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Play as a Literacy of Possibilities: Expanding Meanings in Practices, Materials, and Spaces

Since the seminal book *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (Harste, Woodward, & Burke) appeared in 1984, a substantial body of educational research has documented young children's playful explorations and transactions with texts, that is, their interpretations, approximations, and appropriations of print and nonprint messages in the world around them. (For a comprehensive review of transactional early literacy research, see Whitmore, Goodman, Martens, & Owocki, 2005). Until recently, early childhood teachers could draw upon this established research base to integrate play into classroom literacy events by encouraging open-ended exploration of literacy materials and by incorporating print into classroom play centers. However, government accountability mandates for standardized testing and uniform teaching leave little time for the messy wonder that regularly occurs during child-directed play and exploration—in effect, driving play out of classrooms in favor of teacher-directed skills instruction.

Newspaper articles (Brandon, 2002; Hemphill, 2006; Stewart, 2005; Weil, 2007) regularly report a nationwide trend that replaces playtime in kindergarten with “more academics,” referring to increased literacy skills practice through worksheets, workbooks, flashcards, and computerized drills. Play is char-

acterized as trivial activity in school, an expendable frill with little potential for improving literacy achievement. Such reductionist approaches to literacy and schooling appear especially shortsighted in light of the constantly evolving new literacies (New London Group, 1996) needed to manage burgeoning multimedia environments (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Luke & Grieshaber, 2004; Millard, 2003). *New literacies* expand the definitions of literacy and texts from reading and writing print bounded by a page of paper to include gaming, blogging, podcasting, text messaging, and other ways of digitally participating in vast social networks.

The recognition that language comprises only one piece in a literacy puzzle that is completed by other *modes*, such as “image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech, and sound-effect” (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 1), has sparked fresh perspectives on early literacy that reconceptualize the connection between reading, writing, and play. Early literacy teachers and researchers who analyze early reading and writing *multimodally*¹ look at young children's

¹ Although the term *multimodal* is now almost synonymous with digital texts and online environments, Kress's (1997) early work in multimodal literacies drew from young children's nonverbal interactions with the surrounding environment. (See Siegel, 2006, for a comprehensive review of research in multimodal literacies.)

talk, actions, images, and artifacts as intentional literate messages (Rowe, 2003) that children take up as they participate in literacy apprenticeships (Rogoff, 1995). For example, Deborah Rowe (2008) explores how children come to participate in schooled ways of writing. Questioning the assumption that writing emerges as an individual process, she uses interactional frames to track the scaffolded conversations, actions, and gestures between toddlers and their preschool teachers. Two-year-olds learn that the marks they make have meaning by participating with teachers who frame the children's actions, products, and gestures as intentional writing. Recognizing the semiotic load carried by the materials and spaces surrounding literacy events, Rowe calls for additional research that attends to the interrelationships of material objects, geographic spaces, and social conditions within early literacy classrooms.

When multimodal literacies coexist with school literacy, marginalized learners benefit (Siegel, 2006). Elaine Millard (2003) argues for a “transformative pedagogy of literacy fusion” that transforms out-of-school literacies, or “what children already know, into stuff that will give them agency in a wider world” (p. 7). Children use play to import opportunities for literacy performances and increase

their participation within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through play, children take up identities as literacy users in imagined communities, “communities to which they hope to belong” (Kendrick, 2005, p. 9). Such play performances of more experienced readers allow them to mediate texts for themselves and others (Wohlwend, 2007b), expanding their participation in *peer culture*, the child-ordered social organization of a classroom—the “activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 197).

In this article, I explore how play, through its multimodal facility for manipulating meanings and contexts, powerfully shapes children’s learning and participation in classrooms. Examples from one focal kindergarten classroom in a three-year study conducted in early childhood classrooms illustrate how young children emphasize or combine particular modes to strategically amplify their intended meanings as they play: 1) to try out social practices, 2) to explore the multimodal potential of material resources, and 3) to construct spaces for peer culture within classrooms.

