
Friendship Meeting or Blocking Circle? Identities in the Laminated Spaces of a Playground Conflict

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ABSTRACT Drawing from an incident that took place during a year-long investigation of children's play and peer culture on a school playground, the author argues that seemingly neutral child-centered techniques can maintain and even strengthen existing gender inequalities as teachers and children access *laminated* but contradictory identity positions surrounding agentic educational discourse. As children revisit the original conflict, they laminate time-spaces to discursively reconstruct events and position themselves advantageously. Critical discourse analysis problematizes the effects of a conflict resolution strategy based upon gendered notions of learner agency in a cultural model of teaching: developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). Although the focus of this article is a single event on one elementary school playground in the USA, the author suggests that the presence of the DAP cultural model internationally means that many early childhood teachers may experience similar ambiguity over gendered tensions that arise around issues of agency and authority as they attempt to resolve children's conflicts during play.

Introduction

The school bell signals recess and children shout, squeal, and scatter in wild trajectories across the playground, dodging creaking swings, looping jump ropes, and bouncing balls. Through my years as a kindergarten and first grade teacher, I viewed the playground as the site at school where children could enjoy relative freedom while exercising their bodies, their imaginations, and their need for play and interaction with each other without the constraining interference of teachers. During recess, I would refrain from directing play, a teaching stance that I believed was developmentally appropriate, by allowing children more agency as they explored the natural world.

The idea of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987) forms a mainstay of child-centered education, resting on tenets of child agency and learner autonomy that reflect Western romantic influences in early childhood education (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997). Although recent iterations of DAP include more nuanced and culturally responsive practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Gestwicki, 1999), the establishment of DAP presupposes that there is one best way of teaching all children that can be unproblematically and equitably applied (Lubeck, 1998). In this article, I take a different perspective. Drawing from an incident that took place during a year-long investigation of children's play and peer culture on a school playground, I argue that seemingly neutral child-centered techniques can maintain and even strengthen existing gender inequalities as teachers and children access *laminated* but contradictory identity positions surrounding agentic educational discourse. Lamination is a concept introduced by Goffman (1981) to explain the production of layered, socially constructed spaces in human interaction. The meanings that we assign to a particular activity depend in part upon how we construct its surrounding social space. For example, a clump of children kicking at each others' legs on the playground may be constructed as 'fighting,' 'blocking a goal,' or 'just playing around.' This view of activity within a polysemous social landscape complements the notion of identity as positioning; that is, in any lived activity, multiple subject positions are available and/or imposed. We enact

particular identities by consciously and unconsciously accessing, taking up, or rejecting always/already present subject positions (Butler, 1990, 1993).

Leander (2001, 2002) demonstrates that we access the multiple identities and associated practices that are simultaneously available in the overlapping layers of any given lamination of social spaces and times (Prior & Shipka, 2002). Using Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotope, literally *time-space*, Leander (2004; Holland & Leander, 2004) analyzes how talk and action in one time-space laminates the present to distant events, producing a wider range of available practices and discourses to strategically position ourselves and others:

Images and narratives from the past are laminated together with present day people and events. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how abstracted social and personal 'histories' or abstracted globalized spaces, could have any potency for persons except through their lamination onto contemporary events and people. And, in addition, as a result of this process, every laminate carries the traces of a particular *locale*, a particular space of practice, and the games and struggles that characterize it. (Holland & Leander, 2004, p. 135)

In order to legitimate particular identity enactments for ourselves and others, we laminate more distant discourses to present times and spaces. In turn, lamination strengthens and stabilizes our identity position by repeating themes across layers. In this article, I examine the school playground as a site where children's social conflicts with peers prompt identity positioning. Such conflicts between children also activate disparate discourses in school district policies that govern school safety and student discipline and early childhood classroom rules that promote child-directed cooperative play. To explore how lamination amplifies parallel identity themes across time-spaces on the playground, I look closely at the language and indexed cultural models and situated identities in an altercation between one boy and several girls.

Teachers who view playground interaction from a perspective that values child-centered practices as empowering to children may attempt – as I did – to limit teacher regulation of recess play and to provide instead plentiful opportunities for peer interaction. However, we may not be taking into account the potentially deleterious effects of children's agentic behavior. As children exercise agency, they may take up discourses that reproduce inequitable social relationships in the dominant culture which position other children unfavorably within the local peer culture (Lensmire, 1994). As children strategically position themselves during gendered conflict, they flexibly try out multiple tactics, choosing whatever is 'to hand' (Kress, 2003) and most efficacious for their purposes (Thorne, 1993; Boldt, 2004). For example, Grieshaber (2004) found that by appropriating a mother's tone and admonishments to their brothers, girls enacted obedience in ways that fit societal models of gendered aggression. Similarly, on the school playground, girls can tap into greater power by assuming the role of 'little teacher' to chastise boys.

In analyzing this incident, I came to recognize the ways in which my understanding of children's conflict resolution draws upon gendered notions of learner agency inherent in DAP, a *cultural model* of teaching. According to Gee (1999), cultural models provide storylines that explain expected ways of being within a particular discourse; in this case, gendered developmentally appropriate practices that are grounded in part in a play ethos, or unquestioning belief in the natural goodness of free play (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Roskos & Christie, 2001). Although the focus of this article is on a single event on one American elementary school playground, I suggest that the international presence of the DAP cultural model means that many early childhood teachers may experience similar ambiguity over tensions that arise around issues of agency and gender during children's play.

