

**IMAGINATIVE DISTANCE**  
**RECONSIDERING YOUNG CHILDREN'S PLAYFUL SOCIAL LANGUAGE**

A Dissertation Submitted to the College of  
Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of Curriculum Studies  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

Megan Maureen Lee

Copyright Megan Maureen Lee, September 2009. All rights reserved.

## **PERMISSION TO USE**

In presenting this dissertation titled *Imaginative Distance: Reconsidering Young Children's Playful Social Language*, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Curriculum Studies from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this dissertation in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by Dr. Trevor Gambell, who supervised my dissertation work or, in his absence, by the head of the Department of Curriculum Studies or the Dean of the College of Education in which my dissertation work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this dissertation or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of the contents of this dissertation, in whole or in part, should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
28 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7N 0X1

## **ABSTRACT**

Traditionally, research about young children has been shaped by developmental approaches which persist in framing them as incomplete adults. This dissertation proffers a relatively new image of childhood that celebrates the possibilities inherent in children's multiple ways of knowing. It is drawn from a 2006 study of the playful social language of, and interviews with, grade one children attending an urban Canadian school.

Two questions drive this inquiry: a.) What is the significance of children's social language in a primary classroom? b.) What is the role of play within children's social language and within their culture? To maintain a sense of children as collaborators in research and to bring children's talk into mainstream education discourse, Bakhtinian concepts of dialogicity and responsivity are foregrounded.

The dissertation begins with a literature review that relates extant theory, research, and praxis to the study of language, discourse, and play. Then, participants' perceptions of play, as articulated in the interviews, are presented. Because the study focuses upon children's ability to make sense of their lived experience, their perceptions of play guide subsequent interpretations. Theory is reconsidered, and interpretative analysis is presented as dialogic response to the children's ways of knowing, as points of contact between texts, as dialogue. Vignettes, drawn from videotapes of the participants' social language in class, provide concrete examples of the role of play within the children's local culture. Three key ideas emerge: children are able, dialogic interpreters of their lived experience and research participants in their own right; play discourse is agentic behaviour; and

agentive play discourse is children's response to problematic life experiences, for example, the world's gendered texts.

This study illustrates how children's playful social talk places an imaginative distance between them and entrenched assumptions about what counts as knowledge. And, it challenges readers to distance themselves from the way things are, to redefine what is considered to be legitimate classroom conversation, and to reconsider how, together, children discursively make meaning and imagine themselves as social actors.

## **DEDICATION**

To my partner, Phillip, for his steadfast love, inspiration, and support

And, to Finn Lee-Epp  
whose playful words are just beginning to be heard...

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

These pages reflect not only my work but the contributions of those who have supported and encouraged me, offered thoughtful insights and suggestions, and who have extended my thinking in many different ways.

Heartfelt thanks to my primary advisor Dr. Trevor Gambell, always the best of listeners, whose guidance and support throughout my doctoral journey was steadfast. Our discussions kept me focused as I struggled to bring the children's words to life on the page.

To Dr. Angela Ward, with whom I began my graduate school journey, many thanks. Your interest and expertise in children's language kept me focused and prompted me to continue my study of children's talk after completing my master's degree in 2001.

To Dr. Janet McVittie, your thoughtful, prodding questions always challenged and stimulated my thinking about children's discourse.

Thanks as well to Dr. Sam Robinson whose careful eye for detail made the editing process bearable.

And to Dr. Sheila Carr-Stewart, for your intuitive support and encouragement every step of the way.

To my external examiner, Dr. Anne Haas Dyson of the University of Illinois, many thanks. I appreciate your willingness to lend your expert voice to the panel at my defence. Your obvious respect for children's voices has underscored the importance of reimagining entrenched perspectives of early childhood education.

To the children, whose playful, social voices inhabit these pages, my sincere gratitude and respect. Your proclivity to reimagine the world, to

distance yourselves from the way things are, has delighted and amazed me. Still, it continues to provoke, stretch, and challenge my thinking.

To my husband, partner, and best friend, Phillip Lee, for supporting every aspect of my work, my love and thanks. Our many conversations always refreshed, inspired, and moved my thinking forward.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PERMISSION TO USE</b> .....	i
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	ii
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	iv
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	v
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	vii

### CHAPTER ONE

#### RECONSIDERING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL LANGUAGE

Introduction.....	1
Rethinking Educational Perspectives.....	1
Research Goals and Purpose.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Critical Subjectivity.....	5
Significance of the Study.....	7
Document Structure.....	9

### CHAPTER TWO

#### EXPLORING THE LITERATURE

Introduction.....	11
Early Language.....	12
Language and Discourse.....	15
Gee and Discourse.....	15
Gee's Concept of Discourse Acquisition.....	16
Children's Culture and Discourse.....	18



Bakhtin and Discourse.....	20
Classroom Discourse from a Bakhtinian Perspective: Haworth.....	26
Classroom Discourse from a Bakhtinian Perspective: McLean.....	27
Bakhtin’s Carnival Discourse.....	29
Bakhtin’s Carnival and Classroom Research: Lensmire.....	30
Bakhtin’s Carnival and Classroom Research: Gallas.....	32
Play, Imagination and Literacy.....	34
Dauite.....	34
Dyson.....	35
Classroom Discourse.....	39
Acquiring Classroom Discourse: Mercer.....	39
Playfulness and Resistance in Classroom Discourse:	
Grahame and Jardine.....	41
The Role of the Spectator: Britton.....	43
Playfulness in Classroom Discourse: Power.....	44
Vygotsky and Play.....	46
Children’s Perceptions of Play at School.....	48
Classroom Underlife.....	55
Sutton-Smith and the Rhetorics of Play.....	56
Conclusion.....	59

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCHING WITH CHILDREN: METHODOLOGICAL MATTERS**

Introduction.....	61
Qualitative Research with Children.....	62
The Ethnographic Perspective.....	63
Ethnomethodological Threads.....	66

The Setting: Prairieview Elementary.....	68
The Classroom.....	69
Gathering Data.....	71
Getting Started.....	71
Classroom Talk.....	73
The Interviews.....	74
The Role of the Camera.....	76
Determining a Focus.....	77

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **TWELVE VOICES: A DIALOGUE ON PLAY**

Introduction.....	79
Tim and Brooke.....	82
Olivia and Kate.....	87
Lauren and Chloe.....	89
Belle and Connor.....	92
Celia and Ally.....	98
Jake and Evan.....	102
Conclusion.....	107

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **"IT FEELS LIKE PLAY": RESPONDING TO THE WORLD AS TEXT**

Introduction.....	109
The Word as Text.....	110
Play as Discourse.....	113
Childhood and Agency.....	116
Marginalized Children.....	116
Play Discourse and Children's Agency.....	118

Conclusion.....	123
-----------------	-----

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?**

Introduction.....	125
Reading the World as Gendered Text.....	126
Vignette 1: "I want to be the girl!".....	127
Interpretation/Analysis.....	130
Vignette 2: "That's a girl. But it's really a boy. But it's a girl.".....	137
Interpretation/Analysis.....	140
Vignette 3: "I'm going to join the team!".....	145
Interpretation/Analysis.....	150
Conclusion.....	158

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **IMAGINATIVE DISTANCE: THE TRIUMPH AND CHALLENGE OF CHILDREN'S PLAYFUL SOCIAL LANGUAGE**

Introduction.....	159
Children as Active Research Participants.....	161
Play Discourse.....	163
Play, Agency, and Response to Gendered Texts.....	166
Present and Future Implications.....	170

## **CODA**

<b>BELLE: "I have the power now."</b> .....	178
---	-----

**APPENDICES**

Preface to the Appendices.....180  
Appendix A Consent Form.....181  
Appendix B Consent to Participate Parent/Guardian.....185  
Appendix C Assent Protocol: Letter to Child.....186  
Appendix D Assent Protocol: Child’s Participation.....188  
Appendix E Transcript Release Form.....189  
Appendix F Recruitment from Organizations: School Division.....190  
Appendix G Recruitment from Organizations: School.....192  
Appendix H Unstructured Interview Guiding Questions.....194

**REFERENCES.....195**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **RECONSIDERING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL LANGUAGE**

#### **Introduction**

The social world that children create together in classrooms provides a glimpse into the culture of childhood. Daily, children appropriate information from the world around them, share it, reinterpret it, and ultimately produce their own unique understanding of the world. Researchers and educators can learn much from these prosaic occurrences – from close observation of children's everyday experiences at school. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) expressed confidence in education that was rooted in the potentialities and possibilities "inherent in ordinary experiences" (p. 114). To realize the potential that Dewey envisioned, it is imperative that we understand as much as we can about children: their rich, multilayered, and complex social lives, and the tools they utilize to make sense of it all.

#### **Rethinking Educational Perspectives**

Education researchers, who lay claim to a socio-cultural lens, and who maintain that "what we know is inextricably bound to when and where we know it" (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 38), speak directly to the experiential and contextual aspects of the social construction of knowledge. We build knowledge together. Thinking is a "public activity" (Geertz, cited in Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 38). Because of their social nature, communities are held together by what they know, their discourse: shared language, shared understandings, shared practices. This solidaristic element provides the "currency" needed to interact (p. 38). And so, above all, social constructivists are interested in how language works. It is, quintessentially, "a matter of understanding social practices and analyzing the rhetorical

strategies in play in particular kinds of discourse" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Understanding children's language, then, should be of paramount importance. How else can we learn more about children's ways of knowing? Taylor (1995, p. ix, cited in Schwandt, 2000) asserts, "Language makes possible the disclosure of the human world" (p. 198).

The theoretical underpinnings of socio-cultural research into children's language have converged around the critical place of verbal mediation as conceived by Bakhtin and Vygotsky. For Bakhtin and Vygotsky, thought processes are "born and shaped" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92) only through interaction with others. Understanding is "participative, conversational and dialogic" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). In keeping with Vygotsky's and Bakhtin's emphasis upon the meaning-centredness of a socio-cultural approach, a pocket of contemporary educational researchers is moving towards a multilayered and multidimensional perspective that focuses upon understanding how, within a specific culture, people use language to think, learn, and change. It has become, for those researchers, a study of our "ways with words" (Gee, 2001, p. 30).

Continued teacher control of classroom talk virtually eliminates opportunity for the development of, validation of, or valuing of children's ways with words. And, at the same time, it continues to privilege only official adult forms of knowledge created in official ways. A particular discourse of education has evolved that legitimizes definite notions of what young children's minds are like, what can be expected from them and how, accordingly, educators should manage their treatment of them. It has consistently placed children in the position of the other, labeled them and their ways of knowing as immature and inferior. This predetermined, virtually universal view of Amer-European childhood brings with it several presuppositions about children's culture and agency that ultimately

determine what is taught, how it is taught, what children will learn and how they will learn it.

Traditionally, children's ways of knowing, their social languages, and discursive practices have not been sanctioned, nor clearly understood by teachers. Researchers, academics, and practising educators know little of the lived experiences of students: what it is like for children to be at school, their social languages, the way they build their knowledge, and their understanding of the world. The more that is known about children's unofficial school experiences, about how they make meaning, the more effective educational decision making and pedagogical practice can be.

Still, developmental principles and rhetorics of progress regarding children's lives permeate the theoretical and research landscape. These standpoints persist today partly because of educational research's love affair with psychology. Psychology's dichotomization of childhood and adulthood – inferiority and superiority, simplicity and complexity, concrete and abstract thinking – and the developmental theory that such a bifurcation assumes, remain firmly entrenched in educational thinking and practice. My dissertation presents a cogent, critical argument for rethinking our attitude toward children's social, often playful, discourse, and ultimately, for its recharacterization as pedagogically sound.

Yet, for the most part, processes beyond children's experience and out of their control continue to decide, to construct, and to organize children's everyday social and curricular interaction at school. At the foundation of this research is a conception of the organization of the everyday world of children at school as problematic. As such it borrows central tenets from an emerging multidisciplinary view of childhood: one that respects children's voice and agency, a perspective that honours their culture.

Listening to children's voices is a key feature of the paradigm that lies at the heart of childhood studies, and it is fast becoming a mantra in the policy field. However, as we listen to children we need to be careful that we know how to hear what they are saying, though acknowledging that their words and ideas may be filtered, obscured, or muted by the constructs of childhood that shape our conceptualization of the life course. (James, 2004, pp. 31-32)

### **Research Goals and Purpose**

This dissertation, an account of a child-centred, participatory research project, was undertaken in the recent tradition of reconceptualist childhood studies. As such, its challenges are manifold: to maintain sensitivity to children's rich, multilayered lives; to make forthright attempts to present children's experiences and their ways of knowing in a manner that recognizes and represents them as competent, visible, agentic social actors; to ensure that researchers' interpretations reflect multiple layers of experience and are nested in multiple layers of theory.

With an emphasis on the social child, I designed this study to focus attention upon the concrete particulars of children's lives, specifically, their interactions and dialogic relationships at school, in class. It is concerned with their opinions, their insights, the centrality of their social interaction, what goes on between and among them, and how they make sense of their ever – changing lives. It is written with full confidence that children can and should be valued as competent research participants and engaged social actors. The meanings uncovered in this document are kids', not adults', meanings. And, even though children's lives at school are, undoubtedly, embedded in an adult-controlled context, it is the children's experiences and life situations that are targeted in this study.



## **Research Questions**

I have based this inquiry upon two key questions: a) What is the significance of young children's social language in a primary classroom? And, b) What is the role of play or playfulness *within* children's in-class social language, and *within* their culture? I have emphasized the playful talk children engage in without the direct supervision or intrusion of an adult. Because this study ascribes to children the ability to make sense of their life experience, *their* rubric of play is considered first and foremost in any interpretation.

## **Critical Subjectivity**

Throughout my career as an early childhood educator and my previous experience as researcher (Lee, 2001), I have become increasingly aware of and intrigued by the playfulness of children's social language. Certain socio-cultural and dialogic theories – the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), Lev Vygostky (1978, 1962), and James Gee (1992, 2001) – have rendered useful frameworks to approach a study of children's social language. At school the heteroglossic and dialogic nature of talk is unmistakable. Children's unofficial social language repeatedly collides with other official, primarily adult, discourses. Children are compelled to operate in a language space that other, more powerful groups control, and to utilize socio-cultural tools that belong to others. Expropriating language for their own use is the challenge they encounter daily. Yet, for our youngest students, their discursive relationships with *each other* significantly impact the appropriation of new discourses. Language *among* children provides an opportunity to question and to recontextualize the new discourses they encounter in the world: to accept, or to reject, to assimilate, to reflect, and to understand.

Clearly, research that takes as its focus the social languages of children must place their voices, as social actors, at the heart of the inquiry process. Yet children's unofficial social discourse is nested in an adult-centred context, a context that can exacerbate their marginalization at school and in society. Children's social talk is often silenced, considered counter-productive, off-task, disruptive, out-of-control, illicit. And their opinions, more often than not, considered immature and inferior, are seldom sought. These views, that maintain a certain perspective of the value of children's voices, have been absorbed unconsciously for so long that they have come to define accepted school practice.

Re-examining children's spontaneous social language and engaging children in participatory research that lauds, rather than marginalizes their ways of knowing, presupposes a new lens focused on age-old pedagogical practices and dominant adult-centric ideologies. It presents educational researchers with a clear challenge: to make a commitment not only to locate children within the research community, but also, and perhaps most importantly, to ensure that their participation matters, that their views are recognized, and that they are taken seriously.

Still, old practices die hard. My grade one teacher, Miss H, did her best to teach me what she thought I should know: how to read and write, how to add and subtract, and how to listen. Her classroom boasted rows of wooden desks, black chalkboards, and an adjoining coatroom. A bank of windows faced northward toward the street where I lived with my parents in a middle-class urban neighborhood. I was a quiet, cooperative student and so, I did well. I learned to read and write, to add and subtract, and I learned to listen.

My search of the scholarly literature, my field research, and my professional experience have consistently reinforced the interconnectedness

of talking and thinking, reaching mutual understanding, and constructing knowledge. Nevertheless, the power and potential of words continues to be silenced in many contemporary classrooms just as it was years ago. Students had little voice in the classrooms of my childhood. Teachers spoke. Children listened. And, in practice, little has changed since then. Overwhelmed by the demands of curricula and the mandates of local school divisions, teachers seldom feel free to sanction children's spontaneous social discourse.

Throughout this research I have been caught in a sea of contradictions. As a reconceptualist researcher and theoretician, I have made every effort to interpret the children's words as authentically as possible. Yet, because of my twentieth century 'modern' upbringing I am, in many ways, a product of the philosophical underpinnings of socialization and development that I theoretically oppose: adult privilege, the suppression of children's voices. And so, this research journey has been a personal challenge of sorts, a difficult, recursive process. I cannot completely shake off who I am and the historical, political, and socio-cultural milieu that has brought me to this point. Still, I can push my thinking beyond, to imagine new possibilities. And the children who participated in this study have made it imperative that I do just that. I intend that this dissertation will also incite readers to reconsider and re-imagine childhood, to set aside, for a time, the lenses of experts, to reflect upon how *children's* ways of knowing, if recognized, can potentially influence the world.

### **Significance of the Study**

Children's interpretive reproduction of culture, their appropriation of voice, their shared social practices, and their ways with words have historically been underreported and underrated in academic literature, primarily because of children's position outside the mainstream. Mainstream

school discourse reflects the official, taken-for-granted, authoritative way of viewing the world. It has consistently masqueraded as neutrality and has been compellingly presented as common-sense. If we apply a different lens – a lens that no longer marginalizes children – we can see more clearly the role that they take in both their own and adult cultures.

Traditional educational research and practice subordinate children in a number of ways, most notably, by their preoccupation with psychology's developmentalist mantra. Children are continually viewed, as Corsaro (1997) has suggested, in a "forward-looking" (p. 7) manner that focuses upon what they will become, not upon who they are. In my research I examine children's lives and ways of knowing as they are, at school, in class, in the world. It was undertaken to broaden and deepen our understanding of how their social, playful language contributes to and is affected by their lives as children. In doing so, it is fundamentally committed to a reconceptualized and agentic view of childhood.

Becoming an advocate for children involves recognizing children's active role in "naming and renaming the world and their places in it" (hooks, 1989, cited in Lensmire, 1994a, p. 5). Recently scholars have called for research in this very area. Dyson, Power, Lensmire, Gallas, and Corsaro among others, inspire those who seek to examine children's underlife at school, the activities that exist "alongside and in reaction to ... rules that impinge upon the autonomy of children" (Corsaro, 1997, p. 133). Research open to the autonomy inherent in children's culture, research that values children's voices without limiting them by virtue of their predetermined, peripheral position as 'children', exposes "quite literate" (Dyson, 2003, p. 333) behavior that has been long overlooked.

If we reconsider Western thinking as our exclusive referent, children's ways of knowing, although partial, can present us with clear alternatives.

This project carries with it a “post” perspective: a mandate to redraw our conception of what counts as knowledge, to include within it, and to showcase, children’s alternative ways of knowing. Research that showcases children’s voices ethically supports their “right to freedom of expression” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). The personal, educational, and socio-cultural benefits of freedom of expression and of knowing children’s perspectives can ensure that education makes sense to them, not simply to us, as educators, researchers, and adults. This study targets children’s discursive practices and sheds light upon their culture and meaning making. Norms of a discourse are seldom stated outright (Gee, 1992); they are tacit ways of knowing, meaning, and believing that are discoverable only through naturalistic study.

### **Document Structure**

The issues raised here presuppose a certain interpretive paradigm which, of course, shapes how I see the world and how the data I collected are presented, analyzed, and interpreted. Because this research perspective problematizes underlying assumptions about young children’s discourse in school, its theoretical framework embraces a will to challenge traditional understandings. That being said, making sense of children’s unrecognized and often unnoticed social discourse in the field first demands a close examination of related theory and a thorough investigation of existing empirical research.

Chapter Two examines the socio-cultural perspectives of language and discourse espoused by major theoreticians – Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Gee – as well as contemporary educational research that illustrates the deftness of children’s play, language, and imagination. I introduce current, key considerations from existing literature into this study of children’s culture, and lay groundwork for understanding, interpreting, and analyzing the

research participants' ways of knowing about play as articulated in the interviews and as enacted in their social talk in class.

Chapter Three describes the research event at the core of this document, its methodological underpinnings, and sets it in place and time. It examines my perspective as researcher and introduces the reader to the participants in the study, their neighborhood, their school, and their classroom.

Chapter Four is devoted to the twelve participants' epistemological understanding of play as articulated in each of the paired interviews. Chapter Five provides my conceptual framework for understanding the children's play as discourse, as agentic behavior, and as a response to the world as text. Chapter Six delves into the children's actual social language in class through the examination of three episodes from the study's video file. Each vignette illustrates how the children's playful discourse acts as an agentic response to the gendered texts they encounter in their daily lives. Chapter Seven reviews the study's key findings and provides both practical and theoretical implications for the future of primary education, research with children, and the reconceptualization and decolonization of early childhood.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **EXPLORING THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Certain contemporary researchers and theoreticians – Dyson, Gallas, Dauite, Power, Sutton-Smith, and Lensmire among others – write at length about presumptions regarding young children, the belief that they are exclusively concrete, simple, active learners. They argue that such characterizations discount the potential inherent in children’s deft use of language, playfulness, and imagination. Like Egan (1988), who challenges those who define orality as a “condition of deficit” (p. 94), they choose to direct attention on the power inherent in children’s talk.

This research also presents an alternative to traditional educational inquiry. Its primary goal is to examine children’s spontaneous classroom discourse: to explore the role of play or playfulness in that discourse using children’s ways of knowing as the primary referent. Reconceptualizing play as an authentic part of children’s discourse, acknowledging its existence and its place in the classroom and in their lives, requires that educators revisit how they view the social voices of children. To set the stage for my research in the field, I examined key relevant theoretical concepts: Vygotsky’s socio-cultural view of language, its use as a tool for thinking and the role of play in abstract thought; Bakhtin’s understanding of how language works: how it is appropriated, its forms, dialogicity, heteroglossia, and carnival; and Gee’s rendering of discourse as social practice. I also surveyed the field of extant contemporary empirical research focusing upon projects that examine occurrences of playful in-class language: how it was perceived, managed, and conceptualized. My exploration of the literature reviews the work of

scholars whose interpretive paradigm parallels my own: a perspective that reconsiders childhood, honors children's voices, and recognizes their active roles in our shared culture.

### **Early Language**

The purpose of language from a Vygotskian perspective is two-fold: it is a form of interactive communication and a tool for thinking. Vygotsky (1986) was adamant in his claim that thinking and speaking were inexorably linked: "The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is language" (p. 94). Language develops out of a child's need to communicate within her personal environment, her family. Later, the speech that was initially learned to communicate with others becomes internalized and serves to organize a child's thoughts. Children at school use language in just the ways Vygotsky suggested, to communicate with others – their peers and teachers – and to make sense of their school experience.

At a certain point in the early stage of language development, a "crucial instant", according to Vygotsky (1986, p. 82), children realize that speech has a purpose and that words have a symbolic function. Speech "begins to serve intellect, and thoughts begin to be spoken" (p. 82). Children in this phase of development actively try to learn. And, they do this 'out loud' and 'with others'. Bruner's (1990) descriptions of a little girl named Emily support Vygotsky's focus upon the social aspects of language development. Emily used egocentric speech not only to communicate but to reflect aloud on her eventful life. Her need to interact with others and her need to construct meaning stimulated Emily's tremendous language growth between the ages of eighteen months and three years (p. 89).

Vygotsky (1986) suggests that planning 'out loud', as Emily did, is a precursor to planning 'in our heads'. Her egocentric speech was an



“intermediate stage” in the evolution of her language from “vocal speech into inner speech” (p. 35). Speech structures are mastered. These, in turn, become structures of thought. Hence, inner speech is key to thought development. Inner speech is dependent upon social speech. As children move from egocentric to inner speech their need to vocalize minimizes. Language is used initially for social interaction with family members. It then goes underground, ‘into our heads’, to form our thinking. We see in children’s egocentric speech the potential for thought. And so, it is understandable that, in their first attempts to construct meaning at home and at school, children do so out loud. Clearly, the link between thought and language is key to understanding Vygotsky’s thinking and the role of verbal mediation in Amer-European culture (Wertsch, 1991, pp. 30-31).

Early in life parents become mediators between their child and the world of language: supporting, explaining, clarifying. What children are unable to do alone is accomplished with their parents’ assistance. Once children begin to speak, the collaborative meaning-making evident in their conversations provides a practical example of Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development.

... the zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

Vygotsky explains that as children’s facility with language increases, they are able to perform more and more language functions internally:

The greatest change in children’s capacity to use language as a problem-solving tool takes place ... when socialized speech (which had previously been used to address an adult) *is turned*

*inward*. Instead of appealing to the adult, children appeal to themselves. (p. 27)

This, Vygotsky claims, is how language takes on its intrapersonal, as well as its interpersonal function (p. 27). Socially situating language, as Vygotsky's concept of language internalization does, is germane to any study of discourse because it locates all acts first, on a social level, then, on a personal level. Bakhtin (1986) envisioned thought similarly: it "is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well" (p. 92). In essence, everything we do, think, and say is linked to our initial interaction with others.

The history of the society in which a child is reared, along with her personal life experience, essentially determines how she will learn to think. Once internalized, language provides children with a mechanism whereby they can reflect on their own experiences, confront problems, and share their thoughts with others. Vygotsky (1986) maintained that a fundamental reciprocal relationship exists between thought and language in terms of one providing resources for the other. And, he saw that relationship as steeped within a cultural and historical milieu. The cultural component of his theory focused upon how society organizes the tasks children encounter and the tools provided to help them cope. Language, the principal tool in children's environment, plays a key role in their evolution as functioning members of a culture. From birth children are constantly interacting with adults. Through actions and, most importantly, through language, adults share their culture and their historically-acquired ways of doing things with their children. And so, for Vygotsky, certain patterns of thinking are the products of cultural activities, which Gee (1992) calls social practices.

## **Language and Discourse**

### **Gee and Discourse**

Gee (1992) examines how language fits into social practice from a socio-cultural perspective. His definition of discourse crosses many disciplinary boundaries, integrating the social and the cultural with the ideological, political, and psychological. For Gee discourse is not simply language; it is acting, believing, valuing (p. 106). Each discourse is owned by a socio-culturally defined group and, as such, is ideological and political. Children are apprenticed into their Primary Discourse, the family, where their first social identity is formed. Primary Discourses, Gee contends, affect how we acquire or resist acquiring other discourses. They provide us with a sense of solidarity, of oneness. Gee calls this, a sense of "people like us" (p. 109). Through interaction with focal people in our Primary Discourse circle, we develop into ourselves. As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, "children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88).