CHILDREN AS MULTIMODAL MEANING MAKERS

Unlike adults, who depend upon and are more constrained by familiar conventions of communication, children switch easily between modes to convey their messages through creative exploitation of materials (Kress, 2003). Where adults (and the products that they design) are bound by cultural convention, correctness of form, and ready-made signs

of written language, children are freer to invent their own signs with whatever materials, modes, and semiotic systems (including play) are suited to the immediate purpose. Children’s flexible orientation to designing and interpreting meanings affords multiple paths into literacy (Kantor, Miller, & Fernie, 1992) as they select from a wide choice of language practices, a rich array of materials, and an expanding variety of modes for expressing ideas:

Increasingly important are modes of meaning other than Linguistic, including Visual Meanings (images, page layouts, screen formats); Audio Meanings (music, sound effects); Gestural Meanings (body language, sensuality); Spatial Meanings (the meanings of environmental spaces, architectural spaces); and Multimodal Meanings. Of the modes of meaning, the Multimodal is the most significant, as it relates all the other modes in quite remarkably dynamic relationships. (New London Group, 1996)

Children directly explore the material world through multimodal play. Beginning with an infant’s sound and motor play (Piaget, 1962), children experiment with the physical properties of materials: tapping a plastic cup—first with the tip of a pencil, then with its side to listen to its click change to a clack—or clutching three markers and squiggling along a sheet of paper to watch the lines of color blur as they loop and tangle together. Play allows the material reality of the classroom to slide into distant imagined spaces—the roaring drone of a football stadium—and to snap back again in the next second.

The multimodal quality of play offers children multiple ways to expand the meanings of the messages they produce. When a message is conveyed in several modes, the combination of modes amplifies and/or complicates the separate strands of monomodal meanings. Children, less encumbered by cultural expectations for proper uses of materials, strategically combine modes to intensify meanings; for example, a young child may animate an inanimate drawing of a jet by adding sound effects or by flying it through the air (Kress, 1997).

A social semiotic lens on multimodal literacies (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 1997) looks beyond a facility for enriching meanings through overlapping modes. Multimodal meanings also engage multiple *Discourses*—socially expected patterns of “using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member” among a group of people (Gee, 1996, p. 131). When certain ways of combining voice, gaze, and handling objects come to be expected and tacitly valued, their combination creates the natural-seeming ways of participating that automatically elicit cooperation of others, forming unspoken patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Scolon, 2001). For example, Blaise’s (2005) critical discourse analysis of kindergartners’ play activity showed children reproduced gendered Discourses of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity through their talk and body actions with materials. “In the kindergarten classroom, hegemonic masculinity can be

thought of as the most desirable and powerful way to be a boy” (Blaise, 2005, p. 21) while emphasizing femininity acts as a subordinate foil that amplifies masculinity Discourse by focusing attention away from girls’ accomplishments. In Blaise’s study, boys acted upon material products to compete with other children: producing and claiming visible work, being first, having an original idea, and working alone. Feminine and masculine Discourses resonate with school literacy practices, keeping gender roles and achievement expectations firmly in place (Kamler, 1999).

RESEARCHING PLAY AS MULTIMODAL ACTIVITY: CLASSROOM CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

The three examples that illustrate this article are excerpted from data collected from one classroom in a three-year study of literacy play in K–2 classrooms. Using case study methodology and network sampling, I searched for an early childhood classroom where children were encouraged to play, read, write, and design during open-ended, child-directed activity periods. Following nominations from local early childhood teachers, school principals, and university professors, I visited and evaluated seven kindergarten classrooms in three public schools, looking specifically at toys, literacy tools, and child-produced artifacts in each classroom environment. Observations, photographs, and videotapes of each classroom documented the materials, times, and spaces that integrated play and school literacy activity. After analyzing the data and selecting the most promising

classroom, I spent a year visiting Abbie Howard’s² kindergarten.