Local Context for the Playground Conflict

The playground in this study is located in a suburban elementary school in the Midwestern United States, which serves professional and middle-class families with limited racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. The children on this playground shared more commonalities than differences, a factor that reduced the range of available cultural models. There was also little apparent contradiction between home and school disciplinary approaches and expectations for children's conflicts; families and teachers alike encouraged children to verbally and cooperatively solve social problems with peers. This is not to suggest that adults exercised little authority; rather, much as Heath describes in

Ways with Words (1983), adult authority was often masked by indirect and elaborated speech styles typified by parent and teacher directives delivered in the form of questions, suggestions, or explanations (see also, Michaels, 1981; Miller, 1982; Wells, 1986; Cazden, 1988; Kamler, 1999).

I documented this particular playground incident as part of a year-long ethnographic study (Wolcott, 1999; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002) of first grade children's play interactions that I undertook as a teacher-researcher (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006). The playground incident involved a six-year-old boy in my class who was accused of stealing by ten girls who surrounded, trapped, and attacked him verbally and physically through the (mis)appropriation of a classroom negotiation structure, a *friendship meeting*, that I advocated for children to use in resolving social conflicts between peers. In order to investigate the incident and to intervene appropriately as the classroom teacher, I met with the children individually following the altercation to gather each child's version of the incident.

My dual role as teacher and researcher produced advantages and limitations. I had a teacher's knowledge of school rules and individual children along with access that allowed me to talk with all the children. However, I was also bound by the school schedule and a teacher's responsibility to uphold disciplinary rules. In order to resolve the issue expediently within a busy school day, I tried to quickly locate those children most involved in the conflict. As a result, I talked with only five of the eleven children before the ending recess bell rang and the children headed for the art class that immediately followed recess.

I recorded my conversations with the five children in my field notes (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002), resulting in a close approximation of the dialogue. As the children talked to me, I wrote their responses in a small spiral notebook, which I expanded upon returning to the classroom, approximately 30 minutes after the incident while children were at art class. As a research decision, I had decided to forgo audio-recording playground interaction as impractical on the playground: the major prohibiting factor was the impracticality of gaining parental consent and identifying the voices of the 75-100 children who might be heard in audiotaped playground activity. However, the reliance on transcribed conversations and remembered context creates limitations for linguistic analysis. Researchers in linguistic and critical discourse analysis will note that although my note-taking captured each utterance and offers an accurate rendition of children's word choices and phrasing, it elides false starts, repairs, repetitions, affirming sounds (e.g. 'mm-hmm'), and partial words (Goodwin, 1990). Thus, I analyze the utterances no farther than phrasing at the surface referential level. Further, the account that follows should be read as an approximation of the teacher-student turn-taking within the interviews, although generally the interactional patterning was consistent with the formality associated with classroom discourse (Cazden, 1988).

In this article, I examine the children's verbal accounts of the confrontation using research tools made available through critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis connects micro-analysis of actual spoken language and written texts to macro-analysis of societal discourses by tracing patterns of repetition of words, synonymous phrases, or other linguistic features (Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 2001). In this way, critical discourse analysis provides the systematicity necessary to examine how DAP and child-centered educational discourse paradoxically intensified the children's conflict through the use of an apparently cooperative conflict resolution device. I begin with a description of the children's conflict [1], followed by my initial interpretation from a DAP perspective, and end with a critical discourse analysis that clarifies my understanding of the social effects of student and teacher identities.

Friendship Meeting or Blocking Circle?

Running late on a spring afternoon, I grabbed my notebook and cut through the school cafeteria on my way outside to recess in my participant-observer role (Wolcott, 1999) as a teacher-researcher. As I approached the exit to the playground, I noticed a clump of children standing on the pavement just beyond the glass entryway doors.

'Leave me alone!' I first heard, and then recognized Kevin, taller than the rest, his back braced against the rough brick wall of the school, bare fists clenched at his sides, ringed by girls who were taking turns screaming at him. As I got closer, I could see tiny Janelle berating Kevin who outweighed her by thirty pounds. She leaned forward, one hand on her hip, scolding so loudly that

I could hear her through the two sets of glass doors. Jabbing her finger into his puffy nylon parka, teeth bared, her contorted face bright red, she insisted, 'You have to talk! You have to talk!' Janelle stopped to breathe and another girl started in. The rest of the eight or nine girls stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a half-circle around Kevin. Shocked by the harsh confrontation, I wondered what could have happened to warrant this reaction. As I pushed open the heavy outside door, the girls scattered and Kevin fled too.

After searching the crowded playground, I located four of the girls sitting on the swings; Kevin was nowhere in sight. In talking to them, a confused picture emerged: Janelle and Kim, reacting to alleged misbehavior by Kevin, had mustered a group of girls and then surrounded him with what they called a 'blocking circle.' The girls confronted him, accused him of hurting their feelings, and began yelling at him. The blocking circle developed as a few girls would leave and recruit other girls to join the circle to block Kevin from escaping.

As a teacher, I felt that my responsibility as an adult on the playground was to protect the students from harm, including the harm they inflicted upon each other. To intervene, I first needed to understand what had happened. I interviewed the children separately, starting with the child whom I assumed would be the most reliable source. I thought Janelle, an obedient, verbal child, would give an honest and complete account. Her version, although partially accurate, was full of omissions and turned out to be the most misleading.