Apprenticeship into Secondary Discourses occurs as part of our socialization into groups outside the family: churches, gangs, schools – our foray into public life. Secondary Discourses are distinguished by specific ways of acting. To belong to a Secondary Discourse people must show their actions to be "recognizable performances" in that discourse (Gee, 1992, p. 109). Our actions are our own, yet, at the same time, they are acts belonging to the discourse or discourses to which we belong. Our acts render our discourses visible. Although Secondary Discourses cultivate particular unique historical or traditional ways of belonging, it is possible, Gee contends, to be a member of conflicting discourses at the same time (p. 110). This can become disconcerting, making us appear and feel fragmented. At school, discourses often collide. The official discourse of school, which reflects a mainstream, adult perspective, seldom represents

the unofficial lives of young children. Still, behaviors and social practices from one discourse can and do filter into another.

### **Gee's Concept of Discourse Acquisition**

How do we become part of a discourse? Gee (1992) differentiates between two possibilities: learning and acquiring. He defines learning as conscious knowledge gained through direct teaching. Discourse acquisition, he specifies, is a subconscious process that occurs naturally, not deliberately. Discourses, Gee contends, are *acquired* primarily through apprenticeship and enculturation – they are *not learned* through direct teaching (p. 113). Gee's reference to the discourse acquisition process is central to my research: the examination of children's social language in a primary classroom. What is the nature of young children's unofficial discourse in class? How do children, among themselves, reconcile the different discourses they encounter in the world? Or do they?

Gee proposes that apprenticeship into a discourse is aided by interactive scaffolding which is, for the most part, provided by adults, those firmly entrenched in the discourse. Yet Gee does admit that outsiders may offer insights or possess meta-knowledge about a discourse that insiders may not. He refers to "mushfake" discourse as partial acquisition of a discourse coupled with metaknowledge and strategies to 'make do' (pp. 118-119). My inquiry expands knowledge of the acquisition scaffolding process by examining how, without the direct involvement of adults, children *among themselves*, engage in discourse, and how they navigate and respond to entrenched discourses.

Gee proffers that certain discourses, which are "situated on the borderland between the home and the school" (p. 146), are developed and defined by their opposition to and conflict with school discourse, and involve mutual ways of knowing - a sort of common knowledge shared among users.

The school, seen by a marginalized group as foreign, is made accessible through members' shared participation in borderland discourse. The example Gee offers is a borderland discourse utilized outside school among Black, Puerto-Rican, and lower class white groups who lack full access to the dominant school discourse. But, Gee contends, border-like situations exist for anyone who is outside the mainstream (p. 151).

Gee utilizes the concept of borderland discourse to tighten his theoretical perspective: discourse is both political and ideological. Still, the theoretical construct has real implications for the study of early childhood discourse. The young children who participated in this research employed a similarly unofficial border-like discourse, their playful social language, which made it possible for them to navigate and respond to the world.

For Gee (2001), the oral manifestation of discourse takes form in social languages (p. 32). Social languages are "ways with words" (p. 37) associated with specific situated identities and activities (i.e., who is talking and what is being done). Interestingly, Gee sees patterns within these social languages that maintain their separateness. Mixing social languages, Gee maintains, can indicate either incompetence with the language form or the creation of a new hybridized social language used for a different social practice. He also proposes subcategories of social language used by specific social groups, routinized and relatively fixed ways with words, that are the outcome of repeated experiences. He calls these genres (p. 34).

The possibilities inherent in Gee's concept of social language, hybridization, and routinized language genres, set the stage for an examination of what happens when young children encounter the unfamiliar decontextualized Secondary Discourse of the school and the world. For early childhood educators, as for Gee, the fundamental issue is understanding *how* young children *acquire* "social practices, social languages and genres that

involve 'ways with...words'" (p. 35). Although educators are in the business of *teaching*, Gee reminds us that most social languages, genres, and discourses are *acquired* through socialization, not through direct instruction (p. 35).

The socialization process, our apprenticeship into discourse – in the family and beyond – furnishes us with "identity kits", certain "words, deeds, clothes, objects, and attitudes", that signal to ourselves and to others that we are members of a particular discourse community (2001, p. 36). Shared viewpoints, cultural models or theories about the world, are acquired as one is socialized. These cultural models identify normal acceptable behavior. Like lowest common denominators, cultural models simplify the world, so much so, Gee contends, that certain outliers are marginalized, characterized as abnormal (1992, p. 7). Anomalies, hybrids, and approximations are discredited. Those who determine the meanings of words, those "more centrally placed", are experts. Others are amateurs (p. 7).

At school those who determine meaning are teachers, administrators, central office staff, and departments of education. Theirs are the perspectives and meanings that are valued. Schools, then, are inherently ideological. The discourse of school, its unspoken yet fundamental presuppositions and assumptions about the value of certain experiences and individuals, its cultural models, bracket the lived experience of many. School discourse becomes a "standard, taken-for-granted" (p. 8) way of viewing the world, disguised as neutrality, presented as common sense.

### **Children's Culture and Discourse**

Yet children too have shared ways of doing things, shared social practices, ways with words, that identify them with their own discourse community. All children must be recognized as capable social actors, as knowledge makers, and as insightful contributors to culture. In a manner

reminiscent of Gee's characterization of discourse, Corsaro (1997) defines childhood culture as a "stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (p. 95). However, he insists that children's culture is not simply a matter of internalizing and adapting to adult culture; it is a unique "process of appropriation, re-invention, and reproduction" (p. 18). Children's culture is separate from, yet, by virtue of their status as children, embedded in adult culture. Corsaro suggests that much of what happens in children's culture occurs as they attempt "to make sense of, and to a certain extent to resist the adult world" (p. 96). He carefully distances himself from developmentalist perspectives of socialization. Instead, he calls children's participation in society, "interpretive reproduction" (p. 18).

Corsaro sees children as active social agents who creatively, innovatively, and collectively utilize elements of adult culture to forge their own culture (p. 24). Children's culture, from Corsaro's perspective, is not passed from older to younger children as a "preexisting structure" (p. 26). Rather, it is continuously, recursively created as a result of the "web of experiences" (p.26) children engage in with their peers. And, as such, it is not something left behind as children mature. It becomes part of their lived experience, a part that they take with them to maturity. Thus, Corsaro claims, "*individual development is embedded in the collective production of a series of peer cultures which in turn contribute to reproduction and change in the wider adult society of culture*" (italics in original, p. 26).

A perspective like Corsaro's acknowledges the autonomy inherent in children's culture and makes their discourse worthy of documentation and scrutiny. It suggests that researchers should use a different lens when they examine children's lives, a lens that no longer marginalizes children, a lens that seriously considers their active role in their own and adult cultures.

Corsaro's insistence on the creative appropriation of information from the adult world in the making, extending, and elaborating of unique childhood peer cultures emphasizes both its situated and dialogic nature.

### **Bakhtin and Discourse**

Dialogicity is Bakhtin's (1981) central theoretical construct, fundamental to his notion of discourse. Bakhtin conceptualizes discourse as a "social phenomenon" (p. 259). And, although he focuses upon verbal art forms, particularly those in the novel, he does not ignore social discourse outside the realm of the artist: discourse in the social space of daily life. It is the stratification of everyday language into myriad genres and social languages that becomes the 'stuff' of which the novel's discourse is made. Because of its shared language base, much of what Bakhtin says of literary discourse can be utilized to understand extra-literary discourse as well.

Bakhtin's distinctive way of looking at language, whether written or spoken, is its elemental "sense of opposition and struggle" (p. xviii), which he conceptualizes as its centrifugal and its centripetal forces. This tension is reflected in how he sees the nature of language itself: it is, at once, fixed, by virtue of its common linguistic system, and unfinalizable, by virtue of its contextually construed meanings. Certain language forces, those he calls centripetal, have traditionally received the most attention. They are the forces that harmonize language, enhance mutual understanding, and, as such, "work towards concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization" (p. 271). Language conceived of in this way is a world view of sorts. The centripetal force of language is the powerhouse behind the social languages, genres, and cultural models of the Primary and Secondary Discourses that Gee agrees are ideological.

However, centripetal forces are not the only forces at work in language. Simultaneously, Bakhtin submits, decentralizing and disunifying



forces are at work. These he refers to as the centrifugal forces of language. Language is heteroglot. That is, it is context specific. Each utterance is an unrepeatable event where both centrifugal and centripetal forces come to bear. Each utterance is "contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" (p. 272). And, each utterance takes its meaning in a specific social space, is entangled in this tension-filled environment, and is "shot through" (p. 276) with discordant and concordant views of others. Because each utterance is related to those already uttered, its natural orientation is dialogic (p. 279). Everything we say is directed toward a response, and is, itself, a response.

Everyday talk takes for granted the give and take of dialogue: its responsiveness. The listener and the listener's response are invariably taken into consideration; living conversation is directly oriented toward the future words of the listener (p. 280). Active understanding assimilates the speaker's words into the listener's existing conceptual system. Their emotive and experiential elements color and merge with the utterance, resulting in a response. For Bakhtin, the act of understanding "comes to fruition only in the response" (p. 282). At this point, the one who strives to understand forms specific connections with what has been said, enhancing, agreeing, disagreeing, embellishing the speaker's words. Meaning resides not in words but in the interactive, contingent responsiveness of the speaking event.

Similarly, literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978) purports that the literary "transaction" between text and reader allows for the "continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text" in the making of meaning. Meaning, that is, the 'poem', "comes into being" during a transaction between the reader and the signs on the page, creating a live circuit, each component functioning "by virtue of the presence of the other(s)" (p. 14). Bakhtin (1986) likens the point of contact between texts, either spoken or written, to

a flash of light, illuminating both what has come before and what will come after into dialogue (p. 162). Both Rosenblatt and Bakhtin see the essence of text emerge only in its dialogic contact with the reader or the speaker.

What Bakhtin proposes is that we are all listeners and speakers synchronously. Traditionally the listener has been portrayed as someone who is passive, someone who understands. Yet, for Bakhtin (1986), "responsive understanding" (p. 69) is an active part of discourse itself. It can be immediate or delayed, audible or silent, but it is, Bakhtin stresses, inevitable. In primary classrooms, children's spontaneous social conversations are responsive: to teachers, to curriculum, but also to each other and, most importantly, to the world. For educators, the responsivity of children's talk has significant implications. Purely receptive understanding calls upon a listener simply to mirror what she has heard. It offers nothing new. It is reproductive, not constructive. For Bakhtin it is not understanding at all (1986, p. 281). This reproductive function is personified in monologic classroom discourse by the ever-present preponderance of 'teacher talk' and its attendant student response. The discourse represented in this document is dialogic, not monologic, classroom talk; it is talk among children.

Bakhtin speaks of the stratification of language into social languages that are permeated with value judgments, belief systems, and points of view. Professional languages, jargons, or genres privilege specific meanings, making them less accessible to outsiders (p. 289). Each social group is capable of such language exclusivity, Bakhtin suggests, not simply professionals. All "socially significant world views" can imbue words with characteristic meanings and intentions that are context specific (p. 290). And all age groups, in each moment, in each "socially significant verbal performance" (p. 290), have their own language. All these languages co-exist and intersect, forming new languages over time and space. They are

specific views of the world, ways that all of us, adults and children, conceptualize the world with words (pp. 291-292).

The words we use, then, cannot be considered neutral. They all have a "taste" of the context in which they have been utilized, a "taste" of those who have used them before us. They are "on the borderline between oneself and the other" (p. 293). Words become ours only when we appropriate them, when we inhabit them with our own "semantic and expressive intentions" (p. 293). But where do we get the words we speak? We get them, Bakhtin submits, from other people: words that are serving others' intentions, others' contexts. And the appropriation process can be tenuous. Bakhtin suggests that not all words are easy to appropriate. Sometimes others' words are resistant; they cannot be easily assimilated into our life context. As the children who participated in my study demonstrate, struggling to appropriate others' words can be problematic.

The expropriation of language, our efforts to make it fit with our own intentions, "is a difficult and complicated process" (p. 294). Yet children find themselves in this situation every day at school. It is no wonder that Gee (1992) identified how similar hardships spawn mushfake, borderland, and hybridized discourse. When an utterance is a mixture of two languages, world views, or belief systems, Bakhtin likewise refers to it as hybrid. Words can have contradictory meanings for a single speaker in hybridized constructions (p. 305). New contexts present us with new meanings. Taken to its logical conclusion, every utterance is a potential hybrid. And for young children in particular, hybridization is more likely to occur.

Children are constantly and more directly affected by others' discourse than adults because their agency, experiences, rules, models, and access to information are relatively limited. For Gee, others' discourse, first in the private sphere, (the voices of parents, guardians and care-givers), and then

in the public sphere, (the voices of teachers, principals, coaches), serve as the foundation for children's behaviors and for their world views. For Bakhtin, (1981) others' words act as "authoritative discourse" and, ultimately, as "internally persuasive discourse" (p. 342). The process of "ideological becoming", Bakhtin (1981) contends, is usually affected more by one or the other of these discourses at a time (although it is possible that both may be present simultaneously). Normally, however, the two are disparate. The authoritative is embedded in the words of religious or moral authorities or, for children, in the voices of adults. The internally persuasive word is more personal, backed by no authority, lacks privilege, and is not publicly acknowledged (p. 342).

Authoritative discourse is heard with its authority "already fused to it" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). And, as such, it demands steadfastness, "permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual or flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it" (p. 343). At school, authoritative discourse is fused with a particular person, a teacher or other authority figure. For those not yet assimilated into the discourse, it remains separate, in "quotation marks". It is not to be argued with, nor can it be rejected or half-heartedly accepted. How many parents have heard the words, "But teacher says..."? And conversely, how many teachers have heard students say, when confronted with information that is at odds with their Primary Discourse experience: "But my mom/dad say...". Bakhtin addresses just such a conundrum. Children's discourse (whether it is 'acquired' as Gee would insist, or 'interpretatively reproduced' according to Corsaro) is arguably composed, to a certain extent, of what they have heard and experienced as authoritative discourse, ideas and thoughts that have come from others. Bakhtin (1981) contends that distinguishing between

authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse – what an individual thinks, for him or herself – occurs “late in development” (p. 345).

To begin to think for oneself a child must differentiate between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Internally persuasive discourse is our own words, barely distinguishable from those of others, and, as Bakhtin emphasizes, is “half-ours and half-someone else’s” (p. 345). Internally persuasive discourse interanimates our words with those of others, our contexts with others’ contexts. It struggles for dominance among the myriad “verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values” that we encounter (p. 346). And it emerges from the struggle hybridized, as new ways to make meaning. These new ways are, once again, taken into future contexts and situations. Internally persuasive discourse is creative not finite, productive not static, dialogic not monologic. The importance of harnessing language – the struggle to escape from the authority of others’ discourse and to find one’s own voice within the maze of heteroglossic language – should not be underestimated (p. 348).

Within heteroglossia there are language types which Bakhtin refers to as social languages and speech genres. Social languages are defined by their social profile – the way speakers make meaning that is specific to a particular belief system. They are successful only as a measure of their social influence (p. 356). As such the social languages of children are relatively unsuccessful, being limited to the interaction of a voiceless group still in the stages of ideological becoming. Daily children’s social languages collide with other official, often authoritative discourses. Everyday spoken language is also comprised of speech genres which, Bakhtin (1986) proffers, are relatively stable sets of context-specific utterances. Each sphere of communication develops its own types of talk (of utterances) linked by content, style, and compositional structure (p. 60). Bakhtin directs our

attention to the inherent heterogeneity of speech genres, the countless arenas of possible speech communication, as reason to differentiate between genre types. Primary genres take place in unmediated speech situations, such as classrooms, and are usually oral. Secondary genres, usually written forms, are more complex, organized, and highly developed.

Although he differentiates between social languages and genres, Bakhtin (1981) does not see them as disparate characterizations. In fact, he notes that generic language classification is "interwoven" (p. 289) with social languages. The two are, he contends, interconnected. My study depicts children's persistent efforts to gain control over their lives through their use of social languages and genres, their constant struggle to come to grips with the impact of the world's authoritative texts, and their ardent search for their own internally persuasive words. These efforts represent, to borrow Corsaro's (1997) term, the creative interpretive reproduction of their culture.

### **Classroom Research from a Bakhtinian Perspective: Haworth**

In her study of the Bakhtinian overtones of small group classroom interaction, Haworth (1999) suggests that the relationship between student language and teacher language can be "more or less empowering" (p. 101). Students can either yield to the authoritative text inherent in the voice of the teacher, or they can reshape it, making a multiplicity of meanings possible. Haworth investigated the potential of small group interaction as opposed to whole class teaching, drawing her theoretical framework from certain Bakhtinian concepts: heteroglossia, speech genres or social languages, authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Invoking the work of Vygotsky and referencing Bruner, Edwards and Mercer, and Fairclough and Wertsch, among others, the author's social constructivist framework buttresses her argument that small group talk can act as a mediating discourse that connects and supports learning in all classroom genres. Data

selected were comprised of transcripts of small group interactions of grade three students.

Haworth shares transcripts of small group interaction in which the teacher/adult/researcher voice is as prevalent, or, in some interchanges, more prevalent, than the voices of the children. My research focuses upon peer interaction: children's discourse *without* the teacher. Still, Haworth's findings are germane to my study. Her research indicates that young children in small groups often ventriloquate the voice of the teacher, accepting the fixed meanings inherent in it. Much of the small group talk she documented was teacher-dependent; it was monologic, not dialogic (p. 113). Even so, in one of the small groups the authoritativeness of the 'teacher-voice' was eclipsed, resulting in more creative freedom, "marrying the focused, explicit language of formal teacher exposition to the relaxed and creative freedom of playground/intimate talk in more productive ways" (p. 114). This playful talk prompted the focal children to utilize their language to make new meanings, reconciling the tensions inherent within the heteroglossic classroom (p. 115). Haworth's findings suggest that, from a Bakhtinian (1981) perspective, playful exchanges may serve to objectify an alien discourse, to question it, to recontextualize it in ways to allow students to get a "feel for (its) boundaries" (p. 348), to understand, to accept, to reject, or to assimilate.

### **Classroom Research from a Bakhtinian Perspective: MacLean**

Just such a struggle is central to MacLean's (1994) investigation of the Bakhtinian overtones of an urban grade five and six classroom. He utilized tape recordings of simultaneous and individual classroom conversations to uncover the multiplicity of classroom discourses and to support his contention that classrooms are potential places for the dialogizing of these multiple discourses. To support his Bakhtinian perspective, MacLean first

establishes the site as heteroglossic. He identifies multiple influences and discourses: the school, the playground, the home, and popular culture (p. 234) which he likens to differing socio-ideological or, to borrow Bakhtin's term, "centrifugal forces" within the classroom heteroglossia. MacLean's research focuses upon how, in classrooms, teachers and students oppose the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia by attempting to create a stable language through which they may establish some common ground (p. 235).

MacLean focuses upon the discursive struggle that occurs between school-based discourse and community and peer discourse. The struggle is seen most clearly in the voice of Steve, a student whose challenges to the teacher are characterized as overt attempts to make sense of his school experience, attempts that MacLean contends are also occurring covertly with his classmates. The teacher's willingness to engage Steve results in a loss of the authoritativeness of the teacher's voice. Their talk then becomes dialogized, enabling Steve and his classmates to see the world from different points of view. One of MacLean's key conclusions is that an inter-animation of voices can lead to acknowledgment of differing points of view, an integral part of what Bakhtin calls "ideological becoming" (p. 247). The process in which Steve and his teacher were engaged potentially set the stage for an internal struggle for hegemony of various ideological points of view.

Once again it is the teacher's voice that dominates much of MacLean's transcribed text. However, he does make a key observation that likens children's 'playground talk', one of the discourses he identifies as evidence of classroom heteroglossia, to Bakhtin's carnival discourse. And he determines that forays into playful talk can afford children opportunities to explore and resist an otherwise unfamiliar, official school discourse (p. 247).



## **Bakhtin's Carnival Discourse**

For Bakhtin (1984) carnival exists in real life culturally and historically, *and* in literature. As a life experience, carnival is a diverse phenomenon, comparable to Gee's (1992) social discourse, complete with "language", gestures, and actions that give "expression to a unified (but complex) carnival sense of the world" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 122). In the Middle Ages people lived two lives: their official lives were "serious and gloomy, subjugated to strict hierarchical order". The "*life of the carnival square*" was "free and unrestricted" (italics in original, p. 129). These two lives were separated by "strict temporal boundaries" (p. 130). Children, too have official and unofficial lives. They have school time and home time, work time and play time, supervised time and unsupervised time. The bifurcation of school times becomes glaringly evident during grade one when children encounter the "official monologism" (p. 110) of school and the serious business of becoming literate. For our youngest students, as for those who centuries earlier lived the life of carnival, there is a "mutual estrangement of...two systems" (p. 130).

Bakhtin characterizes carnival as "pageant without footlights...without ... performers and spectators" (p. 122). Everyone is included – all participate. Carnival is not deliberately performed. Rather, it is "lived". As such, carnival is unofficial. It places little regard on established order, rules, hierarchies, and social conventions. Carnival is "life drawn out of its *usual* rut" or "life turned inside out" (p. 122). Bakhtin makes specific reference to age disparity as a familiar barrier that carnival transcends (p. 123). Traditional distances between individuals are deferred in favor of "free and familiar contact" (p. 123). Free contact facilitates boundary crossing, and what Bakhtin characterizes as the "outspoken carnivalistic word" (p. 123). Because it breaks down barriers between people, events, social languages,

and genres, carnival behavior can be regarded by outsiders as “eccentric and inappropriate” (p. 123). Similarly, from a teacher’s perspective carnivalistic classroom behavior, children’s playfulness, laughter, spontaneity, off-task, and sometimes off-color talk, can be considered inappropriate.

In carnival, laughter is a response to “something higher” (p. 127), authority and truth, world order, or perhaps, an entrenched discourse. Laughter’s power resides in the role it plays in understanding “phenomenon in the process of change and transition” (p. 164). The ideological commentary inherent within carnival is not “abstract thought about equality and freedom” (p. 123). It is more aptly likened to concrete thought that individuals ‘play out’ as part of life itself. For a person living in the Middle Ages, carnival festivities sanctioned thinking out loud. In many classrooms, including the one MacLean (1994) studied, resistance to the authoritative voice of the teacher, the creation of borderland or mushfake discourses, and students’ response to canonized texts or curriculum, all can be concretized in playful talk. With carnivalistic playful talk students can cross boundaries between what is and is not acceptable. They can challenge the status quo. Structure, authority, and order are “decrowned” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 124).

### **Bakhtin’s Carnival and Classroom Research: Lensmire**

For Lensmire (1994b) the workshop approach to writing implemented in the third grade classroom he studied upheld a Bakhtinian playful, carnivalistic stance in at least three ways: “by rejecting traditional school writing tasks”, by granting students freedom to shape their own writing experiences, explore their own worlds, and utilize schoolyard talk in their writing, and by demystifying the writing experience (p. 379). And, although he argues that advocates of the writers’ workshop approach seldom address the issue, Lensmire also found compelling evidence of a decidedly anti-official element in certain focal children’s engagement in the writing process.

Particular child writers utilized workshop talk and texts to “challenge, parody, or criticize aspects of their worlds” (p. 380).

Lensmire closely examines those students who pushed the boundaries, those who took their writing in a direction that “sought to upset and challenge aspects of their world” (p. 383). These students and others like them, he suggests, tend to make “authority figures nervous” (p. 383). Educators who respond in this way ignore the potential benefits that can emerge as children actively “oppose and criticize aspects of their world” (p. 383). Lensmire hints at how traditional perspectives of schooling that conceive of students as objects rather than subjects of their learning can play into teachers’ negative response to aspects of carnival in class. The carnivalistic aspects of writers’ workshop that Lensmire witnessed provided children with opportunities to express dissent. It gave them voice (1994a, p. 10). Lensmire insists that those who advocate a process approach to writing instruction are woefully unprepared to deal with, to make sense of, or to respond to, student resistance and opposition (1994b, p. 383). He fears that, rather than recognizing the expression of student dissent as embryonic critical thinking, carnivalesque, playful, anti-official behavior in writers’ workshop, or in any classroom, anywhere, more often than not, leads to teacher “shut down” (p. 383).

Lensmire (1994b) also pinpoints controversial social implications of carnival in writers’ workshop: the formation of peer hierarchies, the plight of ostracized students, and classroom conflict (pp. 384-387). He sees certain focal children’s stories as bridging the gap between the world as it is and the world as those children would like it to be (p. 387).

Bruner (1990) refers to the world as it is as the “canonical world of culture” (p. 52). Yet canonical aspects of children’s peer culture can sometimes be at odds with the idiosyncratic world of certain students as well

as with the knowledge, views, and perceptions of adult culture. In a classroom Lensmire (1994a) studied, children made independent decisions about the writing process: selecting this and not that, valuing and including some but devaluing and excluding others, determining what was and was not important. Playful, unofficial classroom talk and aspects of carnival evident during the writers' workshop made this possible. Carnival turned the power to control classroom discourse – power that normally lies with adults (1994a, p. 14) – “inside out” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 127). Yet the playfulness of the writing workshop was not simply an indication of a struggle against the official *adult* discourse. Lensmire contends that the “open, engaging, laughing, playing workshop-carnival” (1994b, p. 390) can become a place where real and, at times, divisive “ugly” peer cultures are formed, where certain children struggle for voice among their peers, and where some are routinely excluded and subordinated.

### **Bakhtin's Carnival and Classroom Research: Gallas**

Gallas (2001) saw another side of Bakhtin's carnival in her ethnographic investigation of imagination and its role in the literacy development of first and second graders. Her response to students' carnivalistic performances – their written and oral texts, their dances, songs, and their play – was not, in her words, “teacherly” (p. 486). Even at risk of losing control of the class, Gallas chose not to “derail” her students' humor and playfulness by exerting her authority. Unlike Lensmire (1994b) who noted evidence of the ugly face of emerging peer cultures, Gallas focuses more upon students' spontaneity and joyfulness as evidence of community building and the “development of the public discourse of the classroom” (p. 486).

Gallas used the term “authoring” to describe the nature of children's literacy learning: an “ongoing”, “public” offering; a text presented to an

audience; an act of belief, knowing, and convincing others that begins with “an imaginative response to the world” (pp. 477-478). Authoring is an “incarnation of imagination” (p. 477), a public event that “represents a leap toward the core of discourse acquisition” (p. 477). As her students took up the authoring process, as authority shifted from student to student, and, as her power as teacher was weakened, elements of Bakhtin’s carnival surfaced. From these experiences, Gallas came to the conclusion that “dialogic communities cannot be created unless...teachers embrace the authoring process and all its risks” (p. 486). When students’ learning moves forward because of imaginative response to and engagement with texts, teachers must be prepared to abandon “scripted pedagogical practices” (p. 487).