Abbie taught kindergarten in a public K–6 elementary school that served predominantly White middle class suburban neighborhoods in a university community. Children in this kindergarten continually selected from a range of choices to map out unique learning paths for themselves. A typical morning included: 1) Literacy Centers, a 30-minute period of adult-supported activity, including shared reading and writing activities at the writing center and listening center (books and tapes); independent reading at the poetry center (big books, story easel, song and poem charts) and classroom library; inquiry projects and design activities at the art table and the project table; 2) Writers’ Workshop, a 30-minute period of independent drawing, writing, and design, including painting, puppet-making, paper folding, storyboard planning, and dramatization as children worked on projects collected in their writing folders or stories in their journals; and 3) Choice Time, the final 30-minute learner-directed period of the morning, including most literacy center areas as well as blocks, math manipulatives, board games and puzzles, snack table, house-keeping corner, and the dollhouse. During daily Literacy Centers in the art center, children in this classroom freely explored material properties of objects as they created teacher-assisted projects, such as layering papier maché strips to make bowls, coloring and molding plaster of paris into sidewalk chalk, weav-

² All names are pseudonyms, including the teacher, students, university, mascot, and phone numbers.

ing yarn on matboard looms, tying fabric, straining sawdust and water mixtures, or measuring ingredients for soap or chocolate chip cookies. Children often returned during Choice Time to continue working on these projects or to create new projects using assorted art supplies.

I used ethnographic methods (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002) to collect data during my weekly visits to Abbie’s kindergarten. As a participant-observer, I observed and recorded talk and activity that naturally occurred among children during their regular classroom activities, participating in projects as necessary in a classroom where children expect adults to be helpful (Toohey, 2000). Layering discourse analysis onto ethnographic data collection is a highly effective way to examine the social practices and situated language (Rogers, 2003) that affect children’s participation in kindergarten classrooms. Discourse analysis involves “analysis of naturally occurring connected speech . . . [and] is also concerned with language use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers” (Stubbs, 1983, p. 1).

Three approaches to discourse analysis offered tools for understanding children’s play as multimodal practices with materials in social spaces. Mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) identified the mediated actions, children, and material objects that made up the valued meaning-making practices in this classroom. A mediated action (Wertsch, 1991) is a physical—often multimodal—action by a social actor with

materials and tools that alter and render accessible the surrounding environment. For example, a young child playing and drawing a picture at the writing table might engage in overlapping mediated actions that use multiple modes: uncapping a marker, smoothing the wrinkles out of a paper, squiggling a string of letters across the page, commenting on a friend's illustration, bouncing a marker up and down on paper to make puddles of ink, singing a song accompanied by rhythmic taps of a pencil, and so on. Multimodal discourse analysis examined visual image and concrete objects in terms of visual design, that is, the ways that visual elements or physical properties of materials are exploited to evoke particular meanings or index genre conventions embedded in power relations (Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). For example, a walk down any toy store aisle shows that intensity, value, and color are strongly associated with gender: saturated reds, blues, greens, and blacks for boys; pink, lavender, blue, and aqua tints for girls.

Critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) provided the means to link real-time instances of classroom activity to cultural models or storylines that determine how children's situated activity drew from, and was interpreted according to, societal Discourses that determine how children's language and mediated actions with objects are interpreted, that is, whether their actions constitute a valued social practice. Critical discourse analysis demonstrated how interactive moves (e.g., proposing, affirming, rejecting, ignoring) drew power from differential gender, adult/

child, and ability relations. For example, children could reverse their social positioning as they played "school" by using teacherly gestures, phrasing, and book-wielding to pretend empowered identities and position peers (e.g., nurturing adult/needful child, regulating teacher/obedient student) associated with Discourses of gender, nurture, and child need (Wohlwend, 2007b).

In the following sections, examples from Abbie's kindergarten introduce and illustrate how children at play:

1. Try out available social practices such as expected conventions for conversation or handling communication tools.
2. Explore multimodally to discover the material qualities of images and objects and use these qualities for understanding and producing signs.
3. Construct social spaces in peer culture within the classroom by pretending a person, thing, or place is someone, something, or somewhere else through multimodal orchestration of talk, image, gaze, gesture, and sound effects. Figure

1 presents a graphic representation, adapted from an activity model, which demonstrates how three functions of play are situated within an early literacy apprenticeship. (For an expanded explanation of this activity model, see Wohlwend, 2007b.)