I asked Janelle to join me at the round picnic table, and asked, 'Tell me what happened with Kevin.'

Janelle stood to deliver her report, arms crossed. 'Kevin said, "Come and" – something like – "Come and fight me!"'

'Then what happened?' I prompted.

'People came and got help from other people. And I said, "You're not being very nice" and "I don't like how you're acting." Then everyone took off [at the point that I came out of the door] and he started to push us.'

I next talked to Kim, who offered a contradiction: the girls were pushing *Kevin* down after they ran from the blocking circle. 'They [the other girls] were like pushing him down by the orange [plastic slide] over there on the playground – where the balls are.'

Determined to get to the root cause, I asked her, 'But what happened before that?'

'He wasn't even listening to us.'

'What were you saying?'

Kim quoted herself using a pleading tone, 'Can you please be quiet?'

'What was he saying?'

'He wasn't even listening to us ... He wasn't even saying anything. He was 'noring us and wouldn't listen.'

I had seen Jill on the outer end of the semi-circle and had noticed that she did not run away as the circle broke up. According to Jill, the other girls then 'were rolling Kevin around and pushing him around. I was by the basketball hoops,' she was quick to point out.

'What happened at the beginning?'

'Before?' Jill wrinkled her nose. 'Oh. One person said, "Let's go make a plan. Let's start a blocking circle."'

'What's that?'

'Getting in a big circle and getting lots of people and blocking people.'

'Is that something people do a lot?' I asked.

'That was the first time.'

'OK. Did Kevin do something? Why was everyone mad?'

'He hurt their feelings. I think he said something that hurt their feelings.'

'Were you there when it started?'

Jill concluded, 'I was there when it started but then I ran over to the basketball hoops.'

I began to see that I was not the only one who didn't have a clear picture of what had been going on.

Katelyn had a more complete, although still not accurate, description of the incident. She took a deep breath and started slowly: 'We wanted to have a friendship meeting with him.'

A 'friendship meeting' is a classroom strategy for conflict resolution that I introduced in my classroom and encouraged my students to use. Friendship meetings, usually called by the injured party, had three rules: (1) only two children at a time in a meeting; (2) both children need to talk until they both feel better; (3) if you are called to a meeting, you have to meet or sit out until you are ready to meet.

Katelyn's interview revealed a friendship meeting gone awry: 'We wanted to have a friendship meeting with him. Kim and Janelle started [saying to Kevin] "When are you going to talk? When are you going to talk?" in a really loud voice and they wouldn't stop. And he wouldn't meet with us. And we told him, "You have to do the meeting with who calls it." Because we really wanted to have a meeting because he took Jill's lunch away and hurt me and started yelling at Janelle and he wouldn't talk at all.'

'How did you get hurt?'

'He was pushing me down.'

'Before this happened?' Here, I thought, might be the initial cause for the attack.

'No, when we started to ask for a friendship meeting.'

'What did you want the friendship meeting for?'

'He started to take things from Jill's lunch, I think. But I didn't see it.'

Even Jill could offer little in the way of explanation when I called her back to the picnic table and asked, 'What happened to your lunch?'

'Kevin said something to hurt my feelings.'

'But what happened to your lunch?'

'Nothing but Kevin said something to hurt my feelings. I don't remember what – but it hurt my feelings.'

When I caught up with Kevin, he was alone on the swing set, swinging slowly and dragging the toes of his shoes through the damp mulch. As I settled into an adjacent swing, he slowed to a stop, still looking down, and began to pick at the elastic on one cuff of his parka. I reassured him that he was not in any trouble and asked him to tell me what had happened.

Glancing at me, Kevin blurted, "They were saying I stole Jill's lunch when I didn't!"

'I know,' I nodded.

Kevin continued in one breath, 'I was trying to tell them I didn't and they kept leaving and coming back and leaving and coming back and getting more people to try and trap me. I was getting "Hhhnnn" [growling sound] and running away and they started tackling me.'

Feeling that I finally had the entire picture – an unwarranted attack by the girls based on rumors of wrongdoing – I gathered the girls together as I redefined a friendship meeting: "This was not a friendship meeting. A friendship meeting is one person meeting with another person *until they both feel better*. This was an anti-friendship meeting. Jill is the only one who should have met with Kevin. What happened next was a rumor. If you think you have a big problem with lots of people, you need to get a teacher so that it's not a lot of people talking to one person. That felt like an attack to Kevin.'

I asked the group to think together of something to do to make Kevin feel better. Later that day, they listened to a puppet show performance by Kevin during their choice time. Kevin beamed when his audience clapped energetically.

Evaluating a Failed Friendship Meeting from a DAP Perspective

When I reviewed the incident, it became apparent to me that I had exacted a superficial 'happy ending' which could mandate no more than nominal social acceptance. I struggled with my culpability as a teacher, in promoting a conflict resolution tool designed to encourage perspective-taking and empathy which instead proved an instrument for coercion and exclusion, in upholding a 'just' conclusion in which the girls were reprimanded for combining forces and asserting themselves against a perceived threat, and in failing to provide an authentic resolution for the victimized boy.