Discourse space must be made available for students. As a teacher, Gallas relinquished control so that a public space could be created in the classroom for what was going on privately. What Gallas advocates supports my contention that young children must be afforded the discursive space to openly come in contact with the world and with curricula in their own way. The transactions that Gallas witnessed as her students attempted to aesthetically bridge the gap between their private imaginings and the public world at school (p. 489) seldom occur in classrooms. Attending to the important yet unofficial discourse of children requires that teachers take on a somewhat altered perspective, a perspective that allows for a less scripted yet more complex approach to student learning. Such an approach could perhaps best be described with words Gallas (2001) uses to define literacy: a “dynamic inside/out process with imagination at its core” (p. 488).

## **Play, Imagination and Literacy**

### **Dauite**

For Gallas playful imaginative experience is crucial to the development of literacy. Close to a century ago Dewey's (1933) interest in play and imagination also converged around their synergistic role in thinking: "imaginative enterprises often precede thinking of the close-knit type and prepare the way for it. In this sense, a thought or idea is a mental picture of something not actually present, and thinking is the succession of such pictures" (p. 5). Not unlike Gallas or Dewey, Dauite (1989) argues that play is critical to children's thought, that it is a tool they utilize to make sense of their world. She compared children's "playing to write" (i.e., engaging in playful behavior as they write) with non-playful interactions to determine the extent to which play could be characterized as thought. Her study investigated whether children who "play to write" analyze, synthesize, and evaluate their own ideas (p. 2).

Dauite concludes that play interchanges, when compared to non-playful talk, involve "relatively extensive and elaborated - although subtle-thinking" (p. 14). And, she links children's playful language with certain attributes of critical thinking that are strikingly similar to Dewey's (1933) notion of reflective thought (pp. 17-34): analysis, synthesis, problem solving, planning, self-monitoring, evaluating (Dauite, 1989, p. 14).

For Gallas and Dauite, who share an aversion to "scripted pedagogical practices" (Gallas, 2001, p. 487), playful, transformative classroom interactions offer children the freedom to explore possibilities. Their view of literacy, which I share, is, like Langer's (1987), multidimensional. It eclipses modernist constructs that focus narrowly on practical issues, reading and writing in particular, moving toward an understanding of "how people think, and learn and change" using oral and written texts (pp. 1-4). For Langer and

others, literacy is “embedded in a cultural way of thinking and learning” (p. 5). And, as Gee (2001) contends, like discourses, literacy is all about our “ways with words” (p. 30). This ideological approach firmly entrenches literacy in a culture’s socially constructed epistemological beliefs. It is dialogic, leading to “spiraling change that comes about when people ...think, rethink, and reformulate their knowledge and their worlds” (Langer, 1987, p. 3).

### **Dyson**

Dyson’s (2001, 1987) perspective on teaching and on literacy learning validates the spontaneous, the unstructured, and the unintentional events of everyday classroom life. She too is convinced that the playfulness of children’s spontaneous talk is a segue into world-making and integral to children’s culture. Dyson examines children’s talk from a sociocognitive and sociolinguistic perspective, problematizing educators’ preconceived notions of the value of children’s social discourse and challenging traditional dichotomized characterizations of classroom talk as either social *or* academic. Dyson (1987) analyzes the space between the social and the academic, focusing upon what children can and do accomplish through spontaneous interaction, the intellectual tasks they encounter “unintentionally”, yet work out socially, “and often playfully” (p. 401). She demonstrates how reflective thinking among peers is practised out loud early in children’s literacy experience through a “mix of learning and relationship” (p. 417).

Dyson (1987) claims that children’s laughter, banter, and chatter are “intellectually skillful” (p. 397) and should be considered “catalysts for intellectual growth” (p. 417). She takes issue with the reductionism that grips contemporary American schools and with the idea that children’s literacy learning is linear, that key literacy learning strategies can be found

only in the “orderly lists of literacy knowledge and know-how” of curriculum guidelines (2001, p. 10). Instead she argues for children’s agency, their childhood strengths, their ways of “stretching, reconfiguring and re-articulating their resources” (p. 11). These ways, she suggests, are evident in children’s playful recontextualizations, the social languages of children that many educators consider unruly (p. 11). These languages are, Dyson argues, embedded within the unofficial, non-academic, social world of shared childhood, and are fundamental to furthering literacy development.

The keys to understanding literacy learning that Dyson (2001) cites are, I suggest, also crucial to understanding children’s social language: knowing what children do within a communicative space, knowing how they exercise agency, and knowing what they see as relevant (p. 35). Dyson bases her findings upon interpretations of interactions and written texts during writers’ workshop in a primary classroom. She found no “straight...singular developmental path” (p. 25) of their literacy experience. Yet she did find evidence of the active appropriation of cultural material, collaboration, adaptation, and improvisation among the focal children. She likens literacy learning to a “(post)modern novel actualized through children’s play with, and organization of, their everyday textual stuff” (p. 35). Her attention to the Bakhtinian openendedness of children’s “wandering words” (p. 12), the adaptability and flexibility of the socio-cultural world of childhood, and the potential of playfulness to furthering literacy dovetails neatly with my research foci.

In more recent research Dyson (2003) investigates children’s appropriation of voice, devoting her attention specifically to the revoicing or recontextualization process. She examines how children’s unofficial (playful) lives intermingled with their participation in the official literacy practices of their first grade classroom. Dyson calls attention to children’s use of media



(writing, drawing, music, technologies): how it is intertextually linked to issues of family, friendship, pleasure, and power; how children's everyday activities involve myriad recontextualizations of media material; and how children's recontextualizations shape their entrance into the formal official literacy discourse of the classroom. Dyson claims that recontextualization helps children become "more skillful and more sociopolitically astute decision makers and communicators" (p. 330), that it helps them to become more literate.

Children's recontextualizations, their interpretive reproduction of culture, and their appropriation of voice are all unique pathways to literacy that have historically been under-reported and under-rated in academic circles: pathways that are considered outside the mainstream. Dyson's work stands among few who strive to uncover and to legitimize the "social and symbolic material" (p. 330) that children utilize to negotiate classroom literacy events. She roots much of children's literacy learning in their experience and understanding of, and their play with, elements of popular culture. The children she studied were, from a Bakhtinian perspective, purposefully re-accenting the voices of others (p. 331). These children took the "voice-filled landscape of their everyday lives" – the playful talk, songs, media material and rhymes of their shared culture – and made them their "textual toys" (pp. 331-332).

Dyson found much evidence of voice appropriation in the first grade classroom she studied. The children she encountered played with and manipulated the "textual and symbolic stuff" (p. 332) of their shared media experience. Because Dyson envisions literacy as involving the "choice of signs to render meaning" (p. 333) and "the deliberate manipulation of symbolic material within socially organized practices" (p. 332), the active, deliberate appropriation of others' voices places the students she studied

squarely on the path to literacy. These children took others' words, from others' contexts, and made them their own (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294).

Signs, Dyson (2003) rightly points out, are not created by individuals. They are selected and reaccentuated from those already in existence. We transform others' symbols and voices so that they make sense for us. Dyson contends that the recontextualization process teaches children about the "symbolic, social, and (the) ideological" (p. 333). What teachers may, at first glance, dismiss as mere play can, she suggests, "[entail] deliberate manipulation of layers of symbols". And this, she asserts, is "quite literate" (p. 333) behavior.

Texts, in the classroom Dyson studied, were not just written. They were spoken and drawn, sometimes incorporating sound effects and simulations, at times blending narrative and informative text, often multi-modal and hybridized (p. 354). She repeatedly utilized evidence of such texts to forward her belief that a "playful and productive stance toward the media" is a possible "pathway into school literacy" (p. 355). These rich, often unofficial social experiences can give children a sense of their membership in family and in community, a sense of their gender and race, a sense of themselves as children.

Being part of their own community, their shared culture, can result in the creation of folk genres, social languages or discursive practices that have real meaning for children yet are not sanctioned, nor understood by adults. Often what children consider relevant and what adults consider relevant differ. Dyson (1999) asserts that the invisibility of children's frames of reference, and in some cases the lack of a "familiar meaningful frame" (p. 150) results in the persistence of a pedagogical view that devalues their sense-making ability, a view that characterizes them as "decontextualized

children" who "make no official sense...", "unruly children" who "must be fixed" (p. 147).

## **Classroom Discourse**

### **Acquiring Classroom Discourse: Mercer**

For all children, their discursive, often unofficial relationships with peers has an impact upon the appropriation of new school and world discourses. The value of children's spontaneous social discourse is weighed in Mercer's (1996) investigation of the quality of young children's talk as they work together on classroom activities. His study, based on a constructivist framework, analyses children's talk as a social mode of thinking and as a critical tool for the construction of knowledge. He points to the seminal work of Barnes and Todd (1977), who maintain that "pupils are more likely to engage in open, extended discussion and argument when they are talking with peers outside the visible control of their teacher and that this kind of talk enables them to take a more active and independent ownership of knowledge" (p. 362). Citing his own research and that of others, Mercer contends, however, that educational ground rules are necessary for children to make effective use of collaborative talk time with peers. Once again, a caveat is placed upon children's ability to make sense without adult guidance and control.

From video-taped sequences of dialogue among pairs and small groups of 9 and 10 year olds, Mercer identifies three ways of talking that, he contends, are embryonic models of three "*distinctive social modes of thinking*": disputational, cumulative, and exploratory (p. 369). He argues that distinct ways of talking permit certain social ways of thinking, that certain social ways of thinking are specific to certain types of collaborative relationships, and, that collaborative relationships are fashioned by the way participants define situations. Mercer's contention that ways of talking are

specific to certain relationships is comparable to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of social languages and so melds with my research into young children's unofficial playful talk. However, Mercer asserts that there are no sound reasons to indicate that children understand the ground rules of talking and learning together in the classroom. And he argues that, even though research indicates that more collaborative talk occurs in contemporary classrooms than ever before, little direct instruction guides its practice. His contention that children must be explicitly taught educative ground rules to ensure *quality* classroom discourse speaks to an underlying assumption about the value of children's discourse, an assumption that maintains a perspective of children's spontaneous talk as inchoate. For Mercer the importance of a teacher's authoritative discourse is never in question. In keeping with his focus upon the educator's role in the construction of knowledge, he fails to examine points of contact between children's appropriation of educative classroom discourse and their talk without teacher guidance. For Mercer, spontaneous, unstructured talk among peers is not a valued part of children's apprenticeship into educative discourse.

Yet, Mercer does recognize that children "resist, subvert and renegotiate" (p. 375) ground rules even when they are provided. Unfortunately, he does little to address how resistance and subversion occur, a concern directly related to my investigation of the playful social talk of children in classrooms. Instead he determines that subversion and resistance are due to a lack of discourse-making skill that can be remedied by direct teacher instruction. I am not sure that I agree. Certain questions arise. Is there a single, predetermined way to engage in discourse, to construct knowledge? Do children require incessant covert and overt regulation to make sense of their world? Who benefits from children's

assimilation of authoritative, entrenched discourses? And should playful talk necessarily be equated with resistance?

### **Playfulness and Resistance in Classroom Discourse:**

#### **Grahame and Jardine**

Grahame and Jardine (1990), who challenge taken-for-granted conceptions of deviance and resistance, apply the terms 'play' and 'playfulness' to disruptive classroom behavior. Their use of these terms of reference speaks to a particular theoretical perspective: a 'children's culture' or 'childhood studies' approach. Children's culture studies examine the lives of children in their own right without utilizing the so-called normative adult world as the standard against which children's lives are measured (p. 84). To utilize the terms 'deviance' and 'resistance', Grahame and Jardine argue, is to assume a perspective of play in relation to adult norms of behavior, to see play as a means of imitating or preparing for adult life. Unlike a traditional rhetoric of progress, advocates of a children's culture approach present play more as a social construction, a phenomenon in its own right. Grahame and Jardine side with Huizinga (1955) whose early tome articulated the properties of play itself rather than regarding play as simply a subordinate, deviant form of adult activity. Huizinga's idea that players define themselves as separate, with an inherent sense of community, proves helpful as Grahame and Jardine endeavor to understand play as a vital part of children's culture (p. 287).

Grahame and Jardine base their analysis on selected teacher-student elicitation-response-feedback classroom interactions. They conclude that certain interactive sequences (asides) which *could* be interpreted as disruptive or deviant are, essentially, within the limits of the standard ERF structure. What they seem most interested in is the particular nature of the asides themselves, which they determine to be 'playful' (pp. 297-298).

Grahame and Jardine interpret the playful asides as practices that students employ to stretch the possibilities of the lessons. They examine how the asides become border-crossing mechanisms, “hinging the official and unofficial streams of talk in the classroom” (p. 298).

Grahame and Jardine’s characterization of students’ playful talk is reminiscent of Gee’s borderland discourse and the hybridization to which both Gee and Bakhtin refer. The asides they witnessed are described as fluid, indeterminate, uncertain, and open-ended. The authors propose that the asides add an element of equilibrium to the classroom interaction, that their play-like quality infuses the classroom with a sense of mutuality and that their presence moves the locus of control from a vertical to a horizontal axis. Grahame and Jardine see the playfulness of the asides as providing students with some kind of ‘time out’ from the adult controlled world that the ERF structure assumes (p. 299). Bakhtin might see the asides as carnivalesque; their occurrence suspends the hierarchical classroom structure and mediates the distance between teachers from their students.

Grahame and Jardine acknowledge elements of resistance in the interchanges. They interpret the asides as resistance to the serious attention the teacher pays to the subject matter, as opportunities to probe lessons for their comic value. Playfulness functioned in this particular classroom to intensify interaction and to relieve the literalness common to traditional ERF exchanges, a way to pursue creativity. Nevertheless their playfulness kept the students engaged with the organization of the lesson (p. 300).

Regarding this final function, Grahame and Jardine make an intriguing suggestion: the students’ enjoyment of the asides was partly due to their continued immersion in the ERF sequence. The play-like sequences were an “interweaving of realities” (p. 301) not an abandonment of one for another: a hybridization of sorts.

Although Grahame and Jardine did not see students' playfulness as resistance to schooling per se, they did see it as a resistance of sorts: resistance to the knowledge presented. The authors differentiated the playful activities as having a distinctive organization, either knowledge-constitutive or knowledge-avoidance practices. They propose that educators would benefit from considering episodes of playfulness or resistance in classrooms as "distinctively structured forms of response to specific practices of knowledge production" (p. 301). As thought-provoking as this study seems to be, it is still an investigation of adult-student interaction that is embedded in the formal, official discourse of school.

### **The Role of the Spectator: Britton**

It is possible that the playfulness Grahame and Jardine witnessed is an example of what Britton (1993) identified as talk in the role of "spectator" (p. 111). The playful interchanges Grahame and Jardine studied brought the impact of classroom experiences to the children's and the teacher's attention. In the spectator role, children fuse old and new experiences in an attempt to make sense.

The new experiences are interpreted, structured in the light of the old, and in that modified form incorporated: the body of experience, the world representations, is modified, re-interpreted, in the light of the new, and the comparative unity and coherence as far as possible maintained. (p. 117)

For Britton, playing with language and concepts, turning things around, upside down and inside out, strengthens a child's understanding of normative meanings; in some way it defines what "the child has learned about actuality" (p. 87).

Play is a response to the world and its discourses. Britton likens play to poetry: both provide an opportunity to come to terms with significant "social

aspects of experience"; they arise when "something needs to be said", when challenging life events tug at us, when we feel a need to respond to, "contemplate and ...savour" ideas (pp. 120-121). In make believe play, children take control of their environment, continually "refashioning (a)... representation of the world" (Britton, p. 89), and conceivably, offering a critical response to it.

### **Playfulness in Classroom Discourse: Power**

"Play", Power (1992) writes, "reveals much about the players". It is, she contends, an opportunity to "test boundaries and take risks, to test out what we know" (p. 70). Her comments are fundamental to the essence of my research. How does listening to children's social talk help us to know more about them: how they think, how they make sense, and how they become literate critical thinkers. Power proposes that play may be educators' principal tool for analyzing literacy. And she suggests that children's use of literacy in play can reveal much about how they understand it, how they define a literate culture, and how they see the power structures inherent within that culture (pp. 70-71).

Power's findings are based upon a two-year study of a grade four classroom, particularly the students' involvement in an imaginary detective agency. The agency was created in an effort to solve an apparent mystery, the curious destruction of a student's eraser. The teacher's holistic literacy practices, her use of literature circles, writers' workshop, and group conferences encouraged formal and informal interaction among students. Although certain literacy components were evident in the children's detective club play (making badges, recording information), their preoccupation with the agency evolved into illicit, surreptitious social interaction that threatened the teacher's curricular agenda. The students' fascination with the imaginary detective club prevented them from working productively in class.



Accordingly, to alter the focus of their play from the oral to the written, the teacher directed her students to write about the club. The message was clear. Written play, children's imaginative texts, was sanctioned and valued. Playful talk was unsanctioned and not valued. Because detective play was at odds with authorized classroom literacy events, the students moved their play underground. Tensions arose because of the bifurcation of sanctioned and unsanctioned activity, children were disciplined, and issues of power emerged between both the children and their teacher and among the children themselves.

For Power, the children's detective club play provided a microcosmic glimpse into how they perceived the larger culture in which they lived, what they had learned about reality. Issues of fairness and equality, power and hierarchy, the implications of breaking rules, all were part of their playful in-class and playground interaction. The teacher was forced to walk a fine line between valuing the interests, voices, and social norms of her students' culture and promoting what she saw as positive social behaviors and values (p. 83). Both the teacher and the researcher's adult-centric views of play were challenged.

The existence of the students' underground curriculum points to the inherent importance of their culture and discourse, and the tensions that are worked out playfully as children interact. Although access to children's underlife is not easily achieved, Power's study draws attention to the extraordinary opportunity afforded to careful qualitative researchers who examine the implications of unsanctioned classroom interaction.

In spite of Grahame and Jardine's findings, and notwithstanding Britton's and Power's insistence that play and playful language help to reconcile children's understanding of normative meanings, everyday life in schools and extant education research remain rooted in a technical rational

model that has done little to generate the study of border-crossing, resistance, and playfulness. The meaning of children's spontaneous social discourse in class may be undergoing an academic reconceptualization of sorts, however. The work of Jardine and Grahame, Dyson, Gallas, and others indicates a subtle shift in perspectives on children's social language at school. Issues raised by their studies fit neatly with my own, particularly those that call into question certain limiting conceptions of the play phenomenon itself.

### **Vygotsky and Play**

In *Mind and Society* Vygotsky (1978) presents a reasonable starting point to investigate play and playfulness. He discounts those who regard pleasure as the defining characteristic of play. Play is created, Vygotsky contends, not solely for pleasure, but in response to children's need to manage situations that are otherwise beyond their control. When children encounter "unrealizable tendencies" (p. 93), they invent imaginary, illusionary worlds where the unrealizable *can* be realized. This problem-centredness is, for Vygotsky, the genesis of play. It implies a challenge, a tension of sorts. And so, another question is raised: Can the tension of competing discourses within children's school and life experience affect the evolution of play as a strategy for controlling or making sense of other alien, authoritative discourses?

The heteroglossic nature of language presents children with yet another source of tension. Daily, young children encounter new words, new texts, and new discourses that they must reconcile with past experience. When matches do not immediately occur, when children fail to make these new words into their "private property" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-294), incongruities arise. Incongruity in experience can pose problems, *and/or* it can present an opportunity for laughter – an "invitation to play" (Britton,

1993, p. 85). Playful talk is a powerful tool children utilize to “drive a wedge between words and things: to encourage openness to alternative formulations of experience”. Play “*envisages something over and above the obvious*” (p. 86, italics in original).

For Vygotsky, the defining characteristic of play is the creation of imaginary situations in which rules prevail (p. 93). Whatever a child imagines herself to be, she must follow the rules of behavior for that entity. As a game player a child follows overt rules, while in pretend play, the rules are implicit. As a child reaches school age, motives, incentives and inclinations change and game-playing behavior takes centre stage. A continuum of sorts seems to develop: “the development from games with an overt imaginary situation and covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation outlines the evolution of children’s play” (p. 96).

Vygotsky sees the evolution of play behavior as pivotal to a child’s intellectual development. In play, situational constraints evaporate and a child “begins to act independently of what he sees” (p. 97). And so, the meaning of a situation becomes of utmost importance, rather than what is seen or experienced. Play becomes a tool; it becomes a means for severing the meaning of something from the thing itself. As children begin to manipulate meanings, they move to an intellectually higher plane, capable of abstract thought (p. 101). Play is seen by Vygotsky as a transition state; “a stage between the purely situational constraints of early childhood and adult thought, which can be totally free of real situations” (p. 98).

Because their actions are guided by meaning, not situational constraints, children act in play within a type of self-constructed zone of proximal development, as if they were older. As play evolves from “memory in action”, its earliest form (p. 103), to game playing, children become more intent upon the purpose of play. At the end of play development, Vygotsky

claims, game playing dominates. Rules, which had been covert and secondary, now become central. As rules develop in play the differentiation between work and play is possible. This, he claims, is what happens at school. For school-aged children, play “does not die away but permeates the attitude toward reality” (p. 104). Vygotsky sees work at school as compulsory activity based on rules. The connection, he suggests, has a profound impact upon how students envision play and work at school. When and how does a separation of work and play become clear to the child? Or does it? My research has been fueled by a sense that during the early years of schooling, children cross the border between play and work repeatedly and seamlessly and that differences between the discourses of play and work may not be so easily determined.

That Vygotsky concludes his thoughts on play by raising the issue of the work/play dichotomy is germane to my search of the literature. Although it is true that educators acknowledge the benefits of play and playfulness to the early childhood experience, in practice, only in Kindergarten does play get a fair shake. In many jurisdictions Kindergarten students are provided with opportunities to participate in dramatic and role play and imaginative talk to facilitate growth in oral language skills (Saskatchewan Education, 2002, pp. 23, 26). Nevertheless, once children move into grades one and two, other curricular demands outweigh the perceived need for or value of play. Not playing or work, for lack of a better word, dominates. What happens to children’s play culture once they become immersed in the official work culture of school? Does play continue to exist in class whether it is sanctioned or not?

### **Children’s Perceptions of Play at School**

King (1987) examined the results of three studies in which elementary school children from Kindergarten through grade five defined and discussed

work and play at school. She explored play through the words of focal children, then utilized the categories that emerged from the children's play and work definitions to examine educational research relevant to each category. She also investigated how educators and the academy utilized information gleaned from research about play in school. King positioned herself as an outsider to the world of children's play, using non-participant observation and interviewing techniques to come to an understanding of insider (children's) knowledge of play. Her decision to interview students, to seek their definitions of play, adds a dimension to her understanding that observation and interpretation alone could not address.

King's findings suggest a bifurcation of work and play most obvious at the Kindergarten level. However, she does draw attention to one study that examines play from the perspective of older children. And, it is from this perspective that the children's definitions of play become less clear. The older the children, the more diverse the number of activities that are designated as play, and the narrower the work category becomes. Older children characterized work as "required, evaluated, and difficult or tedious" and play simply as "fun and/or undemanding" (p. 145).

Through close examination of the interview data, King established three categories of play found in elementary school: instrumental, illicit, and recreational. Instrumental play is sanctioned play that teachers either program or allow. It is, by far, the most well researched type of play. Illicit play is unsanctioned and, as Power's (1992) research indicates, is predominantly oral (pp. 75-76). Illicit play is often characterized as aberrant and dysfunctional, play that teachers make regular efforts to control and/or quell. It is not surprising, then, that it *is* less studied. Teachers who see playful talk in class as counterproductive make obvious efforts to quash it. Accordingly, evidence of this kind of talk may be difficult to uncover. Even

so, King submits that illicit play provides a point of social contact for children whereby a community is formed that excludes the teacher. She suggests, and Dyson would presumably agree, that observation of illicit play can reveal something of the social world of children.

Illicit play offers children a sense of autonomy and control over their classroom experience, a chance to comment on the imposition of adult norms and the relevance of the classroom agenda: a carnival of sorts (Bakhtin, 1984). Or, perhaps illicit, playful talk is a hybrid, an opportunity to express metaknowledge and insight into the dominant school discourse, comparable to Gee's (1992) borderland or mushfake discourse.

King proposes that, at school, children initiate and control recreational play. She separates this category from illicit play essentially as a function of place; recreational play is playground activity. What King fails to address is the underlying issues of power, control, and governance that determine even recreational play. Despite the fact that recreational play events may be orchestrated by children *as they transpire*, play is, nonetheless, regulated, supervised, and scheduled by adults. At school, play occurs always within adults' purview. King concludes that focus in the academy upon teacher-controlled, sanctioned play brackets the experience of children and their social world. And I concur. By narrowly defining, regulating, and determining the play that is studied, educators are left with an incomplete understanding of its role in children's culture.

Research that deals with illicit play in class comprises only a small portion of the literature cited by King. Admittedly her article is dated. Nevertheless, subsequent research that focuses upon play at school is dominated by literature devoted to sanctioned play – play controlled, either directly or indirectly, by teachers – the kind of play King has labeled instrumental or recreational. King raises a concern which I share: that

documentation of child-initiated play and play-like activity *in* classrooms is under-represented in the play literature. And, once again, her research raises issues around the taken-for-granted determination that children's playful talk in school is aberrant and dysfunctional. Such notions insinuate themselves into the language educators, and adults in general, use to describe children's behavior. Educational discourses maintain the authoritative power of adults over children and, by their tenor, invalidate and devalue children's ways of knowing. The boundaries of childhood are perseverated through controlled forms of socialization that sustain a certain mind-set whereby inequality is regarded as normative. The powerful maintain status, and commonsense rules that hegemonize this differentiated power structure are affirmed.

In keeping with a political view of schooling, King, this time with Apple (1990), suggests that differential distribution of knowledge and "ideological saturation" (p. 43) begins in earnest in Kindergarten. They argue that the way educational knowledge (for Gee, perhaps, educational discourse) or cultural capital – "certain traditions and normative content" (p. 45) – is portioned, and its characterization as legitimate, is a complex issue. As such, King and Apple contend, its study should more appropriately be considered an examination of ideology. School knowledge, even the discourse our youngest students encounter, must be seen as problematic. In doing so, careful, critical examination of social and economic ideologies and the institutionally patterned meanings that stand behind them are possible (p. 45).

By directing attention to the source of school knowledge Apple and King raise a key question: Whose meanings do schools uphold, both overtly and covertly? Their take on this question goes directly to the discourse issues raised by Gee.