Trying Out Social Practices

Allie bounces across the house-keeping corner and nestles under the small wooden kitchen table, tucking her legs up under her chin. Pulling a white afghan over herself, she begins to whimper. Meanwhile, standing next to the table, Colin is on the red plastic phone talking to an imaginary receptionist. "Hello, I'm calling for Allyssa. (pause) Yes. (pause) Is there a check-in for that?(pause) Oh, there is? There is? (incredulous) Well, could I just wait awhile?" After a few seconds on hold, Colin leaves a message for the doctor on voicemail, "I really don't know what's going to happen and I wanted to know if you could come over here, Dr. Bannon, 'cause Allie, she has ammonia and she has the flu, and so yeah, if you could call back here . . . My

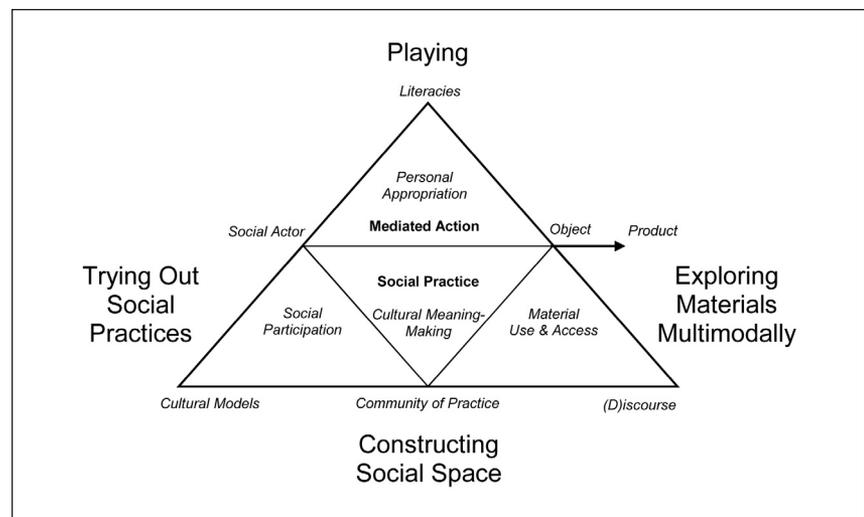


Figure 1. An activity model of play (adapted from Engeström, 1987)

number is 555-3861. And my cell phone number is 555-998-888S—oops, 880, I'm sorry. Thank you.” (Video data, November 2, 2005)

To make this instance of pretend play startlingly real, Colin drew upon multiple familiar social practices: middle class concerned parenting, healthcare consumerism, and talking on a telephone. He enacted the conversational ebb and flow of a phone call, the proper conventions for leaving a voicemail message, the necessary medical information that a doctor might require, and a few strategies for avoiding the waiting room of a busy clinic during flu season (“Is there a check-in for that?”).

Just as every instance of here-and-now activity is made up of multiple social practices, every practice is made of individual mediated actions (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). As Colin invented dialogue on a plastic phone in the housekeeping corner, he engaged in simultaneous mediated actions: handling a phone, punching in numbers, pausing for an imagined listener, repeating a phone number sequence (albeit with a missing digit), pronouncing questions with particular intonation, using appropriate conventions for politeness, etc. How his actions are interpreted as one social practice or another depends upon Discourses that circulate in the surrounding culture. For example, Colin included cultural conventions for politeness required by the differential positioning in patient/physician power relations within the Discourse of private practice medicine (e.g., addressing a physician by the formal title “Dr.” but not addressing the receptionist at all, giving a patient’s given name “Alyssa”

rather than nickname “Allie,” distancing his request to make it politely indirect [“I wanted to know”], and requesting additional time rather than demanding immediate assistance [“Well, could I just wait awhile?”]).