The blocking circle incident troubled me as it indicated that friendship meetings failed to ensure cooperation among children; moreover, in this case, it appeared that a friendship meeting had actually aggravated the conflict. The blocking circle shook my confidence in children's ability

to settle their own disputes without resorting to tattling or seeking adult intervention. The harshness of the children's conflict challenged my beliefs about peer relationships, my assumptions about the innocence of play, and my acceptance of common developmental expectations about the social naivety of young children.

In the blocking circle incident, escalation – rather than resolution – of conflict prompted me to examine friendship meetings more closely. My playground observations in the weeks following the incident offered further evidence that the friendship meeting structure was not helping children resolve social problems. Children often objected that friendship meetings interrupted their play. Because any child would be required to participate if called to a meeting by another child, friendship meetings were sometimes used to demand access to a person or group. Resolutions tended to be quick rather than thoughtful as children hastily and sometimes grudgingly conceded 'OK, you can play' in order to continue their activity.

I wondered why these meetings were failing. The conflicts that were produced or exacerbated by friendship meetings were not the outcomes that I had predicted and seemed incongruous from my DAP theoretical perspective. Was there a flaw in my facilitation, in the children's implementation, or in the friendship meeting structure itself? It was only when I turned to critical discourse analysis that I was able to uncover the overlapping and contradictory identities that complicated equitable resolutions.

Interpreting the Blocking Circle through Critical Discourse Analysis

I use critical discourse analysis theory and methodology (Gee, 1999) to examine how social language surrounding the conflict elicited and constituted gendered performances of teacher protection, nurturance, and authority as well as child innocence, agency, and obedience. I analyzed the playground dialogues according to Gee's analytic tools, two of which are highlighted here: *cultural models* and *situated identities*.

The cultural models that the children and I drew from provided us with shared storylines for the expected ways that boys and girls should interact during conflict. These cultural models are simplified representations of the world that set up expectations for typical cases; in this way, cultural models create normalizing binaries by determining what counts and what does not count as legitimate practice within our gendered discourse. Cultural models such as DAP 'set up what count as central, typical cases, and what count as marginal, nontypical cases' (Gee, 1996, p. 78). In this way, cultural models create and apply hidden criteria for social exclusion.

Individuals use language to get their social interactions recognized as *situated identities* – the available social positions that are recognized in particular contexts, such as compliant students within the institutional context of school (Gee, 1996, 1999). Situated identities make up the range of performances that are accepted as a valid way of doing things within a discourse. These heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) performances draw upon and signal shared histories of previous performances within and across discourses. Based on these histories, situated identities and practices are linked to particular spaces so that different roles are available to a child in the classroom than on the playground. Further, individuals enact more than one situated identity in the same time-space. Children on the playground are simultaneously six-year-olds, students, peers, girls, runners, and football players among others.

The universe of available cultural models and associated situated identities offers far more diverse ways of dealing with children's conflicts than the handful of models outlined below. Although I could also analyze the cultural models at work in this situation as classed or raced, the obviously gendered nature of the 10-on-1 attack of girls against a boy prompts my particular attention to gender. The cultural models found in this incident, embedded in DAP and other institutional norms for early childhood education, normalized and reduced the possibilities for enacting other (cross-)cultural models of gender, agency, and authority.

Cultural Models and Situated Identities

To uncover the naturalized cultural models and identities that were accessed through lamination in this incident, I searched for relevant themes among sociological studies of education (James et al,

1998), post-structural analyses of early childhood (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1994; Cannella, 1997), and childhood cultural studies (Jenkins, 1998; Mills & Mills, 2000). Informed by these sources, I developed a framework of five cultural models and their associated discourses and identity positions – developmentally appropriate practice, child obedience, child innocence, school discipline, and gendered aggression – which represent some of the dominant, tacitly agreed-upon ways of ‘doing school’ that governed my interpretations and the children’s accounts of the recess conflict in this playground space.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice: ‘Use your words’

In the DAP cultural model, teachers often tell children to ‘use your words,’ that is, to resolve conflicts with other children verbally through peer-to-peer negotiation rather than emotionally or physically through crying or hitting (Gestwicki, 1999, p. 186). According to this model’s underlying Romantic (Rousseau, [1762] 1979), and constructivist discourses (Piaget, [1926] 1959, 1972), the naturally developing child progresses through developmental stages by operating on the material world and cooperating on/with other social actors (Piaget, [1951] 1999, 1972). In conflicts among young children on the playground, teachers are expected to act as *neutral guides* who provide emotional support to all children on both sides of a conflict and encourage compromise between *cooperative peers*. In DAP, opportunities to interact autonomously as *competent individuals* present occasions for young children to engage in social problem-solving and perspective-taking that develops their moral reasoning (Piaget, 1965; DeVries & Zan, 1994).

Child Obedience: ‘Follow the school rules’

According to the child obedience cultural model, children develop habits of social behavior by obeying systems of school rules and classroom routines (e.g. Canter’s *Assertive Discipline*, 1988; Wong & Wong, *First Days training*, 1991). Rational (Locke, [1693] 1989) and behaviorist (Skinner, 1974) discourses prescribe education as the means of training unformed and morally susceptible children (Cannella, 1997, 1999; Hendrick, 1997; Mills & Mills, 2000). Teachers are expected to act as *trainers* to prevent conflict by reinforcing sanctioned social skills and establishing habits and routines which children obey as *compliant students* and revoice as *little teachers*.