If we define 'politics' as *relationships and interactions among people where power and status are at stake*, then practices within and across Discourses are always and everywhere *political*. If we define "ideology" as *beliefs about the appropriate distribution of social goods, such as power, prestige, status, distinction, or wealth*, then Discourses are always and everywhere *ideological*. Each Discourse necessitates that members, at least while they are playing roles within the Discourse, act as if they hold particular beliefs and values about what counts as the 'right sort' of person and the "right" way to be in the world. (Gee, italics in original, 1992, pp. 141-142)

Apple and King offer empirical evidence that, even in a Kindergarten classroom, these discourses are pervasive, powerful, and enduring.

In fact, Apple and King submit that Kindergarten students are perfectly suited to a study of educational discourse precisely because they are at such an early yet crucial moment in their school experience. In Kindergarten children learn the roles, rules, norms, and values necessary to function successfully as students. The children targeted in their study were, to borrow Gee's term, "acquiring the discourse" of school. Granted, as Apple and King suggest, Kindergarten is formative to the child's perceptions of schooling, crucial to the development of the student persona. However, Kindergarten children are exposed to school discourse in an atmosphere and within a daily routine quite unlike that of their older counterparts, an environment where playful social language is still encouraged. Closely examining grade one students' social language adds significantly to our understanding of how children cope with opposing discourses. First graders face very different expectations of classroom behaviour; play and playfulness are no longer sanctioned curricular activities.



Apple and King point to the importance of examining ideology and curriculum as “deep structures” (p. 51), commonsense everyday practices of teachers and students in classrooms. (Bruner might call these cultural models.) They focus attention upon certain elements of school discourse – the work/play, school knowledge/personal knowledge and normalcy/deviance dichotomies – that are instituted early in the school year. In the Kindergarten classroom they studied, the teacher clearly saw the establishment of certain socialized classroom behaviours as her primary goal – sharing, listening, putting things away, and following routines (p. 53). The students were powerless to effect any change in daily classroom activity, and were restricted in their ability to freely utilize classroom materials. Daily interactions underscored the necessity for restraint, submission, and conformity.

The teacher in the Apple and King study was, undoubtedly, in control. The children deferred to her. Of crucial importance was how the teacher defined the use of classroom materials and, in doing so, defined their meanings for the children. This fits neatly with Gee’s (1992) way of thinking about discourse as social practice. Meanings, like those attached to the things, routines, and activities in the Kindergarten classroom, do not reside in our heads. They are, instead, “the names of socio-mental practices that extend beyond the skin to include the world and society” (p. 1). The power to name the world lies with the elite. For children, the world of the elite is the world of adults. Lensmire (1994a) advocates for children, as hooks has for women, that “coming to voice” requires that subalterns take an active part in “naming and renaming the world and their places in it” (hooks, 1989, cited in Lensmire, p. 5).

For the children Apple and King studied, agency emerged as a powerful determiner in naming their daily school experience. Results of their

interviews were surprisingly similar. After only two weeks of school, the children had learned to dichotomize classroom activity and to categorize classroom materials according to their perceived use: "things to work with and things to play with" (p. 54). The materials characterized as work materials were consistently those used "at the direction of the teacher". All work was compulsory. The materials the children chose to use during free time were classified as "play materials or toys" (p. 55). Interestingly, the children distinguished between work and play solely on the basis of freedom to choose. They differentiated between work and play contextually. If you are not free to create the experience yourself, then it was considered to be work. Their words curiously echo Dewey (1933) who commented:

Under the title of 'play' the former is rendered unduly symbolic, fanciful, sentimental, and arbitrary; while under the antithetical caption of 'work' the latter contains many *tasks externally assigned*. The former has no end; the latter an end so remote that only the educator, not the child, is aware that it is an end.  
(p. 213, italics in original)

According to the children Apple and King interviewed, Dewey was right. If the architect of an experience is external, then the activity is work. Although not explicitly stated, Apple and King's findings raise crucial questions about the role of play in classrooms and about children's agency, power, and voice. These are the very issues my study of children's social discourse in class addresses.

As interesting as the children's opinions were, Apple and King concentrated their attention upon the connection between the work ethic evident in the classroom and the "experience of being a worker" (p. 57) in the larger society. Their political economy perspective links Kindergarten and life experience; diligence, perseverance, obedience and participation lead to

reward. The Kindergarteners' absolute acceptance of authority and the institutionalizing of their lives were, the authors argue, their first school lessons. Presumably, Gee would argue that these children's experiences present evidence of their enculturation into the dominant discourse of school.

### **Classroom Underlife**

Although, as King and Apple rightly determine, the teacher ultimately controls opportunities for play in Kindergarten, they do still exist. What happens when play no longer is a sanctioned activity, when children cannot legitimately play in the classroom and when play is restricted to recess and to the gym? Does play still exist in classrooms? If so, what does it look like and sound like? Does play become part of what Erickson and Shultz (1992) refer to as the "classroom underlife"? Does it exist "underground" (Power, 1992), outside the "spotlight of teacher attention" (Erickson and Shultz, 1992, p. 470)? And, what purpose does play serve within children's unique culture?

Underlife is an "essential part of children's group identity" which becomes visible as they engage in "secondary adjustments", ways to circumvent rules and regulations that adults impose upon them (Corsaro, 1997, p. 133). Conceivably, in classrooms an underlife can exist as an "innovative and collective response(s)" (p. 134) to the official discourse of the classroom, and arguably, of the larger culture. It is possible that, through naming playful behaviors, all young children, not only those Apple and King (1990) observed, share a "communal spirit" (p. 134), a common perspective, a sense of membership in a common culture, a sense of "people like us" (Gee, 1992). Similarly Sutton-Smith (1997) suggests that children organize their culture strategically, enabling play to exist autonomously, severed from the adult world (p. 114). Raising doubts about certain

commonly accepted theories of play, he is skeptical of attendant rhetorics of progress, taken-for-granted assumptions that play and development are analogous.

### **Sutton-Smith and the Rhetorics of Play**

Of particular interest to this research is Sutton-Smith's (1997) discussion of the rhetorics of child power and identity, their connection with notions of progress and development and their application to children's play. Commonsense, taken-for-granted, developmental and progressive views continue to define play from an adult perspective, and in doing so, ultimately succeed in maintaining adult power over children. Sutton-Smith laments that, as yet, little attention has been paid to the power rhetoric of children's play where they can address issues of hegemony and hierarchy in their own right. My dissertation examines unofficial classroom spaces where, through their playful discourse, children achieve some semblance of autonomy from and critical perspective of the authoritative discourses of adults.

Children's culture theorists, who set the lives of children apart and view them as a social stratum of Western society, recognize that it is the "public transcript of adults", the "rhetoric of progress", that maintains and justifies children's subordination (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 116). Scott (1990) dissects how subordinates deal with those in power in public and private ways. He suggests that the powerless create a "hidden transcript", a power critique, "spoken behind the back of the dominant" (pp. 4-5). This hidden transcript, a covert discourse of sorts, is obscured by virtue of its innocuousness. Sutton-Smith aligns his perspective with that of Scott, asserting that the hidden transcript of children's culture can be revealed by examining their play: their songs, texts, rituals. Hidden transcripts of childhood "press[es] against and test the limits of what may be safely ventured in terms of a reply to the public transcript of deference and

conformity" (Scott, 1990, pp. 157-158). Both Scott and Sutton-Smith suggest that children's play can be regarded as an insidious attempt to ward off the dominant adult culture. Certain institutions, schools, camps, sports teams, are presented to and encountered by children as bastions of adult power; places where children's culture is forced underground; places where covert discourse, often enacted out of the earshot of adults, becomes a way to exert power and resistance (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 118).

Children's powerlessness can become solidaric. It can result in both covert and overt articulation of resistance that Grahame and Jardine (1990), among others, claim can be manifested in play and playfulness. Children's hidden transcripts become audible in play. Play becomes a discourse, of sorts, as Gee would have it, a social practice that has, to a great extent, been ignored. The economic, social, cognitive and affective disconnect between childhood and adulthood results in a colonizing effect that undervalues children's discourse. Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that children seek their own play culture to implicitly, if not explicitly, resist adult power (p. 125). It is a reading of children's texts that warrants a response. Is children's play a discourse of freedom, agency, equality, license, and spontaneity? Sutton-Smith urges future scholars to look as closely and with as much interest, enthusiasm, and vigor at the power rhetorics of childhood as they have invested in the progress rhetorics that have dominated the study of play to date.

Sutton-Smith (1997) also examines the rhetoric of the imagination, proponents of which represent play as a type of transformation. He refers to Bakhtin's characterization of plays, carnivals, and festivals as opportunities for commentary on domination, as "the seedbed of revolution" (Sutton-Smith, p. 140), thus linking carnival to issues of power and resistance in children's culture. Sutton-Smith seems to suggest that, as readers and

hearers of children's texts, researchers should be open to alternative understandings of their words and actions. The hidden discourse of childhood is comparable to the unofficial side of speech that pervades Bakhtin's (1981) carnival: it is a commentary on disempowered lives, rife with "specific points of view on the world, a specific selection of realities, a specific system of language that differed sharply from the official side" (p. 238).

Invoking Bakhtin lends support to research dedicated to new interpretations of children's social, often playful talk. And Bakhtin's insistence on the multilayeredness of meaning and its constant reinterpretability supports post-modern researchers who, themselves, seek to examine children's discourse in a playful, more imaginative manner. A postmodern viewpoint affords the contemporary researcher the luxury of expressing dissatisfaction with earlier ways of conceptualizing knowledge. This is a perspective which, like Sutton-Smith's (1997) characterization of playfulness, is "disruptive of settled expectations" (p. 148).

That children play is a given, acknowledged regardless of a formal definition per se. Yet what children are doing when they are playing is open to debate. Sutton-Smith (1997) suggests that play can be understood as childhood's autonomous response to reality, a deconstruction of everyday life, perhaps. If the world is seen as a text, as he argues, then children's play becomes their response to that text.

Yet fewer and fewer opportunities for the development of children's imaginative play culture present themselves in contemporary life in general and in school in particular. Children's ways of doing things are usurped by adults who, for the most part, control their lives. Sutton-Smith (1997), like many children's culture advocates, implies that adult hegemony, by controlling the time, place, and means of children's play, prevents them

from becoming "autonomous and cooperative social beings" (p. 168). Relegated to recess times, gym times, or the confines of a Kindergarten program, children's play culture is ephemeral, dependent to a certain extent, upon the dictates of the adult-controlled socialization process. Sutton-Smith suggests that prematurely regulating and organizing children's play into sports is evidence of a particular attitude adults hold toward the possibilities of an imaginative play culture. It is, he concludes, an issue of power and control. "Play as progress is an ideology for the conquest of children's behavior, through organizing their play" (p. 205).

The imaginative and the phantasmagoric rhetorics of play Sutton-Smith (1997) describes relate not only to the culture of childhood, but also to rhetorics of self. Rhetorics of self characterize play as an individual, rather than as a collective "state of mind, a way of seeing and being" (p. 174). Defined in this way, play, presented as playfulness, can take a hermeneutic or phenomenological turn, relating more to peak personal experience perhaps than to observable interaction.

## **Conclusion**

Coincidentally, the imaginative rhetoric of play speaks to my possible stance as researcher, my approach and response to data collection and interpretation. A playful perspective precludes a conventional viewpoint, opens qualitative texts to personal aesthetic response, a response that "pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that ... words and their referents arouse" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). Rosenblatt's unique way of looking at literature proposed that making meaning from text involves an event, she called it a transaction, between the text and the reader. She considered readers to be active participants in the making, rather than the discovering, of meaning. And, she proposed that a reader's processes of engagement and involvement with text culminate in the creation of a

"poem". The poem, an "event in time", is a process, a "coming together, a compenetration" (p. 12) that occurs as an individual's personality, memory, needs, preoccupations, moods, and physical condition are brought to a work of literature. For Rosenblatt, as for Bakhtin, meaning resides not in signs – the letters on the page or words in our mouths – but in their interactive, contingent responsivity.

The words of the experts serve us well. They provide benchmarks, places to begin an empirical journey. They provide terms of reference, ways of framing what we learn to fit the audience we seek. As fascinating and thought-provoking as they may be, they tell only part of the story. My research is about aspects of children's social language that lie outside the realm of mainstream accounts. My aim is to focus upon children's unique ways of knowing, to demonstrate how six and seven year olds can engage as respondents and, to the greatest extent possible, as co-researchers in educational inquiry.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCHING WITH CHILDREN: METHODOLOGICAL MATTERS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is devoted to my research journey: its focus, to explicate for the reader my choice of methodology, to clarify my point of view as researcher, to describe the research site, to document the study's implementation, and to convey some sense of my early struggles with the recursivity of interpretation . It is my intention that this chapter will set the tone for those that follow and that it will locate this study firmly within the relatively new, liberatory, reconceptualized subfield of early childhood educational discourse.

What we say and write about educational research today is vastly different from what was said or written forty years ago. Yet, for those of us who were schooled during the modernist era, the yesterdays of our school experience have had an enduring effect. For much of the twentieth century the field of educational inquiry was relatively unified; reliable research paradigms promised conclusive answers to pressing educational questions. And pedagogical knowledge was something that could be discovered and, ultimately, proven (Hinchey, 2001, p. 40). The thinking was that certain cultural beliefs about schooling, about the mind and how it works, and about the developmental stages of childhood could all be uncovered, explained, predicted, and scientifically verified. Psychology, Egan (2002) cleverly points out, overtook education and speculative theories were replaced with a belief in the efficacy of modern empirical science and positivism (p. 163). With the knowledge educators gleaned from scientific research they could,

conceivably, chart a course for sound curriculum development and educational practice.

### **Qualitative Research with Children**

Today, the quantitative researcher's conviction that knowledge is secure, that it can be measured, categorized, and classified, shares centre stage with the qualitative researcher's focus upon understanding the complexities of lived experience. Legions of researchers no longer liken the mind to a "computational device" (Bruner, 1996, p. 1). Like Bruner they see the mind as both "constituted by and realized in the use of human culture" (p. 1). Culturists focus upon how meaning making "involves situating encounters ... in their appropriate cultural contexts in order to know 'what they are about'" (p. 3). Meaning has its genesis within cultural social interaction and, as such, it is contextual and "fraught with ambiguity" (p. 6). The qualitative approach to inquiry offers an alternative to the educational researcher, an alternative that focuses upon making sense of human phenomena.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible .... They turn the world into a series of representations. ... At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3)

The people involved in this particular inquiry are young children, six and seven year old first graders, four boys and eight girls. And so, the meanings it seeks to uncover are kids' meanings. It is an investigation of children's

knowledge-making in situ; its purpose is to make sense of their unofficial playful, social language, to determine, in some small measure, its significance and its role in our culture.

This study calls for a reconsideration of the epistemological presumptions about young children that have historically guided their participation in human inquiry. It is an investigation of children's discourse that is nested in certain separate yet not exclusive research paradigms. It reflects a social-constructivist interpretive framework in that it assumes the co-creation of meaning; it is reflective of a critical perspective in its concern with emancipation (issues of power and authority), and yet, it is postmodernist in its recognition of the relativity and temporality of particularized meaning and its focus upon play (Doll, 1993). Postmodern research forgoes generalizations, patterns, and established, preconceived notions in favor of thick, rich description and interpretations that bracket privilege and acknowledge the contingencies, heteroglossia, and dialogicity of language (Vidich & Lyman, 2000) (Bakhtin, 1986, 1981).

### **The Ethnographic Perspective**

Designed to better understand children's social language and, particularly, the role of playful language within their culture, this study borrows many strategies from the ethnographic tradition. The use of ethnography in education is grounded in anthropology's effort to understand other cultures by turning others into the "object of the ethnographer's gaze" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2). Contemporary postmodernists have exposed the traditional ethnographer's gaze to criticism, characterizing it as being "filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (p. 19). And rightfully so. Ethnography is no longer considered, nor does it strive to be, objective. Rather it is socially situated in and between the observer and the observed (p. 19).

Still, utilizing traditional ethnographic techniques with children is not without challenges. Ethnographers cannot be separated from what they write or experience. For Bakhtin (1986), the dialogicity of a researcher's experience is clear.

The observer has no position outside the observed world, and his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed object.

This pertains fully to entire utterances and relations among them. They cannot be understood from outside. Understanding itself enters as a dialogic element in the dialogic system and somehow changes its total sense. (p. 126)

Regrettably, the scholar's voice and place *in* research is doubly difficult when the research participants are children. Even those who see children as capable social actors remain deeply entrenched in asymmetrical hierarchical cultures that cannot help but inform their practice. Adult-centric views of children are pervasive. Childhood continues to be seen as a position of deficit. And, children's experiences, no matter how thickly described or meticulously interpreted, remain nested in the words of others, the words of adult researchers.

Acknowledging children's rightful place as subjects rather than objects of a researcher's gaze is long overdue. Efforts to maintain a subject-centred perspective towards research are constantly evolving. Regarding the study of childhood, a paradigm shift of sorts is occurring in the social sciences in general and in educational research in particular. Conceptual frameworks that influence children's representation in education discourse are being revisited. Ethics review boards are increasingly heedful of their mandate: to advance the human condition and to attend to how the active involvement of subjects is nurtured in the research process (Canadian Institutes of Health

Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2005).

Firmly entrenched in adult assumptions and adult interests, educational research has typically been conducted *on* rather than *with* children. Adherents to the 'new social studies of childhood' emphasize that the advancement of the human condition *must* involve children to ensure that they too experience the benefits that carefully planned, sensitive research promises. Scholars in the field maintain that traditional adult/child distinctions should no longer be taken for granted. And, their call for advocacy (Christensen & James, 2003), which recognizes children's active roles in the social, political, cultural, and economic structures of society, repositions them as subjects of research in an effort to make them visible, to make their voices heard, to ensure that children matter.

The postmodernist's struggle is with the disposition of traditional ethnographic research: its focus upon uncovering typical experiences or patterned behaviors of selected groups under scrutiny. Social groups should not be characterized as consistent, coherent, or uniformly meaningful. Searching only for consistencies, Eisenhart (2001) suggests, can lead educational ethnographers "to overlook or ignore contested, ambiguous or inconsistent data" (p. 23).

The ethnographer's challenge, to make the familiar strange, is especially burdensome for educational researchers who have not only a professional but a personal interest in education. For those who are educators and researchers, perhaps more so than for others, familiar prosaic school events have a tendency to recede. Educational researchers have been in schools most of their lives. Even so, their task as ethnographers is to *foreground* the familiar, to examine it as if it is happening on another planet (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 115).

To study children and to learn from their discursive interaction as if seeing and hearing them for the first time has challenged me to rethink what I *think* I know about them. This kind of perceptivity is not easily accomplished when our research participants are familiar, our own or other people's children, and when our adult-centric views of them are so firmly entrenched. To create a truly inclusive and participatory child-centred methodology, a methodology that places children's voices at the core of the research process, requires that we bracket the discourse of education to which we have become accustomed. A discourse that consistently places children in the position of the other labels their ways of knowing as primitive or inferior.

Within the qualitative educational research community ethnographic techniques have been identified as those that hold the most promise for suspending the assumption of adult authority.

It is the use of ethnography as a research methodology that has enabled children to be recognized as people who can be studied in their own right within the social sciences...has enabled children to become seen as research participants... and made possible a view of children as competent interpreters of their social worlds... has steered researchers to doing work with rather than on children. (James, 2001, p. 246 cited in Maguire, 2004, *n. pag.*)

Even so, simply characterizing this project as ethnographic will not suffice. It is more than that.

### **Ethnomethodological Threads**

I designed my research to examine children's social language, their everyday discursive interactions without adult direction. Its mandate is to draw attention to the commonplace, the things we know about children's

talk, but may overlook. In that sense it adopts an ethnomethodological perspective.

Procedurally ethnomethodological research is keenly attuned to naturally occurring talk and social interaction, orienting to them as constitutive elements of the settings studied....Such studies consider the situated content of talk in relation to local meaning making .... They combine attention to how social order is built up in everyday communication with detailed descriptions of place settings as those settings and their local understandings and perspectives mediate the meaning of what is said in the course of social interaction. The texts produced from such studies are highly descriptive of everyday life, with both conversational extracts from the settings and ethnographic accounts of interaction.... (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 492)

Although many ethnomethodologists use conversational analysis to examine talk, my research focuses upon discourse in action. As such, it is not concerned with chronicling talk structures as in conversation analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, pp. 493-497). Rather, it is concerned with *how* children's unofficial discourse in the classroom unfolds and what it means. Every attempt has been made to enable readers to envisage the children's social practice, the centripetal and centrifugal interplay of languages and genres – the heteroglot, dialogic space – that daily inhabits their life worlds.

This project was undertaken to explore the discursive social lives of children in a grade one classroom. Its focus is upon children's opinions, their insights, their discursive interactions, what goes on, between and among them, and how, in interaction with each other, they respond to and make sense of the world. The study was initially driven by two key questions. What is the significance of young children's social language in class? And, second,

what is the role of play or playfulness *within* children's social language in that context, and *within* their culture?

### **The Setting: Prairieview Elementary**

The field research, analysis, and data outlined in this document are drawn from a 2006 study of the in-class social interaction of, and interviews with, twelve young children who attend an urban Canadian elementary school. Eight girls and four boys in the grade one class at Prairieview Elementary School agreed to participate in the study. All are Caucasian children whose first language is English. All, except one, live with two parents in single family dwellings. Nine of the participants attended Prairieview School during their Kindergarten year and knew each other well. Three children were new to the school; they had transferred in at the beginning of the 2005 - 2006 school year.

Prairieview Elementary is a school like many others of its vintage. Located in a mid-sized city, the school opened in the 1960s to accommodate the burgeoning number of children whose middle-class families had settled in the suburbs. Towering evergreen, elm, and birch trees line the well-manicured streets and crescents of the surrounding, now mature, neighborhood. The school, playground, and adjoining park occupy a space equivalent to more than two city blocks. The expansive green space behind the school reaches well beyond the playground and is bordered to the north and west by the backyards of the trim bungalows, split-levels, and two storey homes that line the adjacent streets.

The majority of students who attend Prairieview Elementary still come from middle class, mainstream backgrounds. Yet the student population is only a fraction of what it was four decades ago. In recent years, the fringe of the neighborhood, near one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, has seen a resurgence of struggling families move into its lower cost housing and rental



units. This change has had an impact upon the face of the student body; more than ever before, several of the children who attend Prairieview are from single parent families, immigrant families, or First Nations families. And, because of the increasing cost of home ownership, fewer families who settle in the neighborhood are home owners.

To the east, Prairieview's park merges with the playground of another elementary school that is affiliated with the city's separate school division. The shared park boasts several intersecting walking paths, baseball diamonds, a large hill, a soccer field, a rink, and a paddling pool. Groves of mature trees, grassy knolls, and flower beds pepper the park landscape. Before school each weekday, at mid-morning, noon, mid-afternoon and after school, the playground and the park are filled with the sound of children's voices, laughing, talking, and playing together.

Prairieview Elementary boasts an interior design similar to a race track. The inner section of the school is comprised of a large gymnasium, a library, a science lab, and a warren of small rooms: a staff room, a paper supply room, the caretakers' and vice-principal's offices, and a multipurpose room. A surrounding hallway provides access to the inner core as well as to the classrooms, washrooms, and boot rooms that form the outer perimeter of the building. Students enter and leave the school through one of the two boot rooms at the rear of the building.

### **The Classroom**

The first grade classroom of Prairieview Elementary is located near the junior boot room between the preschool and Kindergarten classrooms. It is bright, spacious, and cluttered. Its walls are barely visible, obscured by the texts of songs and poetry, word lists and charts, drawings, photographs, and children's art. A motley collection of vibrant construction paper birds swings from the massive mahogany beams that span its wooden ceiling. Books and

papers are everywhere. Eight wooden cubbies, jam-packed with jackets, backpacks, lunch bags, shoes and boots, line the back wall of the classroom.

To the right of the entrance, facing the east wall, the students' desks are arranged side by side, in five separate, horizontal rows. The children's desks contain a miscellany of objects, including, but not limited to, typical school artifacts. Some boast a cache of found objects, collected outside during recesses: rocks, dandelions, twigs, pieces of metal, screws. Others house stuffed animals and small toys that the children have surreptitiously brought from home. A few children, like Tim, occasionally stash food in their desks or, like Evan, hoard classroom supplies: thumb tacks, wooden beads, pieces of styrofoam, scraps of paper, bits of erasers, and broken popsicle sticks. A large empty space separates the student desks from the east wall and functions as the official classroom meeting place. Here the children assemble for lessons, stories, talking circles, and sharing sessions. A cushioned rattan swivel chair occupies a corner of the meeting place next to an easel.

In the northeast corner of the classroom a large photograph is affixed to the wall surrounded by neatly printed words that correspond to objects the children have identified in the picture. Two similar picture-word charts are suspended on the opposite wall. A series of large north facing windows bridge the east and west sides of the classroom. And, just outside, trees line the chain link fence that separates a walkway from the parking lot, play area, and the park beyond. In the northwest corner of the classroom, directly below the windows, sits a large, child-height rectangular table and several small metal chairs. Access to the back table area is limited to an opening between two bookshelves that also provides a partition between it and the rest of the classroom. Here, the video recordings of the children's social talk were made.

## **Gathering Data**

### **Getting Started**

The data presented in this study were collected during the final three months of the participants' first grade year. In addition to the video recordings made in the classroom, the corpus of data includes interviews with the participants, recorded in the multipurpose room, and ethnographic field notes recorded in the classroom, in the gym, hallways, boot rooms, and on the playground. The unstructured interview segment of the investigation focused upon the children's perspectives regarding the role of playfulness in class, at school, and in their lives. And the field notes created a "framing text" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 104) for the data collection: my understandings of the site, what I perceived to be 'going on', anything, that I heard, felt, or saw that shed light on, or could conceivably help to contextualize the video and interview data.

Upon obtaining approval to begin the study from the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research, potential participants were recruited through the appropriate channels beginning with contact at the school division level. Then, with approval from the school division, formal access to the specific school site was secured. With the knowledge and formal, documented approval and consent of the site administrator, the school principal, letters of introduction, and consent and assent forms were distributed to first graders and their parents or guardians. The pool of participants for the study was comprised of those whose consent and assent was secured. The research subjects and their parents were also provided with the name of my primary faculty advisor as a resource person to whom queries or concerns could be forwarded.

Those children and parents who agreed to participate were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the research results. Consequently all participants' names, and the name and location of the school have been protected through the use of pseudonyms. The participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, although none did. All twelve of the initial group – Ally, Belle, Brooke, Celia, Connor, Chloe, Evan, Jake, Kate, Lauren, Olivia, and Tim – maintained their participation for the duration of the study.

Transcripts and data release forms were made available to the participants and their parents with the proviso that they could delete or amend texts as they desired. The form was clearly worded so that it could be easily understood and was designed with a place for parents' and children's signatures. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity only specific participant's words, not those of his/her conversational partner, were recorded in the transcripts. All participants and their parents signed the transcript release forms indicating their approval of the words as they had been transcribed. (Copies of all communication with the school division, school administrator, as well as templates of all letters of consent/assent and data release forms are included in Appendices A - G.)