At the same time, Colin’s mediated actions are also constructed as “not real” because they occurred within school inside a play frame (Bateson, 1955/1972; Goffman, 1974), a socially constructed and discursively maintained play space bounded by a miniature wooden kitchen situated within the everyday reality of the classroom. In school contexts, Colin’s conversation on a plastic phone is readily recognized as a sociodramatic imitation of adult conversation. However, in some classrooms, the mediated actions and material objects clustered in this set of actions-and-language-with-technologies are recognized as approximations of a multimodal literacies practice with communication devices (i.e., managing voicemail) in which callers leave pertinent and accurate information (e.g., including both land line and cell phone numbers, even correcting a miscue: an erroneous letter “S” in the cell phone number). Colin’s credible imitations of adult conversations allowed him not only to direct collaborative pretense in house-corner play scenarios, but also to confidently assume leadership roles during school literacy Discourse activities. Not only did Colin frequently advise other children during writing workshop, he also assisted peers in following step-by-step directions during a boat-building workshop—an activity he developed and conducted as a learning center during Choice Time.

Exploring Resources Multimodally

At the art table, several kindergartners are drawing faces, stopping now and then to peer seriously into the individual metal mirrors scattered around the table. All except Scott. Having flipped his paper over, he colors with a gray crayon, pressing very hard, moving it furiously back and forth across the white page. Instead of drawing the expected self-portrait, he transforms his paper into a smooth waxy gray surface. Impressed, I comment, “Wow, that looks just like the mirror.” Absorbed in his work, he nods slightly, “Yeah.”

While the other children used the mirrors and crayons as tools to create images of themselves, Scott focused on representing the reflective qualities of the metal of the hand mirror. In other words, he focused on the mode for transmitting the image rather than the content of the image. Fascinated by the shininess of a metallic mirror rather than his own reflection, he pressed down hard to exploit the crayon’s waxiness, thus representing the mirror’s metallic sheen rather than drawing a circle lightly with the crayon’s tip to represent his reflected face. In contrast, I was so accustomed to looking at the reflected content that the metal material was almost invisible to me, and I felt a jolt of surprise when I realized his gray scribbling was the mirror’s surface.

Randy Bomer (2003) terms playful attention to the form rather than the function of the tool “robust materiality” (p. 231). Children more easily appropriate and creatively exploit the material possibilities of objects to

convey their messages in comparison with adults, who are accustomed to familiar conventions (Kress, 2003). Scott, a child who preferred to work alone, rarely sought to join play groups. However, his explorations with materials attracted other children's interest and positioned him as an expert. Abbie encouraged him to demonstrate and write about his inventions, such as a "hand-washing machine," a container pierced with a drinking straw that children filled with water before rinsing their hands under the straw/spout.

Constructing Social Spaces in Peer Culture

At the writing table, three blonde, freckle-faced sports fans share markers as they advise each other on how to draw an eagle, the local university mascot. Marshall shares his drawing of a "SuperEagle," a wingless bird with a crescent head, "I came at, on this idea, awright?"

Matt and Patrick compliment Marshall—"Marshall's a good draw-er, you know"—and ask him to draw a SuperEagle on their papers. Matt watches intently as Marshall forms a triangular shape on his paper but Patrick is engrossed in smacking one marker against another to see whether it will roll or spin, depending upon where he strikes it. He hits the marker at rhythmic intervals and chants, "Let's go Midweeeeestern! Whoop woo-whoop! Let's go Midweeeeestern! Whoop woo-whoop!"

Marshall responds, "Let's go MidWeeeeestern." He points to his drawing and throws his arm upward: "Yeah baby-Yaaah!" as he holds a marker close to his chest and strums it as an air guitar.

Matt leans across the table to ask Patrick, "Hey, 'member when those—when the Eagles weren't doing so good? Everyone who hated the Eagles were going for [the other team]. And then remember what happened? [cupping his hands around his mouth and lowering the pitch of his voice] "Booooo. Booooo. Booooo."

"That was not good."

"Yeah, I was at that game. I was," Matt repeats.

Patrick stops hitting the marker and looks up, "You were?"

"I was."

