However, this approach underestimates the amplified semiotic and social effects when two powerful meaning-making practices combine.

Two-way analysis of reading/playing nexus—reading to play as well as playing to read—is one way to illuminate how literacy and play practices integrate and intensify each other, producing nexus that expand the ways children can be recognized as literate. As teacher-players played to read, they transformed texts, language, actions, and Discourses by using play to create pliable spaces for approximating literacy practices. As they read to play, they recontextualized the classroom as a pretend school and recast their identities as play teachers and students, repositionings that authorized their own interpretations and legitimated their directives to others. The multiple transformations in two instances of literacy play hint at the potential of play's unique properties for imagining new contexts for meaning-making, for expanding participation by enacting empowered identities, and for creating accessible literacy spaces for diverse learners.

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