The video recordings of the children's discourse and the paired interviews, enhanced by observations documented in my field notes, form the marrow of the raw data for this study. Video taping the children's interviews and interactions made close analysis possible and, during the interpretative phase of the study, enabled me to view and review the children's talk. As well, the video tapes captured nuances of the children's non-verbal interaction that have led, I believe, to rich descriptions and interpretations of the intricacies of their classroom interaction. The classroom video recordings, in combination with interviewing, observation,

and reflective field-notes, furnished a comprehensive description of what was going on among the children while, at the same, serving to triangulate the data collection process.

### **Classroom Talk**

To determine which children would be videotaped together in the classroom, possible groups of two and three participants were generated through a purposeful decision making process prior to the start of the study. Groups were formed and assigned a code by my primary advisor. The children who were video-taped together at the back table each day were selected from this predetermined list. For example, on April 24<sup>th</sup> a small group was videotaped as they participated in a talking circle. Two groups formed the talking circle: group 2W1 (Belle and Connor) and group 2W2 (Brooke and Ally). Later that morning when the children were practising reading sentences aloud only one pair was videotaped: group 2W3 (Belle and Tim). And, in the afternoon, group 2W4 (Jake and Celia) was taped as they played a math addition card game together. The pairing of participants for the interview portion of the study was determined by drawing two names at a time from a hat. Each of the study's participants was a member of a dyad who was interviewed. All pairs of participants were interviewed once.

Each videotaped curricular event took place at the 'back table', in the northwest corner of the classroom. In all, fifty-six 'back table' sessions were taped. The camera was placed unobtrusively on a bookshelf prior to beginning the study. And, once the study began, it remained in that place, focused on the back table throughout the entire day, regardless of whether or not it was being used. A separate sensitive microphone was positioned on a counter beside the table to ensure the sound quality of the recordings.

## **The Interviews**

Regardless of the richness of the children's social talk in class and my interpretations of it, the heart of this inquiry resides in the interviews conducted with its participants. The questions posed and the conversations that evolved during the paired interviews presented the participants with opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise, to articulate what play meant *to them*. I have crafted my research in a manner that advocates that, while their ways of knowing and doing may not be *like adults'*, we must not assume that children's ways are *less than adults'*.

Interviewing has long been seen as the methodological core of ethnographic research, the best method for learning about the "meaning of things to the people we hope to understand" (Eisenhart, 2001, p.23). And this study is no exception. The essence of interviewing is to establish a "human-to-human" relationship (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 654) with participants. When children are involved, this implies lateral rather than vertical interaction, a fundamental shift in perspective from research *on*, to research *with*, children.

This project is based upon an essential premise: that children's knowledge and understanding of the world is worth researching and that they should actively participate in the inquiry process. Children can and do reflect upon their life experiences and are, as Corsaro advocates, able to "actively interpret ... and shape ... the research process" (Corsaro, cited in Christensen & James, 2003, p. 5). Reflexivity, then, is not merely a term used to describe the attitudes of adult researchers who work with children. It should also be utilized to describe the attitudes of the children who participate in the research process.

The participants were presented with an opportunity to reflect upon their life experience in the interview portion of the study. A video camera

recorded the interviews which were conducted during the final month of the project. A loosely structured paired interview format was utilized. The children were encouraged to 'tell about' their school and life experiences, initially through the use of the six open-ended, descriptive questions itemized in Appendix H. The questions, prepared only as a guide, were often set aside when the children took the conversational lead, when they offered their own ideas and when they responded spontaneously to the interview topics. Related studies, cited by Graue and Walsh (1998), support the use of paired or group interviews with young children and underscore the effect of group interviews upon participants' likelihood to answer questions collaboratively and keep each other truthful. Despite the preparation of a script, the paired interview format yielded its richest data when conversation broke out between the focal children, when information was provided indirectly, and when the children described their experiences through the use of narrative.

My purpose throughout this inquiry was to improve our understanding of how social language evolves through the eyes of those who directly experience and engage in it. The unstructured interview framework utilized with these twelve participants foregrounds their voices; it places the children as the subjects, not merely the objects, of the research process. Still, interviewing young children is not without its challenges. And certain realities must be acknowledged. Even a desire to place young children at the centre of the research process – to break away from an adult-centric research lens – does not erase the power differentials that, in reality, exist between adults and children. In addition, the interviews for this study occurred in a school setting where the power imbalance between adults and children is often exacerbated by formal elicitation/response/feedback interaction patterns. To ensure a sense of equality in the research process,

to provide opportunities for the children to take ownership of the interviews and the research process, and to limit the possibility that a question and answer format would result in a tendency on their part to come up with *right* answers, hypothetical situations were embedded in the question scripts. It then became possible for the children to be actively, if not directly, involved in the design and direction of the research project. Their responses to, and discussion of, the interview topics not only informed the structure of the interviews, but also facilitated subsequent interpretation and analysis *from the perspectives of the children themselves*, creating a research atmosphere of dialogue and agency.

The paired interviews were conducted in a multipurpose room, in the school, but away from the classroom. Six pairs were interviewed: three pairs of girls – Olivia and Kate, Lauren and Chloe, Celia and Ally; one pair of boys – Jake and Evan; and two mixed pairs – Belle and Connor, and Tim and Brooke. At the outset of each interview the children were informed, once again, of their right not to participate and asked whether or not they wanted to proceed. In all cases the children reiterated their willingness to take part in the interview.

### **The Role of the Camera**

Inexplicably, and somewhat surprisingly, the children attended to the camera fleetingly, if at all. That being said, most of the children made *some* reference to its presence during the study. Those references were usually brief and always, unpredictable. Brooke wagged her bottom at the camera. Connor posed, tightening his muscles to imitate a body-builder. Belle convinced Tim that her Mom could see them on television and spoke directly to the camera in an attempt to communicate with her. Evan kissed the lens. Kate reminded her friends of its presence when she felt that they were engaging in risky behavior, then, joined in the tomfoolery. Still, most of the



children's social talk occurred with little, if any, reference to the camera. And, during the interviews, the presence of the camera was, in essence, disregarded.

### **Determining A Focus**

The researcher-as-interpretive bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 4) stands at the intersection of various methodologies, materials, perspectives, and understandings. Her burden is to craft fragments, disparate pieces of information, into a "coherent, reasoned approach to a research situation" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 20). This is not to say that what is assembled is truth: complete, unified, and consistent. For, as Schwandt (2000) remarks and I concur, there is "no truth to the matter of interpretation" (p. 198). Both during the research event, and after I had withdrawn from the field, I felt both excited and bewildered by the burden of interpretation, the complexity of the raw data, and the lengthy analysis that lay ahead.

Fueled by my desire to make a meaningful and trustworthy contribution to the research community, I began my analysis in earnest by creating anecdotal logs of the participants' fifty-six videotaped back table interaction sessions. Each event was logged noting the date, the running time, the participants involved, and a detailed description of the recorded events as they appeared on the video tape. I then reviewed the logs, searching for consistencies and inconsistencies, patterns and pattern breaks, and outstanding events. Most importantly, I scanned the logs for threads of meaning, interpretive elements I could identify that would bring coherence to the extensive data while connecting them to the theoretical framework and research questions I had established prior to entering the field.

My first attempt at coding the data resulted in the identification of sixty-six categories that were drawn from key foci uncovered in the

literature documented in Chapter Two: children's language, play, and children's culture. I became increasingly frustrated by the breadth of the categories and how, each time I reviewed the data record, the possibility of new meanings and new categories arose. The process was not fulfilling its intended purpose: to reduce the data, to make it more manageable. Instead, the coding process alerted me only to the complexity of the data, its multilayeredness, and its unpredictability. In my determination to analyze the data, I had momentarily lost sight of the dialogicity of the research process and the principles I had established at the outset: to craft a study that was mindful of the rich multilayered social lives of the participants, the twelve first graders who attended Prairieview Elementary. I had apportioned little room in my thinking for the ambiguity that the children had employed so effortlessly in their discourse. I had become consumed with scholarly interests, a desire to consciously construct a research report addressed to those who work in the realm of educational policy-making, as well as those who are immersed in the day-to-day practice of educating children.

Upon reflection, it became increasingly clear that the categories I had established lacked authenticity. Granted, they *were* based upon my arduous search of extant works documented in my literature review. Yet, they did not first consider the children as key respondents and co-researchers. I had repeatedly stressed the fair involvement of children in the research process, but had failed to consider, *before anything else*, what *they* could tell us about their lived experience. And so, with renewed determination, I immediately turned my attention to the video recorded paired interviews, my sights set upon building an interpretive, theoretical document based upon the dynamic wisdom of children.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **TWELVE VOICES: A DIALOGUE ON PLAY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter documents salient portions of each of the six, thirty minute interviews conducted with the research participants: Tim and Brooke, Olivia and Kate, Lauren and Chloe, Belle and Connor, and Jake and Evan. Although the interview conversations covered a variety of topics, in this chapter, I focus my attention upon the children's characterizations of play, their insights, opinions, and perceptions of its role at school and in their lives. The intent of the interview phase of this research was to open educational dialogue on play to those who traditionally have had little occasion to be heard, to secure a more significant place for children's perspectives in the discourse on childhood. Seldom have researchers asked those who play the most what play means to them. The questions posed, and the conversations that evolved during the paired interviews, presented the participants with opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise, to articulate what play meant to them.

Typically educational discourse has been the domain of the expert: adult, Western, and privileged. Theories of play, its definition and its implications, abound. Dewey (1933), for one, saw the bifurcation of work and play as relatively straightforward. "Externally assigned" tasks must be work; the "fanciful and arbitrary" must be play (p. 213). The dualism could be simply defined: *this* is play and *this* is work. However, although the twelve children who participated in this study clearly identified choice – "doing what you want" – as integral to their perceptions of play, for them, play was not a discrete, specific bounded state. Play was described by many

in somewhat contradictory terms. For these children, play seems to exist along a continuum where “in-betweenness” and “in the middle” and “both” were offered as legitimate ways to characterize activity. Differences between work and play were determined, for the most part, contextually. Play is akin to a state of mind, often, but not always, related to specific issues of autonomy, agency, and power. Adults, both teachers and parents, when mentioned, were characterized as those who determined whether or not play was sanctioned.

Play emerged from the interview data as multilayered and contingent. Multiple meanings surfaced. Predictably, many of the children interviewed described play as “fun”, and work as bereft of “fun”. Yet, surprisingly, some of the children interviewed commented that play was not *always or necessarily* pleasurable, that conceivably, you *could* be playing yet not actually “having fun”. Because of this almost contradictory aspect – that play was sometimes fun and sometimes not – sports and games were at times uncategorizable, often play, but not always. And for certain children, sports were characterized as more like work than play.

Play was repeatedly associated with peer relationships, social networking, and intersubjectivity. It was characterized as essential to peer culture. Opportunities to play *with* others were considered most satisfying. Solitary play was recast as social by some who, when alone, described how they either imagined a playmate or pretended their friends were with them. In play the children were free to redraw the world to meet their needs. Within these possible worlds, problems are easily solved and obstacles readily overcome.

Links between imagination and play were mentioned by all children interviewed. However, imagination and play were not seen as synonymous. Nor did all children agree regarding the benefits or deficits of imagining.

Pretend play was often set aside as different from game playing, sports or active play. They identified the use of the imagination as essential to pretend play but imagination was also seen, by several children, as useful outside the realm of play situations. Invoking the imagination can move an activity from playfulness along the continuum towards work if it is used to a curricular purpose. Some children did not see play as important or beneficial while others identified the imaginative elements of play as “what makes your mind grow”. Still others recognized play as practice for life, a way to become an active, engaged member of society.

The children also linked play and imagination to their familiarity with and awareness of popular culture. Those who spoke of toys, film, and media described how they appropriated ideas, how they seldom maintained artifacts ‘as is’. They preferred instead, to embellish, transform, and reconfigure. The minutiae of their everyday play lives presented the children with opportunities to shift power, gain control, and exercise agency. Pre-existing icons and material aspects of popular culture were reinvented to meet particularized needs. Innovation and creativity emerged as key aspects of their play culture.

Artful endeavours – making, drawing, creating – were identified as playful activities of choice for some. Children described certain curricular art experiences as somewhat playful contingent upon issues of agency and autonomy, upon whether or not they “want to” participate, and whether or not they can exercise the power to switch up, embellish, and extend the experience, thus making it their own.

All the children interviewed utilized and understood the dichotomized reference terms, work and play, as opposites. And, all had formed an institutional understanding of the terms as they applied to their school experience. From the results of the interviews it was clear that although the

children did utilize these absolutes to qualify certain aspects of their official lived experience at school, they also had an unofficial understanding of the terms that was less than definitive. That is, they seemed to understand play and work on a number of levels. They recognized the dichotomization of work and play institutionally and interacted officially in class on that basis. However they understood work and play differently, and unofficially, from a philosophical perspective.

And so, layers of response emerged during the interviews. Preferred activity at school often fell towards the play end of the continuum while non-preferred activity inevitably fit further away from play towards the work end of the continuum. Still, overlaps did occur and perhaps more often than one would expect. Play was recognized as not the same as work. Yet play could possibly be work that you *want* to do. Hearing what the children said about the work-play continuum – what fit where and why – provided some of the deepest and richest data from the interviews.

The following interview summaries illustrate how each pair of participants developed some of these ideas. What becomes apparent from the interviews is the recursivity of the children's responses, how they modify and extend, agree and disagree with each other's thinking, how they strive to relate observations from their lived experience to the issues at hand and to support their particular theories and philosophies.

### **Tim and Brooke**

Tim and Brooke share a certain social reality which noticeably affects the ease with which their conversation unfolds, and how thoughtfully they build upon each other's ideas. Both reside in the school neighborhood. Each is from a middle class professional family where both parents work outside the home. They attended Kindergarten, day care, and preschool together

and, besides being classmates, spent time together at the same after-school program.

Dark-haired Tim is a sturdy, active boy. He often dresses as an athlete; he wears a blue and white mesh jersey and shorts. Kneeling on the chair, Tim leans towards Brooke or the interviewer as he talks. Brooke has layered a striped pink sun-dress over a short sleeved t-shirt. Her long light brown hair hangs free. Both she and Tim remain focused, thoughtful, and responsive throughout the interview.

As the session begins they are asked to name their favorite things to do at school. Tim responds first stating that the best part of school for him is gym and free time. Brooke's favorites are crafts and Writers' Club. Tim offers reasons for his preferences, commenting that in gym you can do "whatever you want." Brooke points to the added value of craft time, the opportunities it provides to develop a social network, to interact and talk with friends. In response to the interviewer's request that they provide definitions of work and play, they answer jointly stating that play involves situations "when you get to choose whatever you want", but that work is externally regulated.

Tim clarifies further, however, noting that even if choice is provided – for example if, at home, parents "get you to choose your chores" – the event should still be considered to be work, not play. Tim's idea of regulated choice leads Brooke to comment that chores such as cleaning her room are work, but that, even so, she does enjoy doing them since they provide an opportunity to listen to music as she cleans. So work, like play, can be enjoyable to some degree if coupled with desired, self-determined activity. Tim refers to gym-time as play. He mentions sports specifically. However, he brackets music and dance from other pursuits that he considers to be play in the gym, saying that dance differs because of its classification as an "activity". For Tim, dancing is "usually" work. But Brooke is not as

convinced: "Well, I'm not sure" she answers warily, "because sometimes me and my friends like to pretend that we're dancing just for play." Pretense affects the arbitrariness of the play-work dichotomy. If you pretend to do something that is normally work, then it becomes play. Clearly Brooke does not see work and play as discrete categories.

As the interview progressed it became increasingly apparent that Brooke and Tim both saw play and work as multilayered and multifaceted. For these two, play was characterized as a state of mind, not easily defined or categorized. Their comments indicate that something may be considered to be work in one circumstance, or for one person, yet for another person or in another situation, it could be play.

When asked to brainstorm a list of events that they considered to be either work or play Tim confidently places math and reading in the work category. Once again, Brooke disagrees, arguing that she and some of her friends sometimes read "for play", and that reading should be placed "in the middle" between work and play. Tim agrees that certain things are not necessarily just work or just play. To support this contention he reasons that, in math class, doing time on a "fake clock" is similarly difficult to categorize as either work or play. He explores this idea by talking about the layers of thought involved in learning how to tell time: "It's sort of playing when you say 'It's 12 o'clock' and you look at the real clock and it's 5:15," he muses. Tim sees a conceptual link between the presentation of hypothetical circumstances utilized to illustrate curricular objectives, such as learning how to tell time – in his words, "making the time up" – the imaginative quality of pretend play, and what he describes as "real time stuff". For Tim, the coexistence of binary opposites - reality and fantasy - within the same curricular event, is possible and acceptable.



When asked to clarify how she perceives pretense and imagination, Brooke immediately characterizes them as play. This time it is Tim who disagrees. He sees it more in shades of gray. "It's sort of in-between I think", he says. Brooke listens attentively to Tim then reconsiders her response. "Oh yeah. Tim's right. It's in the middle," she explains. She clarifies by stating that she uses her imagination to write books during Writers' Club. For both Tim and Brooke pretending and imagining bridge dichotomies; they furnish ways to circumvent arbitrary categories.

Tim and Brooke agree that play is important from a physical standpoint – "you can get exercise and get healthy" – and from an intellectual aspect – "the thing why it's important is that ...when you use your imagination you get more stuff in your brain. You get more imagination and like there's more to your imagination". Tim's observations hint at the idea of neuro-plasticity, that the brain can change itself through "thought and activity" (Doidge, 2007, xv), that imaginative thoughts can actually change the structure of the brain (p. 214). Brooke agrees, stating that using your imagination "makes your imagination get stronger". And Tim equates the ability to use your imagination as key to carrying you forward intellectually, to "grade two, three, or four".

Both children admit to having vivid imaginary lives. Brooke describes how she engages her imagination to anticipate events, enact desires, and exercise power over situations that may seem out of or beyond her control. She launches into a narrative account that locates the importance of imagining in her life experience. She tells how, when she's on her way to swimming lessons, she draws on her imagination to anticipate whether her regular teacher will be there, or if there will be a substitute. "Sometimes when my real teacher's not there, hasn't been at swimming lessons for two whole months, I'm like imagining that he'll be back the next time... 'cause I

kind of miss him". She identifies play as a way to overcome situational constraints and articulates how inventing an imaginary illusionary world allows the unrealizable to be realized.

Brooke and Tim agree that play can involve toys but needn't. However Tim does admit that playing with B-Damon and Bey Blades is his favorite play past-time. Tim cites games such as Hide and Seek as ways of playing without props. But he is quick to caution that "not all games are always play". Brooke picks up Tim's train of thought, explaining that people can tire of games, once again moving the essence of play into the realm of state of mind.

Both Tim and Brooke think that playing certain games is not as much fun as other playful endeavours. Sports and video games are representative of this imprecise, variable notion of play. Tim offers Nintendo as an example of a game that is not necessarily play. "Cause all you have to do is go like that" he gestures with his small fingers. "You don't really play that. All you do is press a button and there's a bat." Brooke agrees. "Yeah. And sometimes I get bored...and my brother says I have to finish it."

Sport too, fits "in the middle" or "in between" the ideas of absolute work and play. The children refer to the impact of adult power and authority upon their perception of sports as more or less playful. Brooke clarifies her characterization. "Sometimes I slow down, and I'm getting too tired, and my mom gets me to go faster, and I really can't". Both Tim and Brooke identify feeling pressured by parents, and lament that they "have to" go faster, or try harder. They raise key issues that move sport along the continuum away from play and towards work, once again reflecting the impact of agency on children's characterization of events as playful.

## **Olivia and Kate**

Kate, undoubtedly a beautiful girl, dark haired and dark eyed, is admired by both boys and girls. She arrives at school often dressed in the latest designer clothes, impeccably groomed. She and Olivia have been friends since Kindergarten. Like Tim and Brooke, both Olivia and Kate's parents work outside the home, and so, they regularly spend time together at the school's after-school program. Olivia is soft spoken and thoughtful, yet quietly confident. She, like Kate, is keenly aware of her appearance; each morning she appears sporting a new hair style. On the day of the interview Olivia's tawny hair is pulled back from her face and secured atop her head with a white feathery bow. Both she and Kate are conscious of the importance of social networking. Often they can be overheard at their lockers planning their social lives, or recounting weekend adventures.

The girls' social awareness is reflected in their attitude towards play which they regard as separate in time and place from their in class experience: something children do at lunch, at recess, before and after school, far from the eyes of adults. Occasionally, they explain, they *do* play in the classroom: when inclement weather necessitates an indoor recess, or at "choice time" late Friday afternoons. Kate articulates play's importance from a social perspective explaining how it ensures that children interact within certain predetermined norms. Its benefit is that you "learn how to play properly".

From Olivia's perspective the key difference between work and play is that play is "more fun than working". Kate agrees that play is fun, but cautions that in-class curricular activities are "better" than play because they "help you learn". The girls cite "cleaning" and "writing stuff down" as typical examples of work, and "going on the slide, colouring a picture, hide and go seek, tag, and tickling people" as playful pastimes.

Still, the girls' answers to further questions indicate that neither regard play and work strictly as exclusive categories. In fact, like Brooke and Tim, Olivia and Kate both place play and work along a continuum where situational elements act as key determinants of their characterization. Olivia points out how contextual nuance can impact upon the nature of simple playful acts, causing her to recharacterize them. If an activity is presented in a curricular context by an adult, then it moves away from play, towards work along the work-play continuum. It becomes, Olivia explains, and Kate agrees, "in-between". Olivia weaves a thread over and under her slim fingers. Context is key to her thoughtful explanation. "If your teacher asks you to do your picture after she does something that matches what she said or something, then it would be work. If you're colouring a picture and it's...indoor recess... that would be *playing* colouring a picture". Although Kate had already identified drawing as her favourite play activity, she agrees that, in the circumstances Olivia has described, it may not necessarily be so. Clearly, it is the presence of constraints upon their ability to exercise agency that colour the girls' perception of the play-likeness of particular activities. Neither play nor work can be categorized consistently nor are they uniformly meaningful. They are, as Brooke and Tim have indicated, relative, temporal, contingent.

Olivia's favorite pastime is playing "birthdays" with her dolls. She links thinking, playing, and pretending as she explains how she decides what to play: "First I think, and then I know. Then I start to play. Then I stop and think again," she explains. Olivia understands the capricious nature of her playful interactions yet she is not unaware of her power to deliberately control the process. She admits that she sometimes pretends at recess or during choice time and that occasionally she imagines in class. For Olivia imagining is helpful in class "when someone wants us to write a story". In

that case, "it wouldn't be play because you're *working* on a story. Then you're working on imagining." Olivia recognizes imagining as play *and* as work: not simply this or that, it *can* be both. Like "colouring a picture", imagining moves along the continuum between work and play, depending upon circumstance.

Kate admits that she too plays with dolls but reiterates that drawing is her preferred play pastime. She explains, as has Olivia, how she recognizes the role thinking plays in determining what she will draw. Attributes of critical reflective thought are present in her explanation. Kate analyzes, evaluates and monitors her own skill development. She perseveres with her drawing so that it is her "best" and, she explains, "if it's not that good" she discards it and tries again. She controls the process.

Both girls recognize a continuum based conceptual framework for play and work and are comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in that perspective. Neither Kate nor Olivia was so rigid in her thinking that she found it necessary to categorize activity as either one or the other. Creativity and the arts – "imagining", "drawing", "colouring pictures", even "baking a cake" – were offered as clear examples of activities that could be either work or play, depending upon the context. For Kate and Olivia, play and work did not necessarily represent binary opposites.

### **Lauren and Chloe**

The interview with Lauren and Chloe is animated and engaging; both girls are eager to make their perspectives known. Typically Lauren is spontaneous, direct, and intrepid in the face of new and unforeseen situations. She confidently shares her ideas, takes risks, proposes theories, and questions other children when necessary, often challenging their thinking. She brings this attitude to the interview. She has attended the school for both Kindergarten and grade one but, unlike Chloe, seldom goes

to the after-school program. Chloe too is bold and opinionated. She is highly verbal, dramatic in her interactions with others, and a keen story-teller. Her narratives are often augmented with histrionics, arm gestures, and animated facial expressions.

The girls piece together answers to the interview questions. "Math, play time, gym and Writers' Club" are their favourite school activities. Writers' Club tops Lauren's preferred list, while play is Chloe's favorite. When asked to explain their reasons for citing play as one of their favorites, the girls dovetail their response. Chloe begins. "Because you get to colour and do stuff, kind of fun things". "And you usually don't get them", Lauren cautions. "Cause", Chloe continues, "you only get it in Kindergarten and preschool". Their joint response is loaded with implications about the nature of play, autonomy, agency, and the institutionalization of their young lives. Lauren goes on to explain why, although "it's more work", Writers' Club tops her preferred activity list. She mentions learning and sharing with people as key reasons for her preference. The Writers' Club atmosphere bridges the social and the academic. "You get more words in your head and things", she says thoughtfully, relating the idea of work to thought and the mind. She clarifies, "One thing is, with work you got to think. And play time you really don't have to think."

Issues of control and autonomy are also raised when the girls explore the benefits of play. "Playtime you can stop and work you can't stop", Lauren explains. Both girls persistently utilize phrases such as "have to" when describing work situations and terms such as "if you want" when describing playful interaction. Differences between work and play, either at home or at school, are inexorably linked to the presence or absence of adult power and control. For Chloe play is undoubtedly, self-determined activity. Even writing, which both she and Lauren had earlier classified as work, *could*

fit into the play category, Chloe submits, "if you wanted to" do it. An activity's prior definition as play or work is superseded by one's attitude towards the event. Play is contextual and situational, yet clearly linked to agency, intentionality, and fun. Play shifts power into children's hands. And for Chloe, empowerment is intrinsically related to her ability to choose.

For Lauren though, mandated curricular activity *can* be considered to be somewhat playful. To explain she cites an example. "Like when the teacher makes you make those caterpillars. They were fun". When asked whether that particular event was work or play she replies, "Both... 'cause you're building and that's kind of fun. And in work you have to do it." Her perception of the activity as something "the teacher makes you make" prevents her from seeing this particular activity as pure play. Yet, the creativity involved in the task prevents its polarization as work. Lauren explains how mandated activities can move along the continuum from work towards play. She talks about reconfiguring and transforming particular art projects, "draw[ing] things", playing with her pencil, or making her writing go "funky". Both Lauren and Chloe agree that the freedom to add to or to embellish an assignment can potentially make the process more playful. Overcoming the situational constraints embedded in the prescriptive nature of various curricular acts moves those acts along the continuum toward play.