Patrick answers, "I wasn't. Were you on July 10th? Were you at July 10th? 'Cause we were at July 10th."

As their conversation continues, Lin, a Chinese American girl, walks to the end of the table, sits down, and begins to draw. None of the boys looks up as she approaches nor comments on her drawing as she draws her own Eagles mascot.

Marshall, Matt, and Patrick drew and colored SuperEagles with care, repeatedly moving markers over the sections of their

papers to fill the areas completely (see Fig. 2). As in Scott's drawing of a mirror, visual analysis of the boys' designs answered the questions: Why this material? How does color, texture, and form affect the child's message? How is space organized? Intent on getting the colors and symbols exactly right, the boys reproduced team colors: yellow/black for Eagles' mascots and red/blue for Cubs logos. Matt pressed hard with fresh markers to create saturated red, blue, yellow, and black rather than pastels that would be produced by lightly scribbling with colored pencils. Matt's background design sharply contrasted dark colors against light, creating tension and producing a diagonal curve that split the field and gave his picture a dynamic quality. Diagonals indicate movement and character action rather than a static display (Jewitt & Omyana, 2001). The diagonal orientation of Marshall's SuperEagle created a sense of motion, an ascending bird caught mid-flight. Coloring to the edge made the picture more real by de-emphasizing the framing paper (Kress, 1997).



Figure 2. Marshall's drawing of a SuperEagle on Patrick's paper (The local university's name is masked with its pseudonym.)

Given the easily accessible and abundant supply of materials in Abbie's classroom, it's important to point out that these kindergartners most often chose markers, pencils, or crayons to create pictures and texts by drawing, coloring, and writing on paper. Despite all the multimedia options, children produced paper products, that is, traditional school literacy products (e.g., drawings, child-made books) that attracted teacher attention and earned a place in the author's chair following Writing Workshop. In short, paper products aligned with school literacy Discourse expectations and accrued cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in the classroom.

Kress (1997) argues that technological changes from paper texts to screen-based images require fast-paced blending of forms, or *transduction*, into the best available mode. Children extend the semantic potential of their designs by transduction, that is, by selecting among modes and transforming one form into another. This might be demonstrated by cutting out drawings to create a two-dimensional shape or taping papers into three-dimensional toys. I suggest that the boys' play surrounding their SuperEagles engaged a fourth dimension—movement through time and space—that transcended school literacy Discourse. When Matt cupped his hands to animate his drawing with the visual/sound effect of a booping fan and Marshall strummed a marker as an air guitar, the meanings of their drawings and tools shifted. Animation transformed Matt's image into an event and Marshall's marker into a prop that carried double meanings (e.g., real marker and simulated guitar).

The chanting, marker spinning, air guitar strumming, crowd booing gestures, and sound effects in this play event show that contrary to their claims, the three boys did more than “just draw,” and more was at stake than the creation of an aesthetically pleasing picture. The boys' coloring and drawing abilities were concretized in the products they made. Their production of visible work and claims of original ideas reproduced practices of hegemonic masculinity that allowed them to recognize each other as members within the boys' group (Blaise, 2005). They used their SuperEagles drawings to rank each other and demonstrate their relative skill; the boys clearly recognized Marshall as the dominant designer and sought his expertise. While they drew, they added dramatic effects, evaluated each oth-

er's drawing and coloring skills, ranked their favorite sports teams, compared their likes and dislikes, engaged in verbal competitions, and enacted mock battles with writing tools. Their multimodal additions enhanced their drawings and demonstrated each boy's sports knowledge and fan experience. Abbie helped the boys translate their play enactments of sports fans into valued school literacy practices, encouraging them to write and draw books of recent sports events, label diagrams of baseball diamonds (see Fig. 3), football fields, scoreboards, and team uniforms, and write scripts for football iMovies.