Child Innocence: ‘Get a teacher to help’

The cultural model of child innocence creates a need for wiser adults to protect innocent and unknowing children through teacher monitoring and regulation of children’s bodies and interaction (Cannella, 1997; James et al, 1998; Boldt, 2001). This cultural model circulates within both rational and romantic discourses in which childhood is an unfinished and vulnerable state (Burman, 1994; Mills & Mills, 2000; Woodrow & Brennan, 2001). In young children’s conflicts, claims to innocence from *vulnerable victims* and *unknowing followers* counteract the need for punishment as teachers act as *protectors* of aggressors as well as victims.

School Discipline: ‘Who started it?’

As an institution, the school monitors, regulates, and disciplines children through a network of normative disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault, 1995) too vast to explicate in this space but thoroughly addressed elsewhere (Silin, 1995; Cannella, 1999; Boldt, 2001; Comber & Nichols, 2004; Transit, 2004). The cultural model of school discipline is legitimated through legalistic and regulatory discourses in school board policy and student codes of conduct that establish procedures to comply with democratic juridical processes of right, fair treatment, due process, and fitting punishment. Like many other elementary schools in the United States, administrative policy at this school included specific procedures for the investigation of allegations of bullying:

The investigator will reasonably and promptly commence the investigation upon receipt of the [student’s] complaint. The investigator will interview the complainant and the alleged harasser.

The alleged harasser may file a written statement refuting or explaining the behavior outlined in the complaint. The investigator may also interview witnesses as deemed appropriate. (School Board Policy: Maintenance of Orderly Conduct, 2005, p. 1)

In the cultural model of school discipline, *bystanders* and *injured parties* in children's conflicts act as *witnesses* who provide testimony that impugns *offenders* or reveals *instigators* while teachers act as *judges* and *enforcers* who evaluate children's testimony, equally apply school rules, and enforce punishment of wrongdoers.

Gendered Aggression: 'No hitting' means 'boys don't hit girls' and 'girls don't hit'

The stereotypical assumptions within the cultural model of gendered aggression reproduce patriarchal discourse through mainstream expectations for masculine and feminine performances (Butler, 1990, 1993; Walkerdine, 1994), circulating an artificial and dualistic picture of children's complex construction of gender during play and conflicts with other children (Thorne, 1993; Grieshaber, 2004). In this cultural model, teachers are to act as *gender-arbitrators* who expect boys to be *physically aggressive* and girls to be *verbally aggressive*. Teachers who are women are also positioned within this cultural model as *passive facilitators* who should 'know when to intervene but not to interfere' (Walkerdine, 1994, p. 61).

The structured presentation of models and identities as discrete entities is intended as a theoretical tool rather than a representation of actual lived lives. Often a particular identity position resonates with other complementary or contradictory identity positions so that multiple situated identities are accessed in a single event. It is not possible or useful to separate neutral guidance in DAP from feminine passive facilitation in gendered aggression or nurturing in childhood innocence. However, areas of significant overlap do indicate how models strengthen each other by circulating similar storylines and authorizing compatible identities. In this way, the multiple layers in the laminated space of the playground conflict interacted to strengthen and stabilize the children's and my identity positions. In the next section, I examine the laminated space produced as children accessed multiple cultural models and identities with both complementary and contradictory elements.

**Positioning Selves and Reconstructing Events
through the Production of Laminated Space**

My investigation of the playground conflict created an opportunity for identity positioning through the production of laminated space. My questions invited the children not only to report on a past event, but to position themselves and others within it. Table I shows the variation in positioning and reconstruction of the events made possible through lamination of three time-spaces within the conflict: in the lunchroom before the blocking circle, in the blocking circle itself, and on the playground. The next section links the language in the interviews with the identity positioning produced as each participant recalled and reconstructed the events within the three time-spaces.

Positioning by the Children

As the children reconstructed the friendship meeting events, they strategically accessed storylines from multiple available cultural models to defend their actions. Kim drew upon the identity expectations within the DAP cultural model when she objected to Kevin's response to the girls' request for a friendship meeting. In her view, he was not fulfilling the communicative obligation of a *cooperative peer*: 'He wasn't even listening to us ... He wasn't even saying anything. He was 'noring us and wouldn't listen' (See Table I, Time-Space 2.) Katelyn's claim that 'he wouldn't meet with us' also indexed the child obedience model to implicate Kevin as a non-compliant student who refused to follow school procedures (see Table I, Time-Space 2.) Under the child obedience cultural model, the girls as *compliant students* obeyed the meeting rule. Janelle enacted the *little teacher* who seeks enforcement of school rules when she appropriated the tone and phrasing of a chastising teacher: 'You're not being very nice.' She even included an I-statement typical of educationally sanctioned disapproval – 'I don't like how you're acting' – to censure Kevin's alleged physical

challenge – ‘Come and fight me!’ – and aggression – ‘He started to push us’ (see Table I, Time-Space 2).