Activating the imagination also frees children from situational constraints. Make-believe is integral to "playing with dolls", which both Lauren and Chloe cite as their favorite play pastime. Even though they speak of their doll play as social – they generally play with others – the girls acknowledge that pretending, in and of itself, is not necessarily social nor does it necessarily involve only props. Both girls identify their brains as a primary source of imaginative ideas for solitary make-believe play. Chloe also notes the mind-body connection inherent in the abstractness of

imagining and its outward manifestation as observable playful acts. Ideas for pretend play are also generated corporately and cooperatively with playmates, or they can be borrowed from popular culture. Both girls mention movies and videos they have seen, television shows they have watched, and computer games and music as sources for their imaginative play scenarios.

Lauren and Chloe also recognize the connection between their ability to imagine and tacit resistance to their everyday circumstances. They both envision alternatives to the daily social reality that is school. In class Chloe visualizes herself “on the beach” and Lauren admits to imagining that she “won’t have to do work most of the time”; that she could be doing “something else”. Undoubtedly, these girls understand the impact of the artificial bifurcation of work and play on their institutionalized lives. And, they understand the power of the imagination to loosen the hold these arbitrary categories have upon them. They have clearly identified feelings of repression precipitated by their perceived inability to make independent choices. For them work is synonymous with disempowerment and adult hegemony. Play is code for empowerment and freedom.

### **Belle and Connor**

Belle is a sprite of a girl, slender and fair. Fine featured with darting eyes and an engaging smile, she is an extremely social child. Often forming strong alliances which cross gender lines, Belle counts both boys and girls as friends. Among all the children who participated in the interview process she is the only child to make direct reference to social thinking as a means of answering questions. “Can we talk to each other to think, to answer [the questions]?” Belle inquires as the interview is about to begin. She and Connor banter back and forth throughout the interview, sometimes conferring with each other, crafting corporate answers, at other times



candidly disagreeing. They respond hypothetically to several questions utilizing simulated conversations to illustrate their answers.

Connor is a wiry active boy, a fast talker, lively, inquisitive, and full of fun. He, like Belle, is direct and opinionated. Connor responds quickly and decisively to the interview questions. To the first query regarding his favourite school activity, he answers immediately, "Gym. And free time". Belle agrees. Along with play time, free time in the gym is her favourite. Both children's reasons sound familiar. Connor prefers gym class because it involves game playing and, at least occasionally, provides opportunities for self-determined choice. "We can pick what we want to play". Belle prefers to play furbies in the gym.

Furbies are small, commercially produced robot-like plush toys. They have large dark eyes, protruding ears, and round plastic mouths that move expressively when they talk. Furbies speak furbish and communicate using a voice recognition system. Belle's preoccupation with furbies is undeniable. She figures centrally in a furby-play subculture that is not limited to gym or recess times but often permeates the day-to-day social and curricular events of the classroom. Belle describes how she and others play a furby chase game in the gym with scooter boards. Connor is not a furby player and so, as an outsider, he is unfamiliar with the game. He listens intently, struggling to understand how the game works. A conversation breaks out between them as Belle explains,

Belle: Well what you do is there's this person and there's this other person and there's two persons lined up with each other. And then there's someone in the middle. And one side is where you go and tag them. And there's a new furby in the middle. And the other side is – and whoever gets all the furbies on their side first wins the game....

Connor: Isn't that octopus?

Belle: No.

Connor: Is it like octopus?

Belle: Because there's another person going in the middle.

Connor: So you catch two people and then they have to come with you.

Belle: Yeah. And then if the humans get them out again that means that they're part of their side. But if the furbies get them out again that means they stay permanently on the furby side.

Connor: So you're saying the people they have to run against, they can tag someone and then they have to be on their team?

Belle: Yeah

Clearly the free time furby scooter game is, as Connor suggests, an adaptation of a teacher-directed game that occurs regularly in gym class. Belle and her furby-playing friends have transformed an established practice to fit a new situation and to meet their specific needs. A new hybrid game emerges as they change the rules, the players, and the object of the game, but leave the original framework intact. Furby play in the gym during choice time is not uncommon. And the chase game Belle has just described is one of several hybridized furby-play scenarios in which she plays a central role.

Belle's interest in furbies was piqued while watching a television commercial: "...when these little creatures came up I was like, 'Ohhhh! That's a cute creature!' And then I started to like Furbies". Her immersion in furby play has evolved from a personal interest to a means of social networking among her classmates. In its evolution, furby play has acquired a clearly defined and organized social structure. Several children meet

regularly at recess times to play furbies. "We play rock, paper, scissors to see who's the boss furby", Belle explains. Although membership in the furby play group is open – anyone *can* play – it does not involve all children in the class. Some, like Connor, lack intimate knowledge of the particularized furby play culture of their classmates. However, all are familiar with furbies through their exposure to popular culture.

When asked to distinguish between work and play, Belle focuses upon the importance of freedom to choose: "Well the difference is you have to do what you want to do." Connor melds his explanation into a brief narrative: "Play is more like, 'Hey let's go over there and play some Lego'. Work is more like pencil, glue, paper and folding and stuff like that. That's why it's no fun." Belle appears to agree in essence with Connor's explanation, but she adds a contextual caveat. Drawing and making things that are *used* for play, "like swords", can be play as well.

Both Belle and Connor agree that decisions about work tend to be adult decisions and that work, at school or at home, is "no fun", disruptive to their play lives, and an impediment to their autonomy. Connor offers an example: "Do you know why I don't like the green book bag?" (part of the first grade home reading program). "Because, sometimes I'm playing or I'm in the middle of something. I have to stop and go and do it. And when I play at night usually, I have a Play Station, I have to do my homework before I get to play on the Play Station."

Both agree that fun is a key defining quality of play. Yet Connor purposefully points to play's contingency, its ambiguity. "Sometimes," he states, "play is not fun. Like when you're playing a little game..." "That you don't like," Belle adds, finishing his thought. Regardless of the type of play activity, pretending or game playing, coercion, being "dragged into" playing by another person, has an impact upon its play value. Clearly, Belle

recognizes that limits upon personal freedoms exist within children's culture just as they do within the dominant adult culture. She acknowledges play's practical benefits as well. Belle sees play, particularly pretending and imagining, as possibly a rehearsal for life, a potential problem-solving strategy. For example, Belle connects play, official curricula – learning a second language, health, and personal safety lessons – and the pragmatics of daily life. "If you're playing teach French, you can learn to speak French. And if you're playing 'go do the right thing' you can practice trying to get away from a guy who's trying to touch your private parts", she explains. Imagining is fun, but it can be utilitarian as well.

From both children's perspectives opportunities for play in the classroom are limited. Nevertheless Connor remarks that sometimes curricular events such as math can involve play. But Belle emphatically disagrees. Instead she proposes that arts and crafts possess an inherent play-like quality. She likens play to the artistic freedom she exercises to create curricular art projects as she "wants to". Connor, who had previously named "drawing and cutting and glueing" as exemplars in his definition of work, listens intently as Belle points out how art relates to freedom of expression and individuality. Then he reconsiders. "Sometimes", he concedes, these activities could be considered playful. Reiterating the importance of agency and free will to the essence of playfulness, Belle adds, "if you wanted to draw".

The arbitrariness of Belle and Connor's answers reiterates others' contention that there is a space "in the middle" between work and play. They lightheartedly suggest that the interview situation itself is an example of an event that they consider to be a little bit work and a little bit play. When the next interview question is characterized as a serious one, Connor smiles broadly. With feigned earnestness he responds, "I'll get on my tie."

Belle agrees, "Let's get on our ties!" Both pretend to tie as Connor deepens his voice, simulating authority, "This is a meeting here in U.S. hall". When asked why play is important to kids their responses once again pertain to "having fun". The intersubjectivity inherent in their response points to the pervasiveness of play to children's culture. "If there was no playing," Belle begins, "what would we do?", Connor concludes. Belle hypothesizes that without play life would be "boring" and Connor adds "it wouldn't be any fun".

Because both children have repeatedly mentioned the association they perceive to exist between fun and play, a few questions are posed to probe their thinking. Connor comments that "sometimes" an activity can still be play even if it is not fun. He cites baseball as an example stating that sports are "sometimes... play and sometimes ...not". For Belle, however, sports are play. Yet other extra-curricular activities, highland dancing for example, she considers to be work. "No. It's work. It's boring," she states firmly.

Belle admits that many of her ideas for play are linked to the media, television in particular. She is selective in her viewing practices and responds critically to "boring shows" that hold little potential play value. To clarify, she admits only to watching '*Franklin*' and '*Barney*' but "not playing" them. The media also had an impact upon Connor's play pastimes. He often plays "football [video] games" on his Play Station, then utilizes the virtual games in imaginative play scenarios. "Sometimes I pretend that I'm one of those people that says all their names", he explains, referring to the commentators who regularly host televised sports events. Curiously, in class Connor can occasionally be heard doing just that, commenting on the action around him or vocalizing make-believe scenarios. It is as if he steps outside himself, watches his and others' interactions, and comments on them.

Watching something is identified by both Belle and Connor as impetus for subsequent play. "When I watch football", Connor says, "I like to play it

then.” And Belle agrees. “Same” she says, citing how she reflects on what she sees, then decides whether or not she’d “like to be that character”. Although they are keenly aware of the impact of media and performance upon their everyday lives, both Belle and Connor are discerning in their viewing and playing practices; they are critical consumers of popular culture.

### **Celia and Ally**

Interviewing Celia and Ally provided an opportunity to hear talk between individuals who may not normally choose to interact. Equally delightful, yet as different as night and day, these girls do not run in the same social circles. Ally has a social history in the neighborhood having attended preschool and Kindergarten with several of her classmates. Boisterous and fun-loving, her edgy, somewhat unpredictable personality places her on the margin, eager to belong, yet not always sure of how to make that happen. Ally’s public persona in class is compliant, task oriented, and co-operative; her private persona more direct, somewhat calculating. When no one is looking, she is less likely to ‘be good’.

Celia too hovers at the edge of the social core of neighborhood friends, albeit for different reasons. New to the school Celia seems the perfect child, smart, attractive, and kind. Yet she seldom interacts with her more gregarious classmates, having no shared social history and coming from a seemingly more traditional and relatively religious background. Celia is selfless, neither greedy nor vindictive, always respectful of others. Her demeanor is clearly at odds with that of some of her more rambunctious peers. And, although Celia deftly keeps herself somewhat separate, she is respected by all. Her best friend is another newcomer. At recesses Celia and her new friend can usually be spotted together, blithely skipping arm in arm across the playground.

Recess is unequivocally Celia's favorite part of school. She identifies the social aspect of play as a reason for her choice. "Because you get to play with your friends", she states. To elaborate she mentions "having fun" and "getting to do whatever you want" as integral to the appeal of play. Celia explains that the freedom to "do whatever you want" does not exist in the classroom and that teachers make decisions about classroom interaction.

Decisions about play, however, can be either individual or corporate, depending upon whether play is social or solitary. The social aspect of play is integral to Ally's characterization, so much so that solitary play *becomes* social in her imagination. She reconfigures it to suit her desires. "Probably, you could play Hide-and-Go-Seek with yourself", she explains, "cause you could pretend that there was an imaginary friend".

For Celia too play can be individual or social. She identifies certain activities, sliding and swinging, as examples of solitary play. Playing at home can also involve spending time with her father, "helping my Dad...build stuff and do stuff". When asked specifically whether or not she considers building things and helping her Dad to be play, she answers thoughtfully, "Yeah. It feels like it's playing." Celia's response – that what she does with her father feels like playing – points to the aesthetic nature of play, the unfinalizability of it. Play is freshly constructed in each instance. And so, it is amazingly difficult to define. For these children at least, play is not a specific state, nor is it a specific set of activities per se. For them, play exists along a continuum. Its essence is, as Celia has cleverly noted, closely associated to how one "feels" when engaged in it. It is, for the most part, an emotional aesthetic event. It is ephemeral, situationally, not universally, definable. Play can be recontextualized and reconfigured. It can be this and/or that, for this person or that person.

Interestingly, later in the interview, Celia identifies “building something” as an activity she also considers to be work. Several subtleties are involved in this seemingly contradictory classification. First, work, in this context, lacks the social element Celia alluded to earlier when she categorized helping her dad build a birdhouse as feeling like play. Second, there is implicit reference to the impact of choice to the characterization of this activity as playful. Dad *works* on building a birdhouse. Yet, when Celia helps Dad, when she has freely chosen to engage in the activity, it falls more into the realm of play. And third, Celia’s response supports Tim and Brooke’s determination that an event can be play or work in differing circumstances. Like Tim and Brooke, Celia clearly places the two on a continuum saying, “working is sort of in the middle of fun and playing is a lot of fun.”

A pivotal point in the determination of an activity as playful seems to be whether or not it can be considered to be “fun”. Yet when asked if *work* can *sometimes* be fun Celia nods in agreement. Ally, too, is reluctant to dichotomize work and play. Still she does differentiate between the two with regard to their relative “hardness”. Piano lessons can be demanding and so, more like work. She places them further along on the continuum, reasoning “sometimes it’s a little bit harder... work”, “sometimes it’s [play] a little bit hard”.

Nonetheless, Celia and Ally do categorize school activities in general as either play or work. Work involves math, reading, and science. Play is recess, and choice time. Still, their perspectives on the importance of play differ. Ally thinks play is important while Celia does not. Celia’s view reflects her understanding of how the world works. Children are relegated essentially to a passive role, subordinate to the adults who exercise power and authority over their daily lives. Play’s lesser importance is linked to its association with childhood. To explain, Celia juxtaposes play’s relative



unimportance with the relative import of adult power. Helping her mom, which Celia classifies as work, is more important than play simply because “helping your mom is important”. Ally disagrees. Hers is a more agentic view of childhood. For Ally play is important just because she likes to do it. Her use of the phrase “if I wanted” conceptually links autonomy, agency, and the pleasurable, preferred activities she has determined are play. Ally also relates play to aspects of peer culture: interaction with her sister, going to birthday parties, and so on. Among other events that she considers to be play, Ally cites opportunities to “create” and “to make”.

Because their opinions of constructive activities differ – one frames them as work, the other as play – the girls are asked whether an activity could conceivably be work and play at the same time. Both immediately respond in the affirmative. Although clearly convinced that this is, indeed, possible, neither can immediately offer an example of such an activity.

According to Ally, ideas for play originate “in your mind” and sometimes, she adds, in music and movies. She explains how she watches movies or video games with friends, then selects scenes to play. “We can watch a show – ‘cause I have the Nutcracker movie – and it has scenes, and we can try to act them out by ourselves, like with some friends.” When asked which has a greater potential for fun, playing video games or acting out ideas *from* the games, Ally prefers “the acting out part”. Celia agrees that ideas for play can come from the media: television, movies, and video games. “Yeah. Like I’ve got this secret agent Barbie game. We played it and sometimes I pretend to be, like, a spy!” Game characters can become springboards to actual play events. Neither Ally nor Celia is limited by what she has seen or heard in popular culture. Both transform and reconfigure certain kernel ideas and make them their own. “I do different stuff though”, Celia elaborates. The girls willfully appropriate key elements of popular

culture which have been produced by adults for children. Then, they imaginatively extend, reinvent, and transform them to meet their needs.

Even though both girls enjoy playful interactions that involve imagination, neither admits to pretending during formal class time. Both admit to engaging in imaginative play during their Friday free time and at recess, however. Ally differentiates between playing school and being *in* school. Drawing during free choice time, or when you are *playing* school, is not the same as drawing *in* class. "You can draw and that's not really part of school", she cautions. Implicit in her differentiation are matters of free will and choice and the artificial boundaries between play and work that have become part of her lived school experience.

### **Jake and Evan**

Ally's perception of the arbitrary limitations school imposes upon free will is echoed by Evan and Jake as they talk about life in grade one. They take charge of the interview from the outset, moving into a discussion of play and work almost immediately. "You get lots and lots of work", Evan explains when asked to tell about his experience in grade one. "And", Jake adds, "you get play time." Evan is quick to clarify that play time in grade one is proportionately less compared to last year, in Kindergarten. In grade one there is just "a little bit [of play time]. But Kindergartens get humongous play times. And do a teeny tiny bit of work".

The boys present a shared world view, an intersubjective understanding of their school experiences despite the fact that they attended different schools the previous year. Corporately they continue, taking turns completing each other's sentences. Jake carries on. "When I was in Kindergarten you do one page of work and", Evan interjects, "then you get to have play time for a hour." "At my school, two hours", Jake clarifies. They juxtapose Kindergarten and grade one, reflecting upon commonalities in

their school experience and lamenting the fact that, as they see it, in grade one you get only "one or two minutes of play time and you get a humongous bunch of work". Evan dichotomizes the two. "It's the opposite, Kindergarten and grade one," and Jake agrees.

When Jake is queried, he defines play succinctly. It is, he states simply, when "you do whatever you want." He and Evan define work in terms of events typically associated with formal schooling: "science, math, picture word chart, sentences, reading". Jake specifically associates work with the acquisition of "good things in your mind". Although it is apparent that he treasures his play time, Jake sees few intellectual benefits in his favourite pastimes. During play the "good things in your mind", which occur as a result of work, "all fall out." His explanation points to the impact school, as an institution, has had upon how he has come to perceive and value play, how he has had to learn to compartmentalize and redefine his everyday life. "Play," Jake concludes, is "all bad for your brain and stuff" and work is "all good." Play has come to be valued, or not, only in direct opposition to work.

Evan explains the play-work dichotomy graphically. "Work is, like, working hard and sweating". He drags his hands deliberately down from his forehead to his cheeks, wiping make-believe perspiration from his face. Then, bouncing in his chair, his arms swinging freely above his head, he continues. "And play time is playing like - ah-hhh - and not doing any work." Play for Evan is unpretentiously defined. It is *not work*. Nevertheless, Evan acknowledges that limitations do exist upon the freedoms that play affords. With freedoms come attendant responsibilities, embedded social controls. He explains: "You can do lots of stuff - whatever you want - but not like fighting or anything. So playtime has a little bit of rules".

Animated and imaginative, Evan is seldom able to sit still or to be quiet. Even on his own, he persistently fills silences with sound: a tapping

pencil, a song, a rhythmic hum, a repeated phrase. At times others lose patience with him. "Evan, be quiet!" they request repeatedly, with little, if any results. Still, Evan is well-liked by his classmates. He is never without willing playmates at recesses. Yet he is surprisingly selective in his friendships. Evan's closest and dearest friend is Belle with whom he shares an almost obsessive interest in furbies. Evan's relationship with Belle figures largely in his interview conversation. He, like Belle, favours shared thinking. He makes reference to his and Belle's imaginative furby play as originating in "our mind", persistently referring to a sense of like-mindedness that he and Belle share.

Jake, on the other hand, has few close friends in the class. He interacts with others but remains stoic, somewhat distant. Quiet and at times forgetful, Jake often appears preoccupied, lost in his own thoughts. He is a bright, capable boy, yet in class he typically maintains a low profile. He seldom seeks attention, is more an observer than a participant. Jake is surprisingly introspective for a six year old, honest and forthright as he describes his classroom behaviour. He recognizes that in class he is frequently inattentive and links his daydreams to imagining: "Sometimes I'm looking out the window and I'm imagining stuff like there's a big Bey Blade flying and stuff".

BeyBlades, commercially produced spinning toys, are popular with several children in the class. Jake, along with a small group of his classmates, had created Bey Blade facsimiles from interlocking cubes one rainy day in early spring during an indoor recess. Since then, whenever inclement weather has prevented outdoor breaks and, often at choice times on Fridays, several students can be found clustered together on the floor or at a table in the north side of the classroom playing with these BeyBlade-like toys. Jake, along with Connor and Tim, are regulars. Typically one or two

others join them. Together they commandeer a large plastic container of interlocking cubes which, during instructional times, are utilized to demonstrate and explore mathematical concepts. During indoor recesses, however, the cubes become replicas of commercial BeyBlades. Each child fashions a unique replica using a variety of coloured cubes. A single cube, affixed to the bottom, serves as the spinner. The object of the game is to construct a toy that will spin longer than anyone else's. Jake eagerly engages in free play with the BeyBlade facsimiles yet prefers playing with "real ones" because, he explains, "there's more stuff to it and they go faster and... they're way better".

Evan casts a more critical eye upon commercially produced toys. He recognizes the role of popular culture in his play life, yet he is often less than satisfied with what it has to offer. He is aware that ideas for his favourite toys, furbies, originated with "someone else". Still he is eager to point out that together, he and Belle make furbies that are "different" from the "normal" furbies encountered in popular culture. He is unwilling to credit television with the ideas they utilize in their daily imaginative furby play: "I'm doing lots of thinking and me and Belle too. So we have lots of stuff in *our mind*." And, he criticizes media for presenting furbies in a static, unidimensional manner. "The people that made up the furbies just wanted to go with normal furbies. Me and Belle wanted to go with combining other stuff with one furby"

Reconfiguring furbies is one way Evan and Belle evaluate, act upon, and respond to the social contexts in which they find themselves. They prefer to extend, elaborate, and transform aspects of popular culture to meet their particular needs rather than accept them at face value. "Like, you just take the furby's identity and you put it in the camera. And they can talk and they can walk. Like it's a talking, walking, furby-camera. Like it sounds

like a furby and a furby head just pops out of the top". Evan is amazingly aware of how the appropriation works. He describes the hybridization process he and Belle engage in as they create their special furbies. He repeatedly makes reference to social thinking, "combining our brains together", as an intrinsic part of the process. Ideas "just come in our mind," he says as he describes how together they collaborate to create butterfly furbies. "Me and Belle combined it together...Take the caterpillar kind of thing off (when it used to be a caterpillar), and then you take a furby, and then you put on the wings. So, Belle made the thing, like the caterpillar that's turned into a butterfly, and I made it up that how you put it together... We put it together but it's only different." He continues, "We combined it to quite a few things".

For Evan play is as much about social interaction as it is about doing what you want. Each play episode he talks about is linked to his social relationship with Belle. Evan deconstructs his and Belle's obsession with furbies, relating their common interest to a certain intersubjectivity that is operationalized through mutual thought and shared social language: "And every time it's recess, the furby word comes up and Belle's furby word comes up, and we both say it at the same time, all the time".

Evan clearly identifies cooperative thinking and the importance of social interaction in his reflections upon play. The social bond created in and through play for Evan is palpable. Although he later admits that he does play alone if, indeed, no other options are available, solitary play *becomes* social play when he invents an imaginary Belle to take real Belle's place. Without Belle, Evan still plays: "I just play alone and I pretend that Belle is there."

Evan explains his interest in furby play, reflecting upon how he and Belle first met, and tracing the intrinsic connection he sees between furby play and the bond that exists between them. "Belle just made a furby

up....It was a cool furby. Belle just made a wood furby that gave slivers and I was like, 'I like that!' And I just said, 'Hi Belle.' And she said 'Hi. Want to play with me and make furbies, all different kinds, all cool furbies? And rock star furbies? And I seemed to like her and I liked the furbies so she just made the furbies stuck in my mind." He admits to talking about furby play in and out of the classroom and he candidly reflects on play's influence on his thinking even when he should be focusing upon school assignments. "I just can't get the furby talk out of my brain". Evan and Belle's imaginary furby play world, complete with "boss furbies" and "rock star furbies", in many ways parallels the world as it is. It differs significantly, however, because it is a world they control, a particular social space where they can exercise agency.

Evan is meta-cognitively aware of the ubiquity of his imaginary life, play's social core, and the implicit power play and imagination have to control, to manipulate, and to transform. He freely acknowledges that he does "a lot of imagining". As he reflects on his classroom experience, Evan admits to imagining and working simultaneously: "Sometimes I think about work *and* do the imagining. My brain, half my brain goes, like this side goes like: 'Another type of furby is born' and the other one is doing work. So I do two things!" Evan responds thoughtfully: "I think imagining is work for me."

## **Conclusion**

Evan's conclusion simply accentuates the indefiniteness of play. What is play? What is work? *Can* play be work? By virtue of their embeddedness in adult culture young children are introduced to the ideas of play and work as preexisting dichotomous structures. Their meanings are already fused to them; authoritative adult discourse has defined work and play as polar opposites. And so, predictably, the participants in this study spoke of the institutional bifurcation of work and play as being associated with either

adult-initiated or child-initiated activity. Nevertheless, these children also understood the terms work and play unofficially, that the key to play's meaning lies in its unfinalizability. Play can be this *and* that. It is context driven and situation specific. Yet, at the same time, play can be presented, recognized, and understood as finite and immutable. It is "doing what you want". The children whose voices inhabit this study rejected universal representations and meanings for play, instead relying on the particularities and situatedness of everyday events to determine their characterization and understanding.

Although all of the children interviewed acknowledged the ambiguity of play, threads of agreement, common knowledge, shared attitudes, viewpoints, and theories about play and its place in their life experiences are woven throughout the interviews. That these children agreed regarding the unfinalizability of play, its impact, and its importance to agency in their everyday lives is critical. Their deep understanding of play interrogates modernist assumptions about the concrete, simplistic thinking of young children, about representations of children as merely the receivers not the creators of knowledge. That these young children can recognize elements of contradiction and discontinuity within aspects of their lived experience places them well within the conceptual space of a postmodern childhood. Paradox and contradictoriness is acceptable. Meaning is local, temporal, and unfinalizable.



**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**“IT FEELS LIKE PLAY”:**  
**RESPONDING TO THE WORLD AS TEXT**

**Introduction**

Sooner or later” Bakhtin (1986) wrote, “what is heard and actively understood will find its response in subsequent speech or behaviour” (p. 69). “A human act is a potential text and can be understood...only in the dialogic context of its time” (p. 107). Similarly, a postmodern perspective in many ways invites all phenomena and events in our world to be regarded as text. Our responses to the world may be immediate, or they may be delayed, but, they are inevitable. And so, we become readers of the world as text, our responses made manifest in our sequent words and actions. Bakhtin likens the point of contact between texts, either spoken or written, to a flash of light, illuminating both what has come before and what will come after, into dialogue (p. 162). The essence of a text emerges only in its dialogic contact with the reader or the speaker. In this chapter I present, consider, and reconfigure certain theories and concepts in response to the ways of knowing about play the children articulated in the paired interviews, as points of contact between texts, as dialogue.

Everything children say and do is *directed toward* a response, *and is* a response to the world they have encountered. Children read the world as text, actively respond to it, and, consequently, come to understand its particularized meaning. Children’s playful social language functions as an essential and unique response to, and dialogue with, the world.