The interaction between Marshall, Matt, Patrick, and Lin shows that it is not enough to access and use multimodal resources; it is also necessary to get one's performance and use of materials recognized as a valid

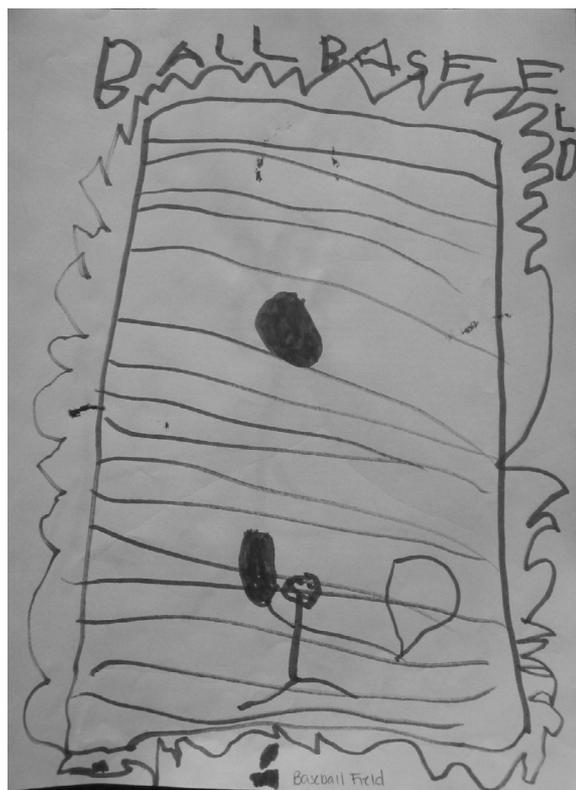


Figure 3. Matt's drawing of a "baseball field"

way of belonging within the Discourses that operate in the classroom and in peer culture. The boys' bonding through competitive activity and cooperative drawings aligned with Discourses of masculinity (Blaise, 2005) and sports fandom (Crawford, 2004). Gendered expectations in these Discourses determine who can be considered an "appropriate" sports fan and dictated Lin's exclusion, even though she shared the boys' avid interest in university sports.

Social effects were visible at the level of modes within mediated actions where gaze helped to construct a social space for boys-only activity. As Marshall sketched SuperEagles for Matt, their shared gaze on Matt's paper created an inclusive space. When Lin approached, each boy concentrated his gaze on his own paper, and their simultaneous downward gazes jointly constructed an exclusive space that shut her out. Power is wielded through exclusion as certain individuals are held on the periphery (Scollon, 2001) and denied the *scripts*, or accepted ways of representing, which provide greater access to privileged status within a particular community (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). However in this case, a Chinese American girl was denied membership in an all-White boys-only peer group not through scripts, but *nonverbally* through the direction of gaze and absence of talk.

Panning back to look at the boys' group activity as an event, the boys used visual design, gaze, gesture, and accompanying sports talk to reference past games, thus making distant events available as sites for displaying knowledge and bonding through recollection

of shared experiences. Laminating other time-spaces to present situations is a powerful discursive device that expands meanings and opportunities for positioning others (Leander, 2004; Wohlwend, 2007a). The boys' attempts to locate themselves as co-present in past football games further strengthened the cohesion of the boys' group and legitimated their individual identities as "real" sports fans who attended actual sporting events. The boys gained stature within peer culture by incorporating sports trademarks (such as mascots, Cubs logo, university name) and football chants into their storytelling, drawing, and writing. Matt and Patrick's admiration for Marshall's drawing ability and his sports expertise, evident in their compliments and requests to have him draw on their papers, established him as artistic expert and group leader.

Even in this classroom where children were expected to collaborate and mediate for each other, access was not distributed equally. Classroom interactions were structured by:

... the possibilities and limits of the physical environment, by the socially constructed peer culture (a patterned history of who played with whom, around what themes, where, and with what materials), by the wider school culture (norms and expectations for materials use, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, etc.), and by participants' explicit and implicit understandings of local ways of doing everyday life in this setting. (Kantor & Fernie, 2003, p. 210)

In this classroom, Abbie actively worked to interrupt children's exclusionary tactics in

several ways that eventually contributed to Lin's inclusion in the boys' group by the end of the school year. Abbie talked directly with children whenever she saw overt exclusion. More important, she valued children's diverse home literacies and sought ways for parents and children to share their cultural expertise. She provided classroom time and space for children to share their out-of-school literacies and interests and to teach other children. For example, Lin demonstrated her emerging literacy in Chinese calligraphy and repeatedly attempted to teach characters to Marshall and several other boys at their request.