	Janelle	Kim	Jill	Katelyn	Kevin	Teacher
<i>Time-Space 1: Lunch-room</i>			Kevin as verbal aggressor	Kevin as offender and instigator and physical aggressor	Kevin as bystander, injured party	Kevin as injured party
			Jill as vulnerable victim	Jill as injured party	Girls as verbal aggressors	Girls as wrongful accusers
			<i>Event as hurt feelings</i>	<i>Event as theft</i>	<i>Event as wrongful accusation</i>	<i>Event as rumor-spreading</i>
<i>Time-Space 2: Meeting/ Circle</i>	Kevin as physical aggressor and offender	Kevin as uncooperative peer	Kevin as verbal aggressor	Kevin as non-compliant student and physical aggressor	Kevin as injured party and innocent in need	Kevin as innocent in need and vulnerable victim
	Girls as injured parties and compliant students, Janelle as little teacher	Girls as cooperative peers and compliant students	Girls as injured parties and vulnerable victims	Other girls as verbal aggressors, compliant students, Katelyn as witness and injured party	Girls as wrongful accusers and uncooperative peers	Girls as unknowing followers, Girls as innocents in need, Jill as vulnerable victim
	<i>Event as friendship meeting</i>	<i>Event as friendship meeting</i>	<i>Event as blocking circle</i>	<i>Event as friendship meeting</i>	<i>Event as physical attack on boy</i>	<i>Event as anti-friendship meeting</i>
<i>Time-Space 3: Fight by the Swings</i>	Kevin as physical aggressor	Kevin as injured party	Kevin as injured party	Kevin as physical aggressor	Kevin as injured party	Kevin as vulnerable victim
	Girls as injured parties and self defenders	Other girls as physical aggressors, Kim as bystander	Other girls as physical aggressor, Jill as bystander	Katelyn as unknowing follower	Girls as physical aggressors	Girls as physical aggressors, unknowing followers
	<i>Event as physical attack on girls</i>	<i>Event as physical attack upon boy</i>	<i>Event as physical attack upon boy</i>	<i>Event as physical attack upon boy</i>	<i>Event as physical attack upon boy</i>	<i>Event as physical attack upon boy</i>

Table I. Positioning by children and teacher across laminated time-spaces.

The girls' reconstruction of the event as a *friendship meeting* simultaneously draws on conflicting cultural models of DAP, child obedience and school discipline (see Table I, Time-Space 2.) I

understood the friendship meeting to be consistent with the DAP model as a negotiation structure that allows children to solve conflicts on their own terms. On the playground, however, the meeting structure became a malleable strategy to be used by children with children to restrict access, for resolution or escalation of conflict, as sanctioned confrontation, or to justify retribution. The girls' invocation of school authority – 'You have to do the meeting with who calls it' – cited a class rule that governs friendship meetings: *If you are called to a meeting, you have to meet or sit out until you are ready to meet.* By invoking a school-mandated conflict resolution rule, the girls could access the power of school rules and teacher authority through the child obedience model, effectively setting up a shield to deflect any blame for their physical confrontation that could be penalized under the school discipline model.

The girls' defense of their actions appealed to multiple storylines of gender, obedience, innocence, and discipline, not necessarily in distinct, consciously separate enactments but in colliding, simultaneous layers. Overlapping cultural models and situated identities were accessed through laminated time-spaces in ways that reinforced their social – in this case, gendered – effects. In this incident, the girls represented their identities as cooperative peers who wanted to work things out and as compliant students who used the teacher-recommended friendship meeting. The girls' multiple claims as injured parties positioned Kevin as an active offender and physical aggressor and themselves as passive victims (see Table I, Time-Spaces 1 and 2, first four columns). This positioning of Kevin called forth contradictory school goals for the emotional protection of victims *and offenders* under the innocence model and the punishment of wrongdoers under the school discipline model. As six- and seven-year-olds, the girls could access cultural models of childhood innocence to mask their tactical use of a 'blocking circle' to intimidate a boy and recruit more girls to their group. When she met with me after the conflict, Jill took up the position of vulnerable victim through her claim that 'Kevin said something – I don't remember what – but it hurt my feelings.' Jill's claim of hurt feelings is consistent with gendered expectations of innocence as a girl's passive response to aggression and with discipline expectations as a reported affront by an injured party (See Table I, Time-Space 1).

The school discipline model requires that offenders be punished and injured parties be protected and recompensed, while the gendered aggression model predicts that boys will act directly through physical action and girls will react indirectly through appeals to authority (Maclean, 1999; Boldt, 2002). Through the mechanism of accusations of Kevin's misbehavior, the girls evaded blame while justifying their aggression, actions that can also be read as gendered boundary-work (Thorne, 1993) in their creation of group coherence through the exclusion of a boy outsider. The age- and gender-stratified nature of crowded public school playgrounds exaggerates and ritualizes gender differences (Thorne, 1993), rendering invisible the verbal strategies, group alliances, and border work that children often use to exert power (Goodwin, 1990; Solsken, 1993; Thorne 1993; Kamler, 1999; Keenan et al, 1999; Maclean, 1999). Through Jill's claim as a vulnerable victim that Kevin 'said something' to hurt her feelings and Katelyn's claims as both injured party and witness that Kevin pushed her down and also 'took Jill's lunch away,' the girls reconstructed the lunchroom time-space as a theft and unwarranted attack with Kevin as an instigator, offender, and physical and verbal aggressor, which could excuse their actions in the meeting/circle time-space as a developmentally appropriate peer negotiation response to a prior attack (see Table I, Jill's and Katelyn's columns). This reconstruction of events and positioning through laminated lunchroom and meeting/circle time-spaces allowed the girls to avoid a gender-blind disciplinary interpretation of the girls' physical attack by the swings (see Table I, Time-Space 3) that would demand equal treatment of all offenders regardless of sex or developmental state and censure an attempt by several children to collectively gang up on a single child for an ill-defined and possibly imaginary slight, whether a stolen lunch or hurt feelings. By framing their own actions passively through a gendered lens, the girls' appeal for protection through innocence deters school justice consequences for bullying that would require a trip to the principal's office and masks social group-building accomplished through the recruitment of friends to form the blocking circle.