## **The World as Text**

Geertz (2005) urged anthropologists to extend the notion of text “beyond written material”, to focus their efforts upon one key question: “What does one learn from examining culture as an assemblage of texts?” (p. 83). The primary mandate of my research is to read children’s culture, to uncover deeper meanings, the “meta-social commentary” (p. 82) embedded in their playful social language, and to articulate how they strain to read *their* everyday encounters with the world as text. The world as text analogy forces us to reconfigure how we think about the prosaics of everyday life; social interactions become texts awaiting interpretation.

Rosenblatt (1978) wrote extensively about how readers focus their attention while reading. She presented literary theorists and educators with a new way to conceptualize the reading process. Her conceptual framework can be utilized to illustrate the stance children take toward their encounters with the world as text. Rosenblatt herself married similar ideas, stating that a “transactional view of the reading act is simply an exemplification...of the basic transactional character of all human activity,...especially linguistic activity” (p. 20).

Readers, she contended, position themselves either efferently or aesthetically with respect to a text. When responding from the efferent stance, they are primarily concerned with making connections between the text and the world outside the text. Their focus is upon the text’s utility, upon acquiring information (p. 23). Rosenblatt likened the efferent stance to a mother’s frantic reading of a label on a poisonous liquid. “She concentrates on what is assimilated for use after she has finished reading” (p. 24). Conversely, a reader may, in transaction with a text, take an aesthetic stance. Aesthetic reading, not unlike Britton’s (1993) characterization of speech in the spectator role (pp. 97-125), focuses upon a lived-through

experience which Rosenblatt refers to as a "poem" (p. 12). If responding aesthetically, the reader "pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that the[se] words and their referents arouse within him" (p. 25). An aesthetic response "fuses the cognitive and the emotive" (p. 46).

Rosenblatt was careful not to polarize reading stances. She acknowledged that texts *could* be read either aesthetically or efferently and that, even during a single encounter, a reader may alternate back and forth along the efferent-aesthetic continuum. Texts can be experienced at differing points on the continuum, depending upon circumstance. For Rosenblatt, the characterization of a reading as either efferent or aesthetic has much to do with personal engagement and positionality during the reading event. It is contextual, contingent. Although Rosenblatt was first and foremost a literary theorist, she did hint at the application of her response theory to extra-literary events as well. "This play of attention back and forth between the efferent and the aesthetic", she wrote, "is undoubtedly much more characteristic of our daily lives than is usually acknowledged" (p. 37).

Repeatedly the first graders depicted in this study availed themselves of opportunities to move along the continuum of experience, from the efferent to the aesthetic, often abandoning the utilitarian in favor of the playful. First, during the interview phase of the research, the children articulated understandings of the meaning of their life experience in terms of play and work which, in many respects, parallel Rosenblatt's theoretical spectrum of reader response. And, second, in class, the children's social language, samples of which I examine in Chapter Six, are rife with playful interaction, and represent an aesthetic, contingent, dialogic response to their experience of the world as text.

On the one hand, in class, the children took a transactional stance toward the world as text. They responded selectively to the world around

them, a notion that Rosenblatt insists is “central to the transactional view” forwarded by Dewey (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 17). Both scholars position themselves as pragmatists who “envision speaking and listening, writing and reading as interrelated aspects of the individual’s transactions with the environment” (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 383). Essential to understanding these children’s social language is determining what in their environment demanded their attention. In essence, the children responded in a manner similar to Rosenblatt’s (1978) aesthetic readers; they acted as “embryonic critic(s)” (p. 138) of the world around them. So, the question becomes... What *is it* about the world that engaged them? The answer lies in the video file of the participants’ in-class playful social language.

On the other hand, during the interview phase of the study, I posed questions to disinter the children’s implicit understanding of their lived experience, particularly their penchant for play. From their answers it became clear that they responded to and defined their lived experience in general, and their school experience in particular, as a reader might respond to a text, as points along an aesthetic-efferent continuum. Moreover, the children utilized this spectrum of experience to explain their understanding of work and play. At the efferent end of experience is work. At the aesthetic end is play. Key to this conceptual overlay is how the children, like those who read aesthetically, repeatedly made reference to how they felt during and about their experiences: whether or not they “*wanted*” to participate, whether or not it was “fun”, whether or not it “*felt like*” play. The children were focused upon play as a lived through experience, an aesthetic response to the world as text. Like Rosenblatt (1978) who insisted that aesthetic responses must be about “sensing, feeling, imagining, thinking” (p. 26), Celia theorized that the determining factor in characterizing an event’s position along the continuum was whether or not it *felt like play*.

Comfortable with ambiguity, the children who participated in this study readily acknowledged, articulated, and accepted that multiple meanings for their experiences were possible. They favoured shifting rather than fixed descriptors as they talked about the meaning of play. Their fuzzy definitions vacillated back and forth along the continuum in response to perceived changes in context and situation. Events can be experienced efferently or aesthetically, or, as work-like or play-like, dependent upon how an individual's attention is selectively focused. To read efferently is to concentrate upon information gleaned from the text: a product. An efferent reading of a text can be likened to, as Olivia suggested, "working at" reading.

Conversely, an aesthetic reading of a text is associated with qualitative lived experience, personal engagement, and emotion or, as Brooke reasoned, "reading for play". Those who read aesthetically concentrate more upon the process, the reading event, the coming-together with the text to create a poem. Both work and play, from the children's perspective, and efferent and aesthetic responses, from Rosenblatt's perspective, are defined situationally. Neither is exclusive of the other. A reader may respond aesthetically to a text in one instance, but efferently in another. Similarly, this study's participants characterize play and work as context specific. An activity can be considered to be play in one circumstance, yet, more like work in another. The difference lies in perspective.

### **Play as Discourse**

Based upon their responses during the interview phase of the study it seems safe to conclude that none of the children regarded any curricular classroom events as *purely* play. In fact, it seems quite clear from their comments during the interviews that, from their perspective, most classroom events fell well toward the work end of the continuum. Still,

several children did identify playful elements embedded in certain classroom activities: art was play for Kate; Tim, Brooke, Lauren, and Olivia recognized imaginative elements in mathematics and Writers' Club. Nevertheless, from my position as researcher and observer, elements of playful interaction appeared to be present repeatedly in the video file and in the children's in-class social interaction. Laughter, teasing, joking, pretending, imagining, game playing, all were documented on the tapes, and, in abundance. Yet, during the interviews, when they were asked to reflect upon their grade one experience, very few children recognized or admitted to playing during class time. Instead, they compartmentalized opportunities to play, associating them with non-curricular events: recesses, gym, and unstructured times. Still, close examination of the video file bears witness to play's unique place in these children's peer culture. It is a way of thinking, talking, and interacting that is firmly embedded in the prosaic events of their everyday lives. Conceptualized in this manner play functions as discourse, as social practice, as a shared way of being. The participants' playful social language created a sense of intimacy and solidarity that set them, and their discourse, apart from the formal adult-centric discourse of the classroom.

Regardless of whether or not the participants acknowledged play as being part of their official classroom interactions, my dialogic response to their social language suggests that play-as-discourse was present in each and every encounter video-taped in this study. It integrated the children's words and actions into a way of being through which they established their social identities and acquired their shared viewpoints, cultural models, and theories about the world. Play-as-discourse, which I also refer to throughout these chapters as playful social language, defined Jake, Evan, Celia, Ally, Olivia, Kate, Lauren, Chloe, Belle, Connor, Tim, and Brooke as insiders,

members of a social group, a peer culture, and imparted their talk with a dynamic, solidaric intersubjectivity.

Throughout their play discourse, their playful social language, the children unreflectively presupposed intersubjectivity, what Rommetveit (cited in Wertsch, 1985) declared to be "a shared social reality" (p. 160). Using their "speech imagination" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 81) the children's words were cast with a "certain compositional structure" (p.79) which determined their playful nature. And so, their play discourse emerged seamlessly and spontaneously from complementary intentions.

The children's play discourse was based upon their anticipation of "actively responsive understanding" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 97). It took on a speech genre-like quality. Through "continuous and constant interaction" (p. 89) among them the children's play discourse was constantly "rework[ed] and reaccentuat[ed]" (p. 89), the essence of intersubjectivity. And even though, like speech genres, the play discourse was "changeable, flexible and plastic" (p. 80), it did have normative significance.

Play as a discourse, is, to borrow Gee's (1992) frame of reference, social practice. Woven seamlessly throughout the children's talk in the videos, their play discourse appears to occur naturally, not deliberately, providing outsiders with recognizable manifestations of their culture. Playfulness was so much a part of the children's interaction that it seemed to guide them on an unconscious level. And, because its presence was so firmly entrenched in their social language, the children were, for the most part, unable to recognize its occurrence in their interactions. Conversely, my position as researcher, as adult, and as outsider, affords an opportunity to offer "metaknowledge" (Gee, 1992, p. 118), insights into the discourse, that its insiders, the children, may not distinguish.

There are particular discourses, those that sit “on the borderland” (Gee, 1992, p. 146), that marginalized groups develop and define in opposition to and in conflict with, more mainstream discourses. Mutual ways of knowing and common knowledge are shared among users. Gee asserts that the potential for the development of border-like discourses exists for all outside the mainstream. The young children who participated in my study of in-class social language occupy a discursive space where two disparate discourses collide, theirs, and the discourse of the adult world. However, it *is* a dialogic space, a space where one exists because of, not separate from, the other. Within their playful, unofficial social language, is an embedded response to the world as text: a discursive way of working out just what the world means, a way of actively participating in the social construction of their lives. Such a perspective on children’s social language considers their lives in relation to the mainstream world of adults, and recognizes the influences of one and the other.

## **Childhood and Agency**

### **Marginalized Children**

Undoubtedly, children exist outside the mainstream. From a developmentalist perspective, their discourses are fragmented and incomplete. Childhood and adulthood are seen as dichotomous points of the life course, opposite realms of existence. And, because they are seen as less than or developmentally immature, children are seldom free to interact without the proximate influence of adults. Their lives are managed and controlled, seemingly for all the right reasons, to ensure their emotional, physical, and personal well-being.

Still, the impact of children’s protection has been the intense regulation of their life-world with little opportunity for their voices to be recognized, heard, or valued. Because children are *not* adults and are



continuously subject to adult authority, they are rarely considered to be skillful interpreters of their lived experience or competent research participants in their own right. And so, education research, even into the twenty-first century, persists in characterizing children only as incomplete adults, not interesting in and of themselves. My study stands in opposition to the developmentalist tradition in its mandate to attend to children's current experience, to reveal how children interact as agentive members of their and our present, viable, and vibrant culture.

Irrespective of the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of my study, in actuality, children remain on the social periphery, marginalized, without the power of independent action, without privilege. Cannella and Virura (2004) challenge the biases that cause educators to privilege the knowledge of certain groups and not others. They refer to the legacy of colonialism, "the fixing of socially constructed categories as truth" (p. 6), which, they contend, perpetuates modernist assumptions about children and childhood (p. viii).

Colonizing power places certain others – at school, young children in particular – on the margins, or as Gee (1992) suggests, in the borderlands. And, in being marginalized there is a keen awareness of inequities of power that come to be understood in particular ways. Still, hooks (1990) sees marginality as Janus faced, not simply as a "site[s] of repression and ... resistance". The margins, she asserts, can also function as potential sites of "creativity and power" where the colonized can "move in solidarity" to overcome categorizations that have been affixed by the colonizing power (p. 342). From the margins alternate, possible worlds can be imagined (p. 341). Playful discourse is one way children work towards these ends.

## **Play Discourse and Children's Agency**

Discussion of marginality is not possible without discussion of agency. Acknowledging that there is a margin infers that there is a centre, a place of power and control that only the privileged inhabit. Officially, privilege, power and control at school belong to adults. But, what about the unofficial world of school? How can children position themselves as agents in a classroom setting? Or can they?

Close examination of the theoretical work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), I propose, provides a conceptual link between agency and the playful social discourse of the children who participated in this study.

What, then is human agency? We define it as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. This definition encompasses...different constitutive elements of human agency: iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation. (p. 970)

Although Emirbayer and Mische's argument is concentrated upon reconceptualizing adult agency and its relationship to structure, applying their theoretical framework to an analysis of children's social language holds promise. The authors' key contentions are of utmost importance to the use of play as a metaphor for agency: that agency evolves in response to problem situations, that imaginative distancing from habitual response leads to reflective, critical thought, and that agency develops temporally, as social actors live in the present, past, and future simultaneously.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose that, at different times and in differing contexts, people are more likely to be oriented toward the past, directed toward the future, or concentrated on the present. They speak of the "choral triad" (p. 970) to emphasize that all three dimensions of agency, the iterational, the projective, and the practical-evaluative, are present in varying degrees in empirical action.

The iterational element of agency refers to how social actors reactivate past patterns of thought and behaviour, routinized responses and habits, thereby maintaining unity, stability, and order. The projective element of agency "encompasses the imaginative generation ...of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively re-configured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future" (p. 971). And, the practical-evaluative element refers to the ability of actors to judge among those imagined possibilities in response to the "demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (p. 971).

It is the manner in which Emirbayer and Mische draw out the projective element of agency that is of particular relevance to this discussion. Through projection, they argue, individuals anticipate the future and imagine possible reconfigurations of present contexts. hooks' assertion, that from the margins possible worlds can be imagined, dovetails neatly with their central tenet, that agency is a temporal, problem-initiated social phenomenon.

Projection is the dimension of agency in which actors reconsider and reformulate what is known and established so that, instead of simply repeating past responses, they can invent "new possibilities for thought and action" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 983). When problems, inconsistencies, and challenges are encountered in daily life, individuals

distance themselves from the schemas that typically encumber their actions. Instead, they hypothesize, they focus their attention beyond the here and now, and into the future. Projection allows social actors to imagine what they want to do, and how their desires can be accomplished. Emirbayer and Mische acknowledge that the language individuals use to distinguish this “distancing” capacity ranges from the purposive to the ephemeral (p. 984).

The locus of agency in the projective dimension is the “hypothesization of experience” (p. 984). People redraw established schema by inventing alternatives, by exploring other possible responses to the problem situations they encounter. They move “beyond themselves, into the future”, imagining “where they think they are going, where they want to go. And how they can get there” (p. 984). Projectivity is situated between the constraints of the iterational dimension and the pragmatics of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. Thinking projectively requires movement toward reflectivity. And reflection, as Dewey (1938) envisioned it, occurs when individuals encounter problems or perplexities in their experience that cause them to assume a perspective of continuous inquiry (p. 97).

For Emirbayer and Mische the inner structure of projectivity is distinguished by primary and secondary “tones”. The dominant tones, “narrative construction, symbolic recomposition, and hypothetical resolution” are supported by the secondary tones, “identification” and “experimentation”, which orient individuals to other temporal dimensions (p. 988). Narrative construction enables actors to see their experiences as temporal, as moving forward through time, as parts of a story. Envisioning life experience in this manner makes visualizing resolutions to conflict easier. Because they are flexible and metaphoric, narratives help us to “experimentally posit” solutions to problems we encounter (p. 989).

Symbolic recomposition is key to understanding the projective imagination. Individuals innovate, take apart, and reconstitute elements of meaning in “new unexpected” ways (p. 989). Emirbayer and Mische propose that actors “playfully insert themselves into a variety of possible trajectories ...spin out alternative...sequences” (p. 990). Being thus freed of situational constraints, common practices and habits, established routines can be “creatively reconfigured” (p. 990). From the alternative possibilities that have been imagined “hypothetical resolution(s)” to problems are proposed, then tested in “tentative or exploratory social interactions” (p. 990). Connections to Vygotsky’s (1978) thought are unmistakable. The “tentative, exploratory interactions” that arise in response to life’s challenges echo his characterization of play as children’s response to “unrealizable tendencies” (p. 93).

Parallels also exist between Dewey’s (1933) characterization of playfulness and the projective dimension of agency. Dewey considers playfulness an escape from what Emirbayer and Mische refer to as the iterational aspects of life, the “schematization of social experience” (p. 975).

To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition. Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of the mind upon a topic. To give the mind this free play is ...to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its own account, apart from any subservience to a preconceived belief or habitual aim. (Dewey, 1933, p. 286)

The secondary tones of projectivity, identification, and experimentation orient us toward other time dimensions. Identification is a “retrospective-prospective” process whereby actors situate imagined alternatives in relation to their past experience. Experimentation, like play,

brings imagined solutions into the present through “tentative or exploratory” enactment of possible courses of action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 990).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conclude that the agentic processes that allow us to respond to the complexities and ambiguities of life are “preeminently dialogic and communicative” (p. 1013). Revisiting Bakhtin’s notion of the centralizing and decentralizing forces of language can clarify the dialogicity of agency to which Emirbayer and Mische refer. Iteration can be likened to centripetal forces at work in our daily lives, the established, the status quo. The projective aspects of agency parallel centrifugal forces of change, what can be imagined. For Bakhtin these essential forces intersect each utterance and maintain the dynamics of dialogue, its unfinalizability.

Bruner (1996) relates dialogue to agency and to collaboration noting the pivotal role of “the give and take of talk” (p. 93). Similarly, for Emirbayer and Mische (1998), as for the children highlighted in my research, “intersubjectivity, social interaction and communication” (p. 973) are crucial aspects of the agentic process at work in daily experience. Agency, they contend, is always dialogic, and responsive, always moving “toward something”, “persons, places, meanings, and events” (p. 973).

Not only can it be argued that playful social discourse is indicative of the projective dimension of agency in childhood, but it can also be proposed that playful talk provides a proving ground, a rehearsal for projectivity in adulthood. Through their playful discourse the children in my study demonstrated a blatant disregard for boundaries, an abandonment of the status quo, a free and unrestricted sense of the world, a penchant for turning life inside out. The carnivalesque aspects of the children’s playful discourse often stood in stark opposition to social conventions and routinized practices representative of the established social order. Exercising agency through playful discourse the children imagined “alternative futures” for

what they considered to be a “problematic present” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1006). In doing so their play became not simply an *agentive practice* but also *practice* for grappling with future problems.

Young children, by virtue of age and limited life experience, have fewer “taken-for-granted schemas of action” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 975) from which to choose when they encounter different or unknown contexts. And so, it is less likely that they would be able to rely exclusively upon iterational dimensions of agency. Paradoxically, the play discourse which is so firmly embedded in the social language of this study’s participants, not only functions projectively, but also iterationally. Play discourse is the children’s default mechanism, a routinized, habitual way of responding to life events, problems, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Accordingly, these young children readily “assume different simultaneous agentic orientations” (p. 964); their play discourse is both iterative and projective at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

Not surprisingly, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that the projective dimension of agency demands serious consideration as an area of empirical study. Projectivity is clearly under-researched, they contend, due simply to its ephemeral qualities, its subjective nature and the “apparent incompatibility of “imaginative” phenomena with behavioral observation” (p. 991). The authors also point to the interplay of agency and structure as an area that demands attention in the research community. On a micro level my research into children’s social language in class meets both criteria: it provides documentation of playful imaginative talk in a structured, institutional environment.

The extent to which people’s responses can be characterized as agentive is inextricably linked to the situations to which they are responding.

And so, for researchers, an essential question arises: Which contexts and circumstances evoke particular dimensions of agency? And for the purposes of this particular study, what specific contexts precipitate young children's agentive, and in this case, playful interaction?



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?**

#### **Introduction**

From close examination of the interview transcripts, it is clear that the children in this study recognize the limits placed upon them by the structures of the multiple worlds in which they live. Their repeated reference to play as “doing what you want” underscores its importance as an opportunity to exercise agency in their everyday lives. Their persistence upon the importance of freedom to choose echoes Bruner’s (1996) assertion that “agency presupposes choice” (p. 136). And, although their common sense views of play, like the term agency itself, reflect a “resonant vagueness” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963), it is clear that the children’s theories are firmly grounded in their lived experience, and that they are keenly aware of the myriad dichotomies and constraints that interpenetrate their lives. The recurrence of play discourse in the video file, coupled with the children’s clear preference for and characterization of play as articulated during the paired interviews, exposes a clear subtext: that these particular children recognize their precarious agentive positioning in the world.

The children’s play illuminates empirically aspects of agency that Emirbayer and Mische had the opportunity only to theorize. It exposes those cultural models that may be second nature to adults but that these children, at the very least, call into question. Until recently there has been much educational dialogue *about* young children but little *with* them. Early childhood has been and, for the most part, continues to be, a silent and invisible life-time. My research, in some small measure, recognizes children’s voices and presence as strategic social actors. Their contributions emerge

from authentic interviews and from their informal, spontaneous social conversations in class, away from adults, where they freely deconstruct the world and co-construct their response to it.

Together, through their social language and, in particular, through their play discourse, the children helped to create and maintain, but also, and most interestingly, to dispute the many existing structures and meanings they encountered in their daily lives. Their recurring talk about particular life experiences reveals a sense of problematization that imbues their understanding of the world. Using hypothesization, narrative construction, and symbolic recomposition in particular, they have redrawn established schema and invented alternative responses to the world texts they encountered. Critical to this study's success is identifying the specific situations that the children confront playfully and agentively through their social language. What issues do these children grapple with on a daily basis? And, in response, what alternative visions do they present of the world?

### **Reading the World as Gendered Text**

Through their play discourse the participants in the videos deconstruct, co-construct, and reconstruct the language and texts of the world to tease out possible meanings and implications for their present and future lives. As they struggle with the myriad "points of view, approaches, directions and values" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346) they encounter, the children move ever closer to establishing a sense of their own internally persuasive discourse, to constructing new knowledge, to discovering "ever new ways to mean" (p. 346).

Play as discourse arose repeatedly in the video file, most notably as the children struggled to wrest *their* "ways to mean" from authoritative, established ways. Recurring evidence of the children's agentive stance toward issues of gender foregrounds its distinctive place in their lived

experience as a potent issue that they feel compelled to address. Projective tones – hypothezations, narrative constructions, and symbolic recompositions – punctuate their play discourse and repeatedly call into question presuppositions about gender and behaviour that they encounter in their everyday lives. Interrogating taken for granted assumptions about gender is one way these children negotiate the processes and problems of growing older, and work out how to participate actively in, and make sense of, their place in a gendered world.

The video recordings of the children’s in-class social language reveal a complex weaving together of often conflicting beliefs about what it means to be gendered, the dichotomization of gender, and its implications for children’s life experience. For these children at least, several ways of being a girl or being a boy can be imagined. Entrenched dichotomies of maleness and femaleness are challenged and potentially non-dichotomous ways of thinking about gender are raised. Yet, at the same time, many traditional understandings of gender roles are taken for granted. The children actively take ownership of portions of existing gendered texts while they reject and, at times, reconfigure others. And so, the children’s play discourse about gender is *both* reproductive and generative simultaneously.

In this chapter three episodes from the video file have been selected and summarized for closer examination. These vignettes uncover the complexity, diversity, and contrariety of the children’s dialogic responses to the world as gendered text. Gender issues clearly provoke these children to imagine alternatives and in doing so, to develop their agentive capabilities.

**Vignette 1: “I want to be the girl!”**

(Kate & Chloe [2W12], Video Tape 12, May 10, 2006)

Kate and Chloe are chatting as they pull their chairs up to the table, side by side. After some negotiation – where they will sit, how they will

arrange their pencils, word cards, papers and tissue boxes – they settle down to tackle their assignment. The girls, along with their first grade classmates, have been instructed to select a few challenging reading or spelling words from their current PWIM picture, to print, and then to illustrate each word. In essence, they have been directed to create a personal picture dictionary from an established list of possible choices. A large format photograph of a chicken enclosure is affixed to a nearby wall. Surrounding the picture are a number of neatly printed words with lines drawn to corresponding objects. During a series of formal lessons the children had identified particular objects in the photograph thereby generating the word list. Together, the class and the teacher repeatedly practised spelling the words aloud during formal language arts lessons. This teaching strategy, known as the picture word inductive model (PWIM) (Calhoun, 1999) has been mandated for use in all primary classrooms in this particular school division.

The girls fold their papers, then examine their personal copies of the photograph and begin to select words for study. The silence between them is soon broken as, quietly at first, they hum and sing to each other. Their musical conversation involves turn-taking; first one sings, then the other replies. It reaches a crescendo as nonsense rhymes, repeated be-bops, and a rap-like rhythm infuse their songs. This musical interlude marks a transition from the girls' school discourse to their play discourse. Chloe moves her shoulders up and down and her head from side to side to the beat, then turns, reaches over and taps Kate's pencil lightly with her own. "Do you want to play with me?" her pencil asks, as it moves ever so slightly to the cadence of her voice.

Kate responds at once. "How about this one [indicating her pencil] is a girl and that one [indicating Chloe's] is a boy?" she suggests. Chloe's "no" is

almost inaudible. "And then," Kate continues unfazed, "they kiss". The top of her pencil tips towards Chloe's and they touch. Both make kissing sounds and then, Chloe's pencil proposes. "Do you want to get married? Do you want to have a baby?" Kate agrees cautiously. "We'll have to wait 'til it comes out!" she warns. She feigns the birth of their first pencil child. "It's coming out! It's coming out! See the point," she says, indicating the pencil lead. Transferring the pencil to her opposite hand, Kate drops her arm to her side. As she lifts her hand and rests it on the table top she wails, "Wah! Wah!" Then, in a soothing, nurturing, yet firm voice she commands Chloe's immediate attention. "Look at my baby!", she coos.

Chloe is resistant. She wants to exchange roles so that her pencil can "be the girl" and Kate's can "be the boy". Kate agrees. She quickly crafts yet another narrative; "And I was a boy. And I just kissed you." Suddenly rethinking her decision, Kate appeals to Chloe. She wants to "be the girl" again. When Chloe's pencil boy leans in for a kiss, Kate objects. "No! *I* kiss *him*," she counters thrusting her pencil toward Chloe's. Chloe laughs, then insists upon her pencil's turn in the female role. "I'm the girl", she proclaims. And Kate finally agrees.

Chloe reaches across the table, pulls a tissue from her box, and wraps her pencil in a white tissue gown. "I'm getting changed into my bride outfit," she explains. "And I'm getting into my tuxedo," Kate counters. The girls show each other their wedding clothes. Then Kate lays her pencil down on the table and opens the tissue tuxedo that she had so carefully wrapped around it. Pointing below the midpoint on the pencil she draws Chloe's attention to a place where she imagines the pencil boy's genitals would be. She then asks Chloe to show her "bum". Kate chastises herself; "Why did I say that?" she wonders aloud. Chloe gasps. Still, rather than amend the narrative, Chloe unwraps the gown and exposes her naked pencil.

As they play, Kate repeatedly looks over her shoulder toward the other side of the classroom. There, the teacher and her educational assistant are interacting with other children. Kate then quickly snatches the tissue from under her pencil boy, blows her nose, walks to the trash can, and, glancing again toward the teacher, throws her tissue away. Chloe follows. Both resume their assignment as soon as they are seated. No further discussion of the play scenario ensues. Again, Chloe sings. Kate writes, then erases, deliberately shaking the table. Just as the bell rings Chloe remarks that Kate has accomplished little. Both girls gather their belongings. As they head for their desks, Chloe repeatedly admonishes Kate: "You're a bad girl, bad, bad, bad!"