CREATING THIRD SPACE, RECLAIMING PLAY SPACES

Abbie's involvement created a transformative *third space* (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995), a blend of the official space of the classroom with the unofficial space of peer culture, where meanings were always under construction, open to ongoing negotiation and renegotiation, and never finalized. Third space opened a school-sanctioned area where children used play to re-imagine power relations by assuming pretend identities and to explore literacy practices and materials in a risk-free zone. Abbie actively looked for ways for children to play and write their way into the social network of the classroom. She reflected:

So I was wondering as I was watching them—who will be written in? Who won't, and will they write their way into the classroom culture of all of this. I was wondering about Jake because I know he struggles socially a bit, and then was wondering if he might

write his own [play] to be in control of characters/kids (I was thinking about Dyson's [2003] book). That could be a way for him to get a bit of power. . . . He's actually doing that a bit with the I Spy book. (Personal communication)

Ironically, at a time when educational researchers are reconceptualizing and expanding what counts as learning to include multimodal ways of knowing, governmental policies rely on constricted definitions of literacy and achievement (Siegel, 2006). Rather than recognizing the imaginative power of children's play as a literacy that expands meanings and modes, recent accountability measures (e.g., No Child Left Behind in the United States, The National Literacy Strategy in the United Kingdom) challenge kindergarten and primary teachers to justify play activities within an increasingly academic curriculum. Yet in this play-intensive classroom, Abbie reported that every child in her class exceeded the school district's end-of-year literacy benchmarks that identified children for remedial services (personal communication).

Given widespread accountability pressures, how is it that Abbie was able to provide such a play-rich learning environment? Although Abbie felt compelled to comply with district mandates to use the commercial literacy program during daily shared reading sessions, she structured the majority of the morning literacy block to allow children to choose their activities and projects. It's important to acknowledge that Abbie's principal played a key role in allowing her the agency to use the commercial curriculum as a resource rather than requir-

ing her (or other teachers) to be regulated by it. This administrative flexibility made it possible for Abbie to design a play-based literacy curriculum that was challenging, responsive, and inclusive.

Abbie also built support for her innovative teaching through parent partnerships. Although parents are often skeptical about the benefits of play-based learning (Goldstein, 2007), I witnessed strong support for Abbie and her teaching among the children's families. From the beginning of the school year, Abbie worked with parents as partners, cultivating a caring classroom community that included families, using newsletters not just to inform parents but to recruit them, communicating weekly with each child's family, and encouraging parents to share their expertise to enrich kindergarten inquiry themes. Abbie noted:

I also try to write in Friday folders each week as much as possible. Notes between parents and myself. I love [the families] a lot, and [the folders] keep us in touch with one another.

Multimodal literacy research holds promise for convincing administrators and policy makers to reinstate play in schools. Abbie's pedagogy of literacy fusion (Millard, 2003) merged two literacies—multimodal play with school literacy—producing an inclusive space where children could play with meanings and achieve school goals as they enacted literate identities in both peer and school cultures. In the past, advocates for literacy play have depended upon a widely held assumption that children need play as part of a

developmentally appropriate educational program that would provide a deferred academic benefit (Roskos & Christie, 2001). That argument subordinates play as a means to accomplish literacy. Reconceptualizing play as a multimodal literacy re-centers play in school curriculum as a valuable semiotic system in its own right and revalues play as essential to "new basics" that aim to prepare diverse learners to respond to rapid change in the 21st century (Dyson, 2006). This approach should resonate with policy makers who recognize governments' and businesses' needs for people who are adept at multimodal skills that play uniquely provides—improvising with new technologies and practices, inventing new uses for materials, and imagining new contexts, spaces, and possibilities.

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