Despite the discontinuities between actual and claimed identity positions in this conflict, one theme consistently echoes through the layers of identities that the children accessed across the three laminated time-spaces. The chord of feminine passivity is continually sounded as the girls represent themselves as *cooperative peers* within the DAP model, *vulnerable victims* and *unknowing*

followers within the child innocence model, as *compliant students* within the child obedience model and as one *injured party* supported by her defenders within the school discipline model, with the boy as a *physical aggressor* within the gendered aggression model. The girls avoided making claims of individual action or agency, using clauses or sentences that placed Kevin as the active subject and the girls or their possessions as passive objects of the action. In the most explicit example, Katelyn blamed Kevin as the cause or instigator, 'because he took Jill's lunch away and hurt me and started yelling at Janelle and he wouldn't talk at all.' Kevin also placed himself as subject in his account (see Table I, Time-Spaces 1 and 2) Although his language constructs the girls as active subjects, Kevin placed his actions first within sentences, followed by girls' reactions: 'I was trying to tell them I didn't and they kept leaving and coming back and leaving and coming back and getting more people to try and trap me. I was getting hhhnnn [growling noise] and running away and they started tackling me' (see Table I, Kevin's column).

However, discursive cohesion in narratives is a socially constructed phenomenon that does not necessarily reflect the contradictions of lived experience (Davies & Harre, 1991). The discursive construction of passivity that permeates the content of the girls' accounts belies the physicality of the confrontation and the active, almost frenzied, group recruitment that occurred. Syntactic analysis (Gee, 1999) of interview responses reveals pervasive references to group membership that indexed other children's insider and outsider positions through the selective placement of pronouns and nouns as children identified subjects and characterized their actions. Children's stances inside and outside the group varied with the particular situated identities that they were representing at any given moment. For example, Kim used *they* to separate herself from the group to speak as bystander when describing physical aggression in accordance with her identity as a compliant student: 'They were like pushing him down by the orange [plastic slide] over there on the playground – where the balls are' (see Table I, Time-Space 3). In her next statement, she positioned herself as cooperative peer and as an insider within the group through the first person pronoun *us*: 'He wasn't even listening to us' (see Table I, Time-Space 3). Jill also selectively used pronouns to alternately create affiliation with and distance from the group in her interview. During her description of the aggression, she reported as an outsider, '*They* were rolling him, Kevin, around and pushing him around. *I* was by the basketball hoops.' In this way, pronouns indexed both group membership and individual blamelessness.

Positioning by the Teacher

The children's appeals to innocence resonate with teaching expectations for passive facilitation in the gendered aggression model, nurturing in the child innocence model, and neutral mediation in DAP in ways that ameliorated the girls' culpability. Jill's claim of hurt feelings shifted my attention away from the lack of a material cause – Jill's stolen lunch – that supposedly prompted the girls' confrontation with Kevin, and instead stressed her individual emotional susceptibility, strengthening the appeal to adult sympathy and de-emphasizing the girls' initiation and the organized nature of the fighting. (Even as I write this article, I find myself denying the girls' initiative and physicality, describing the incident abstractly, using the passive, carefully neutral term *conflict* and resisting the active, masculine term *fight*.) Complying with implicit gender expectations of passivity as a neutral guide in the DAP model, my feminized reaction to the fight was to respond as a nurturer (Grumet, 1988), recognizing that aggressors need as much comfort as victims (see Table I, Teacher column.) This notion reverberates with the cultural model of child innocence; teachers should act as protectors to shield unknowing and vulnerable victims from physical and emotional harm, whether from other also-innocent children in aggressive social interactions or from oneself due to overpowering emotions. In both models (DAP and child innocence) emotional protection rather than punishment is the goal of teacher intervention during children's conflicts.

Prior to my analysis, I assumed that I was enacting a single, coherent developmentally appropriate teaching identity throughout the student interviews. After all, I had taken pains to listen carefully and non-judgmentally to each child's version of the incident and to respond in a non-punitive manner. However, critical discourse analysis of my concluding speech and the semiotic context of the interview structure led me to a startling realization: the social languages of teacher-student interaction and testimony combined to emphasize my power position as adult,

constructing me as omniscient teacher – the only participant privy to all the information shared in the individual interviews. Ironically, the interview format positioned children as obedient students (Hendrick, 1997) rather than the empowered individuals described in the DAP cultural model that I supported.

Semiotic analysis of the language interaction structure exposes the inconsistencies of my educational self-discourse by revealing interrogatory effects of the social languages in the interview mode that emphasized the power of the teacher and diminished the agency of the children. Social languages are the particular semiotic ways of speaking and knowing that are made relevant within the local situation (Gee, 1999); in this case, conflict mediation calls forth the social language of testimony. Specifically, the social language of school discourse that I used in this set of teacher–student interactions featured formal turn-taking, little interruption or overlap of speech, mandatory student responses to teacher questions, restrictions on elaboration by students, and teacher control of topic. The interview structure, the questioning of individuals, and note-taking combined with the goal of settling a dispute, elicited eye-witness testimony from the children characterized by expectations of independent truth-telling, frequent use of reported speech to provide evidence, and accounts which verbally situate people and actions in chronological time and space. For example, in response to my teacherly questions, Janelle adhered to a tacit maxim for accuracy (Grice, 1975) emphasized in both social languages of school discourse and testimony, when she inserted the qualifier ‘something like’ to acknowledge her inability to recall Kevin’s exact wording: ‘Kevin said, “Come and” –something like – “Come and fight me!”’ Paradoxically, by qualifying the accuracy of her statement, she enhanced the credibility of her reporting by stressing her attempt to make her account fully truthful.

Critical discourse analysis revealed that the underlying structure of my interaction with the children relied heavily on traditional patterns of classroom discourse, setting up positions of teacher authority and child obedience that contradicted the teacher facilitation and peer cooperation stances that I was attempting to promote.

Children and the Possibilities of Multiple Identities

Throughout the incident, children activated multiple cultural models (DAP, child innocence, child obedience, school discipline, and gendered aggression) and crossed educational discourses (rationalist, romantic, constructivist/developmental, behaviorist, legalistic/regulatory, and patriarchal) in order to create room to take action that would be otherwise denied within a particular cultural model. The frequent references to group cohesion in the girls’ language and their obfuscation of the reason for the confrontation suggests that a primary focus was engaging this particular boy in physical *gender play* (Thorne, 1993) evident on this playground in frequent games of ‘boys chase the girls’ or ‘girls chase the boys’ and on *recruiting friends* to include in the girls’ group rather than on resolution of the original ambiguous conflict. The girls agentically and opportunistically used the friendship meeting strategy, designed to encourage perspective-taking and empathy, as an instrument for coercion to organize a social group. And just as tactically, through their interview responses, all the children enacted multiple, even conflicting, identities according to each position’s immediate efficacy in avoiding blame and its associated material effects of school punishment. For example, although the cultural model of child obedience prohibits aggression on the playground, Kevin could access storylines within either the gendered aggression model – in which physical aggression is expected for boys and is unexpected for girls – or within the school discipline model which makes allowances for retribution. Similarly, the girls relied on models of innocence and child obedience to justify their actions, and hid their gender in neutral pronouns to comply with the passive storyline of gendered aggression. However, the single notes of each situated identity resonated across the layered discourses in laminated time-spaces to produce a discursive chord that reinforced gendered expectations for active boys and passive girls.

Teachers and the Impossibilities of Theory-Bound Identities

In contrast to the fluid identity footwork of the children, I felt glued to the spot by my attempt to enact a consistent theoretical identity, that of an impartial child-centered mediator. From the

perspective of my child-centered pedagogy, I was troubled when I became conscious of the authoritarian undercurrent in the interviews. Further, I felt that I had imposed a questionable justice in which girls were reprimanded for combining forces and asserting themselves against a perceived injustice. In Janelle's case, I thwarted both her agency and her compliance: she exercised considerable agency when she twisted the role of compliant student into the more powerful and ultra-obedient role of miniature teacher as she appropriated the teacher's voice to enforce school rules.

However, after further reflection, I realized that my reluctance to see myself as an authoritative teacher stemmed from gender expectations that govern teacher behaviors within the DAP cultural model used at school. Walkerdine (1994) and Grumet (1988) discuss the impossibility of fulfilling the contradictory constructions of femininity in education. Walkerdine suggests that child-centered pedagogy, which includes DAP, relies on teachers' overt expectations of learner independence alongside covert expectations of child compliance. Independence is valued in boys; thus, their achievements are interpreted as discoveries that lead to understanding, the product of natural, playful, active learning. Compliance is expected but devalued in girls; their achievements are interpreted as reproductions of teachers' lessons rather than 'real understanding', merely the result of good behavior and hard work. These contradictory gender-splitting practices set girls up to achieve and disdain passivity, as students and eventually as women. Grumet holds that such practices cast women as irrational and passive mothers or teachers who are expected to nurture but not to discipline active children. But as women, we also participate in perpetuating gendered teaching practices, accepting and extending what Grumet describes as a *bitter milk* mixture of nurturance and denial that upholds a patriarchal educational system. My aversion to recognizing my own exercise of power over children and my later shock of self-recognition that the teacher-child interviews reinscribed this self-denied authority are evidence of an internally-split feminized response to children's conflict.

As this critical discourse analysis reveals, lamination of compatible and incompatible cultural models and situated identities in DAP, innocence, child obedience, gendered aggression, and school discipline acted to amplify the common theme of feminine passivity that suppressed recognition of assertive action by female students and teacher. Lamination allowed expectations for feminine passivity, common to all the models, to be repeatedly sounded and heard through the dissonance among this set of monocultural Western norms. The playground conflict described here represents a moment of complicated interaction within a group of children typified by their commonalities in class, race, and language. Children in this classroom experienced few disjunctures between home and school around issues of agency and authority. In their mostly middle-class suburban homes, they were familiar with feminized, masked authority as exercised by mothers who subtly directed children's behavior while enacting the role of facilitator-nurturer in ways similar to the DAP cultural model. This demographic homogeneity prompts questions for further study: How much more complex are the social interactions around issues of gender, teacher authority, and child agency in classrooms that serve more diverse populations? What complications and possibilities are created when additional cultural models, situated identities, and social languages from other cultures are made available for lamination?

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Note

[1] All children's names are pseudonyms.

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