### **Interpretation/Analysis**

Clearly "being the girl" is important to both Chloe and Kate, yet, it is important in different ways. Through their pencil play discourse, the girls confront the process of growing up, "being a girl", and their anticipated participation in particular social rituals and social institutions: courtship, marriage, and family. Embedded in their play are certain perspectives about gender roles, about the traditional relationship between males and females, about what it means to "be a girl", and about the limitations of being a child in a world controlled by adults. Their playful interaction is a dialogic response to the gendered texts they encounter and upon which they both depend.

Through their play Kate and Chloe acknowledge the temporality of their childhood, and look to the future. Together they enact a narrative construction which presents both open and closed perceptions of the possibilities of their life course and their social roles. The girls' play discourse evolves from a familiar life course narrative: the relationship between males and females. Key to crafting the narrative is their shared understanding of

typical life course trajectories that are embedded in the gender discourse of the world. This becomes a “stock of prior knowledge” that initiates both their projective and iterative agentive playful behaviors. For Chloe, the routinized, familiar, traditional evolution of the story is enough. For Kate, however, everyday gender roles and expectations pose some problems.

The differing cultural narratives that frame each girl’s understanding of gender roles are easily recognizable in their pencil play. In many ways Chloe is a traditional girl. For her, the life course is clear: you kiss, you marry, then you have a baby. For Chloe there is an expectation that “past patterns of experience will repeat themselves” (Emibayer & Mische, 1998, p. 979). She is solely reliant upon her personal experience of family and gender relationships and has yet to identify any problems inherent in sustaining and reproducing these habitual practices. Her agentive orientation toward the gender discourse of the world appears to be iterative, tacit, and unreflective.

Chloe presents herself publicly and privately as a good, nice, quiet, compliant girl. She values femininity, being pretty, wearing fashionable skirts and dresses. And, she is unabashedly proud of her collection of “more than a hundred dollies” (Interview 2, Lauren and Chloe, June 14, 2006). Each morning she arrives at school pulling a pink suitcase-like backpack on rollers. She seeks attention for her appearance, and delights in showing off her seemingly endless wardrobe of new clothes and shoes. Although she occasionally wears pants to school, they are always paired with a matching top, which she pointedly refers to as an “outfit”. Chloe is, without doubt, a girly girl.

For Kate however, gender roles and gendered behaviors seem more layered. Like Chloe, she presents a public persona that is obedient and compliant. For example, during the paired interview, when she and Olivia were in conversation with an adult, Kate answered questions carefully,

focusing perhaps too much, on right answers. When asked to describe “what goes on in grade one”, her response ventriloquates the authoritative voice of the teacher.

You have to work very hard...You do lots of math and stuff. How to read and how to learn to spell stuff... Use your ignoring skills because that’s how you learn to grow up. Don’t yell. Don’t run in the hallway. Lift up your hand to speak. (Interview 1, Olivia & Kate, June 14, 2006)

When asked what happens when children talk to her in class, Kate’s response is that of the consummate student. “Then I say, “Can you please stop?”

Nevertheless, in more intimate settings, such as the one described here with Chloe, when others, particularly adults, are less likely to be paying attention, Kate cautiously experiments with ways of being. And, when she interacts with her peers, Kate’s behaviour is less compliant, less focused on the rules. She fences with Tim, makes faces at the camera, teases Connor, fools around with Belle, and discusses eating glue and poop with Brooke and Ally. Yet, she is always on guard, warning others that their interactions are being taped, checking to ensure that her peers and her teachers have the right perception of her, implying that she recognizes aspects of her play discourse may be inappropriate for a good girl.

Kate’s public and private personas are, at times, at odds with each other. Like Chloe, Kate is well dressed, often in the latest designer clothes. Her slim, tanned frame, doe-brown eyes, and sleek, long hair are the epitome of Western culture’s notion of beauty and femininity. Kate clearly dominates the exchange described in the vignette although it is Chloe who initiates the play discourse. Kate manages the play narrative and directs the way the story evolves. With Chloe, Kate’s behaviour is edgy; she pushes



boundaries and challenges traditional gender stereotypes. For Kate, it is acceptable to have a child and then marry. It is acceptable that her pencil girl is the sexual aggressor. She initiates the kiss; "No, I kiss him!" she insists.

The kiss produces a more traditional response from Chloe who immediately moves the narrative forward in time, from courtship to the proposal of marriage. "Do you want to get married? Do you want to have a baby?" she asks. Even at age six Chloe's understanding of gender roles appears to be fixed. During the paired interviews, as she describes her favourite play scenario, she positions females as inferior, subordinate, and incompetent, and makes a crucial observation about the effect of motherhood on women's lives.

You know just how moms get pregnant, when they get married with a husband? And the husband's like working? Like a really late shift. And she's pregnant and just walking in the house and getting food.(Interview 2, Lauren & Chloe, June 14, 2006)

Kate accepts the normalized social sequence embedded in Chloe's proposal. That is, she works within a traditional, heterosexual life course narrative framework. Still, she explores a more agentic role for *her* female character in the story and, through her insistence upon directing the narrative, she places herself in an agentic position as well. Kate is sentient of the intimacies of marriage at a more complex level than Chloe. She knows that marriage is more than "getting into a bride outfit... and a tuxedo" and that giving birth is a life altering event. Her knowledge of the sexual nature of marriage is laid bare as she unwraps her pencil boy and requests that Chloe's pencil girl expose herself.

Kate is also aware that disclosing her knowledge of and interest in the sexual implications of male-female relationships crosses boundaries that

determine appropriate child's play, that the narrative she is crafting lies on the edge of acceptability. Her sexual knowledge is fragmentary. Still she is aware that particular gestures and topics are prohibited and fraught with special meaning. Kate's attention to such matters in many ways calls into question prevailing social constructions of the child as naive and innocent. Although Chloe focuses upon the romanticized meanings underlying gender relationships, Kate draws more upon sexual meanings to construct her understanding of future life course possibilities.

Kate's broader knowledge base presents more complex gender and life course roles from which to choose than Chloe's traditional experience and knowledge dictate. Nevertheless, together, from their current, disparate understandings of gender roles and gender discourse, the girls create a narrative which, in its simplicity, raises pertinent, complex questions about what "being a girl" really means.

Even so, to construct the narrative together the girls must experience a certain degree of intersubjectivity, of shared purpose, and of unspoken agreement to engage in play. Kate determines how the pencil play narrative will unfold. And Chloe acquiesces to her dominance throughout the scenario. Although she clearly disapproves, and determines that Kate's edgy sexually charged behaviors are "bad", Chloe makes little effort to exert control. She surrenders pencil girl to pencil boy's request to "show her bum". She is subservient and voiceless; her objections, almost inaudible.

Kate, on the other hand, is assertive and independent during their pencil play. She resists the traditional ways of "being the girl" that Chloe has embraced, while still actively maintaining implicit traditional positions as wife, mother, girl friend. Her understanding of "being the girl" invites more possibilities for action, a wider range of practices, more ways to be.

Through their pencil play narrative and their character voicing, both girls enact a particular understanding of gender identities and ideologies. Their play discourse unwraps their knowledge of and attitude toward male-female relationships. Chloe covers her pencil in a white gown. Kate uncovers hers, exposes her knowledge, challenges the status quo, and crosses boundaries. Her play discourse calls traditional gender roles into question and, at the same time, stands in stark opposition to established, predetermined, Westernized views of childhood, to the presumption that young children are primarily asexual beings.

For Kate, being in control is crucial. She deftly constructs the narrative so that the character she plays, regardless of gender, is the one who makes decisions and initiates action. She is keenly aware that her ideas are at odds with what adults may see as acceptable. The development of the story narrative, her self-admonition, and her deliberate attempts to veil the girls' play from adult gaze uncovers a great deal more than a child's simple recognition of and fascination with taboo subjects. Kate is keenly aware of the gap existing between children and adults, her social place as a child, and the expectations that accompany that place.

Kate is conscious that the scenarios she crafts cross boundaries. She is aware of the limitations adults place upon what kids say and do, adults' definition of appropriate children's discourse. Recognizing her behavior as resistant to, or at odds with those cultural norms, Kate makes every effort to avoid detection. She repeatedly steals furtive glances across the classroom to ensure that adults remain excluded from her conversation with Chloe.

At school children often shield their play discourse from potential interference by adults. They maintain a separate social space, an underground network of relationships, a distinct culture. This becomes most evident during unstructured and relatively unsupervised times such as

recesses when children have opportunities to make choices far from adult gaze. All schools provide adult supervision during school breaks but, in reality, two or three adults cannot control the actions of several dozen students. And children know this.

Most children, like Kate, are keenly aware of the restrictions that adults place upon their movements, their associations, and their discourse. Often, when children interpret their actions to be in opposition to adult rules and norms, they choose to move their social interaction to a separate space or, to designate a separate space for it: the edge of the playground, the end of the line, or, in the case of these particular children, the back table in the classroom. Children ardently protect their culture and their discourse from adult gaze. They whisper, pass notes, all the while, like Kate, feigning subservience. Kate repeatedly scans the classroom noting the adults' locations. To avoid detection she wraps unsanctioned behavior in sanctioned behavior; she pretends to use the tissue to blow her nose rather than as a pivotal prop in a sexually suggestive play scenario.

Like Kate, who guards her secret back table conversation with Chloe from adult intervention, other participants in the study compartmentalized the classroom into two definitive social spaces. The back table, separated from the desk pods and instructional areas of the classroom, was the children's space, an unofficial place, *in* the classroom, yet away from direct adult control. And it was treated differently as a result. Social talk was incessant among the children who sat together there, while talk among children who sat at their desks, in the official space, adjacent to the back table, was notably less frequent.

The children were accustomed to using the back table for a variety of purposes: completing assignments, reading together, sharing, talking, drawing, writing. Being there was a familiar part of the daily routine, a

natural part of their classroom experience. Because of the nature of my research question, the back table emerged as the most appropriate place in the classroom for collecting video data. Adult presence in the video space was deliberately minimized in an effort to ensure that the children's talk was, indeed, their naturally occurring social language, untainted by interaction with adults. That said, there were a limited number of occasions when adults did enter the video space, either to retrieve supplies or to respond to children's occasional requests. The children guarded their play discourse from the anticipated interference of those adults. Without exception, in the immediate presence of adults, play discourse ceased, then resumed again when the children were alone.

**Vignette 2: "That's a girl. But it's really a boy. But it's a girl."**

(Jake & Olivia [2W19], Video Tape 14, May 15, 2006)

Olivia's tawny hair is fastened in braids that fall forward as she writes. A few moments pass before Jake arrives. He greets Olivia, drops his supplies on the table and plunks himself onto the chair beside her. Jake is big for his age, a sturdy boy, slow moving, quiet, and thoughtful. Jake and Olivia are about to write in their journals. Journal writing is a weekly occurrence in the classroom. The children's journal pages are divided into two areas: one space for drawing, another for writing. Olivia and Jake talk about their families as they write and draw. First, they tell each other vacation stories: stories about catching fish, tubing, waterskiing, peeing in the lake. Then they discuss their ages, how age compares with size, and the likelihood of the existence of giant babies, babies big enough to reach outer space. They gossip about a boy they both know, who, they determine, "screams like a girl". They talk about playing "real hockey", the kind that involves "hitting and body checking". And, in hushed tones, they discuss having "accidents",

wetting the bed and getting sick. Their conversation moves seamlessly from one topic to another, from reality to fantasy, with few silences between.

Jake muses aloud about the picture he is drawing in his journal. He has decided to write about his brother and is contemplating the colour he should use to draw his brother's shoes. He decides on black. As Jake reaches for his black pencil, Olivia leans over, and places her hand on his pencil case which lies between them on the table. "You know what would be funny, Jake... if you made him pink shoes." Jake smiles, then agrees and selects a pink pencil crayon instead. "You know what would be even funnier?" she continues, "If you gave him long hair that was in braids, or pig-tails." Jake laughs, "I know, I know. I'll give him long hair and pink braids! I'm going to do it! Black hair and pink braids" Jake rummages through his pencil case searching for another pencil, "Long hair, long hair, long hair," he repeats and laughs.

Olivia continues writing, occasionally smiling and glancing over at the picture Jake is drawing. Jake laughs out loud. "What do braids look like?" he asks. Olivia turns her head to the side, grabs one of her braids, and pulls it out from her shoulder. "Like that?...Weird," Jake responds. Olivia abandons her writing and watches intently as Jake draws. "He looks pretty. Like a girl basically. He looks nice like that." She raises her eyebrows, then goes on, "It would be even weirder, if you put him in a dress!" "I'm gonna put him in a dress! I'm gonna put him in a dress," Jake chants as he dives into his case and grabs the next available pencil. Olivia then offers a helpful hint, how to make his brother's pink shoes into "high heels". Jake is excited, eager to complete his brother's transformation. He sketches furiously, his legs bouncing up and down on the floor beneath the table.

Olivia rests on her elbow, moving in closer as Jake draws. "Are you going to tell him about this?" she queries. Jake is reluctant at first. "He'd kill

me," he explains. Then, throwing caution to the wind, he continues, shaking his head, "But I don't care!" Olivia suggests ways Jake could appease his brother, hypothetical apologies, excuses for his behaviour. Then they refocus their attention upon Jake's journal drawing.

Olivia offers another suggestion. "You could make lines like this," she says, turning to face Jake and moving her left hand across her chest in two linked semi-circles. Jake seems puzzled, so she demonstrates on her paper. Jake giggles and lowers his head to the table. "It would make him look like he had breasts." "Make them big and hanging down. And that would be even funnier," Olivia adds. "Put a princess crown on him," she continues. Jake can hardly contain his laughter, "You do it, do it," he implores her. He watches intently as Olivia draws the crown and listens closely as she describes how to make it. "There," she says. The crown is finished. Olivia places Jake's pencil on the table. He is gleeful. "What about a jewel on it?" he suggests, picking up his pencil. "Do you want me to draw a necklace for him?" Olivia offers. Jake grins and eagerly hands her the pencil. "Put a heart on it," he directs and Olivia agrees. But the piercing sound of the lunch bell interrupts them.

Lunch hour over, the pair return to the back table. They note the repeated absence of one of their classmates and wonder if he has moved away. They chat about him, about whether or not he "likes" Olivia, about how Jake "pretends" to be his friend. Jake plays a magic disappearing pencil trick. Olivia is skeptical. But Jake persists, insisting that he is not "switching hands". After bantering back and forth about the authenticity of Jake's magic they refocus their attention upon completing their journal writing assignment and resume their earlier conversation.

Olivia examines Jake's picture, then points toward it with her pencil. "That's a girl. But it's really a boy. But it's a girl." "It's my brother," Jake mumbles. He adds conversation balloons to his drawing that testify to his

brother's love of a girl named Taylor. Olivia's attention is split between writing in her journal and collaborating with Jake about his. "How do you spell crush?" he asks. "Sound it out," she counters, and Jake complies. Olivia watches thoughtfully as he writes, then makes another suggestion, that Jake place this story in the class newspaper. "Next time, next time," Jake agrees nodding. (Each Monday two students selected to share their weekend news which is subsequently published in the class newspaper. Crafting the stories is an integral part of language arts instruction in the classroom. A printed copy of the newspaper is sent home with each child and a master copy is displayed in the hallway next to the classroom door. Children from other classes can often be seen lingering in the hallway outside the grade one class reading the current edition of The Grade One News.)

Olivia glances at Jake's picture. "Hey, you forgot to do the breasts!" she reminds him. As they discuss the different breast shapes – "big, long ones", "fat ones", "huge ones", "tiny, tiny ones" even "Lego ones" – they draw representations of the various possibilities in the margins of Olivia's journal paper.

### **Interpretation/Analysis**

The interaction between Jake and Olivia is infused with an aura of contagious excitement, risk taking, rule breaking, and limit-testing. Through the drawing they create together of Jake's 'brother', they enter a forbidden sexually related discourse that plays with notions of gender ambiguity. Prior to first grade Olivia and Jake were strangers. Jake had recently relocated from out of province and was carefully negotiating his place in the social matrix of the neighborhood and the classroom. Olivia, on the other hand, benefits from a wide social network in the neighborhood. She lives a few doors from the school, on the same block as several of her classmates. Her mother grew up in the neighborhood and her maternal grandparents live



close by. She comes from a closely knit family structure; aunts, uncles, and cousins play an extensive role in her daily life. Olivia walks to school with her mom every day and, when her parents are working, goes home for lunch to her grandparents'.

Jake's weekdays begin early. He lives with his mother and older brother on the fringes of the neighborhood. His father and other family members live elsewhere. Jake misses the friends and the fun he had in Kindergarten and admittedly loathes the "humongous bunch of work" he is confronted with in first grade (Interview 6, Evan & Jake, June 14, 2006). Captivated by science fiction, and the super-heroes of popular culture, he uses this knowledge and his imagination to gain a foothold in the social network of his new classroom. He very much wants to make friends in his new school. Bright and imaginative yet lacking motivation, Jake is a classic under-achiever.

Their lived experience places Jake and Olivia in separate social worlds. It is this difference that becomes the impetus driving the earliest portions of their conversation. Rommetveit (1979) suggests that the simple act of telling someone about something and the other's active listening in response, in itself, creates a jointly committed "temporarily shared social world" (p. 10). The early portion of Jake and Olivia's conversation involves the sharing of information, small talk, a way of getting to know each other better, a way of transcending their disparate private worlds. Their discussion moves seamlessly, without pauses or awkward silences, from one topic of life experience to another. They talk about family, friendship, growing up, gaining control over their bodies, and their definitions of male and female behaviour. They gossip about the web of relationships, the social dynamic, that exists between boys and girls in their class, about who likes whom, about maleness and femaleness, about how certain children either fit or do

not fit gender stereotypes. And they tell each other stories. Only after establishing some sense of a shared social world, a state of intersubjectivity, does Olivia steer the conversation into more controversial territory.

Olivia and Jake's ensuing talk challenges the gender scripts and schemas that they encounter in everyday life. They create a representation of a male, Jake's brother, who is illustratively female and is dressed "like a girl". Prohibitions that prevent boys from adopting female characteristics are firmly entrenched in Western culture, more so, it seems, than those that prevent girls from adopting stereotypical male characteristics. In the social milieu of this particular classroom, there seems to be an openness to variety of ways to be a girl. Belle's popularity, for example, may shed light upon Jake's and Olivia's fascination with androgyny.

Belle is a self-described tomboy, an extremely popular child with both her male and female classmates. Her unique social position in the classroom became glaringly apparent in May when the children were asked by their teacher to complete a sociogram. On a small piece of paper the children recorded the names of four classmates with whom they would like to sit for the remainder of the school year. The sociogram yielded some predictable and some surprising results. Belle was the only girl to choose boys; in fact, she chose boys and girls equally as friends. All other girls in the class chose girls exclusively. And, one third of the girls in the class selected Belle. Results from the boys yielded some unforeseen results. Tim was the only boy to choose boys exclusively. All the other boys chose Belle as one of their favourites. What is it about Belle that made her so popular with both boys and girls?

For Belle play is powerful and enticing. She has a rich imagination that is inconveniently interrupted by the demands of her school life. She sees play as an intrinsic part of childhood. "If we didn't play, what would we do?",

she asks, tilting her head, her brow furrowed. (Interview 4, Belle and Connor, June 14, 2006). Her penchant for play is a social bridge between herself and others, particularly between her and her male classmates. Belle transforms curricular events into fun! She laughs, sings, teases, play fights, pretends. She is immersed in the furby-play culture of the classroom and readily admits that she is keen to overcome the chasm between work and play, to transform each and every curricular experience into "fun".

Belle challenges the way the world is polarized, particularly along gender lines. Dichotomies hold implicit presuppositions that, even at this young age, she rejects. Embedded within her interactions and her discourse is an openness to the possibility of non-dichotomous thinking-in-action. When the French teacher requests that the boys and girls arrange themselves in separate lines, Belle defiantly places herself in the middle. She knows she is not a girly-girl. For Belle, gender is neither fixed nor dichotomous. "I'm a tomboy", she proclaims. Belle crosses gender boundaries every day. Her best friend is a boy. Every Wednesday afternoon she can be found amid a group of boys, examining a collection of dinosaur books in the school library. She pretends to be a boy as she rides on the school bus with Kate; "I'm gonna dress up like a boy and marry Kate. And she'll be the girl. Then we'll get married and have a baby" (Field notes, May 18, 2006).

Belle's popularity with her classmates underscores the relative acceptability of girls who display male characteristics. Traditionally, emotions and behaviours have been gender-differentiated. Distinctly male behaviors are generally more valued and respected than those typically characterized as feminine. The boys and girls in this class are drawn to Belle because she is not *just a girl*. She is a girl who often behaves like a boy. Her gendered behaviours exist along a continuum. Her appeal is in her tacit challenge of

the world's authoritative, and often gendered texts, and in her accessibility as a peer in both groups.

Similarly, Jake and Olivia's fascination with androgyny, captured in their playful drawings of Jake's brother, call into question firmly entrenched gender discourses. Is gender dichotomous? Or can it be something else? As the picture of Jake's brother is transformed, the duo take risks, cross boundaries and defy convention. Gendered identities, trappings, schema – the cultural landscape of femininity and masculinity – are called into question. The possibility of gender ambiguity is raised.

That Jake and Olivia play with these ideas indicates a certain level of understanding of them. They know enough of the culture, its gender scripts and schemas, to turn it on its head. Resisting official regulations on behaviour and discourse, breaking the rules, is agentive behaviour. The more bizarre their drawing becomes, the more gender rules they transgress, the more imaginative the distance Olivia and Jake place between themselves and the stable categories, values, and beliefs of the authoritative gender discourse of the world in which they live.

Imagination is key to the symbolic recomposition that occurs as Jake and Olivia reconfigure the drawing of his brother. The pink hair, the high heels, the braided hair, the jewelry, hearts, and breasts are the gender trappings that Olivia and Jake both recognize as feminine. Free play with these symbols of femininity, the joint activity upon which they are focused, dialogizes privileged gender texts, stripping them of their authority (Bakhtin, 1981).

Furthermore, the children's attention to these feminine trappings and physical attributes underscores their awareness of the objectification of females. The girl they create is a compilation of parts, some physical and some material, which together transform Jake's brother into a girl. As the

drawing is reconfigured the children struggle with key gender issues, among them, the difference between sexual difference and gender difference. Do breasts on a boy make a boy a girl? Olivia's claim, once their drawings are complete, that Jake's brother is a girl, meets with disagreement from Jake. "He's my brother," Jake objects.

Olivia's proposal that they make their drawing of Jake's brother public meets with impassioned objections; "He'd kill me!" he protests. Jake's resistance points to his understanding of the authority of the world's gender texts, the cultural sanctions for and against certain ways of being a boy. The suggestion that they publish the journal entry in the classroom newspaper is clearly an agentive step on Olivia's part. Although publication would most likely be stonewalled by authority figures, the duo's playful discourse proposes a real-life, albeit hypothetical, resolution to their imagined project. If published, the journal entry would place the discussion of sex and gender among children into a public forum, an overt challenge to authoritative, adult-controlled gender discourses.

Both Jake and Olivia are intrigued with the possibilities their dialogue has unveiled. Olivia is the obvious instigator; she makes suggestions, shows how, directs. Deliberative and calm, she guides Jake as he transforms his drawing. Although Olivia initiates, Jake is visibly excited by how their actions turn gender scripts inside out, at times physically struggling to contain his excitement. This air of contagious excitement enhances the dialogicity and sense of intersubjectivity between them.

### **Vignette 3: "I'm going to join the team!"**

(Tim, Lauren, & Connor [3W5], Video Tape 16, May 23, 2006)

It is an unseasonably warm day. The classroom window is open. Sounds filter in: birds' spring songs, the caretaker's mower, a breeze whispering through soft, green leaves. And sounds filter out: children's

laughter, intercom announcements, the teacher's voice directing students. Recess has just ended and Tim, Lauren, and Connor gather at the back table. Connor stands at the far end of the table in his olive camouflage patterned shorts and shirt. Tim and Lauren are seated alongside each other. Tim wears his usual athletic jersey and Lauren's sleeveless shirt matches her pink shorts. They are about to begin an art project, making turtles from paper plates, and construction and tissue paper. The first step involves covering an inverted paper plate with small, overlapping pieces of colourful tissue paper. The desired effect is that, when dry, the plates will resemble turtle shells. A mixture of white glue and water is available to bond the tissues to the plates. In class the children have been studying the life cycles of various oviparous creatures, among them, turtles. Earlier their teacher provided them with the instructions and equipment necessary to complete the task independently.

Tim, Lauren, and Connor sort the art supplies as they joke about the colours they will use to make their turtles' shells. "Oooh! I'm using brown," Connor decides. "It doesn't matter what colour you use", Lauren assures him. "Then I'm gonna use pink!" Tim counters. And they all laugh. Once settled, the trio rehash their recent social time together at recess. It is obvious from their conversation that a chase game has been occurring regularly on the playground which involves Tim, Lauren, and several of their classmates. Connor has been away from school recently but is anxious to be part of the game. "Now I'm going to join the team. Let's get her!" he says to Tim, indicating Lauren.

Tim glues tissues onto his turtle shell and listens intently as together Lauren and Connor begin to create a hypothetical narrative about boys chasing girls. All the children at school are part of the chase game. Then unexpectedly, most of the boys drop out and hide, leaving Connor, Tim,

Jake, and two other first grade boys to continue the chase. Connor narrates. "We can beat them," he urges. But the others, who are hiding, express doubts that the few boys who are left will emerge victorious. "Nice speech boys. But I think you'll need better than that!" Connor's tone modulates as he takes on the many male personas he has created. He plays himself, remaining members of his chase group, as well as those who have abandoned the chase. Lauren is the voice of the girls. She offers to let the boys beat them, "if they want to". Connor's boys are eager until Lauren explains that the composition of the groups has changed. No longer are only children involved. Now Moms and Dads have joined the chase. Moms get off work to participate. And, Connor adds excitedly, kids "skip school" so that everyone can take part in "the fight". Connor flails his right arm back and forth as he stabs the air. "Charge," he yells.

All three children work on their turtle shells as they script the story. Lauren and Connor direct the action, and Tim offers a few additions. Intermittently their conversation returns to their present assignment. They discuss their progress, replenish their paper supplies, and, once again, comment on colour choices. Then, without negotiation, discussion, or explicit planning, their conversation reverts to their hypothetical chase narrative.

Lauren resumes the story by declaring that all the boys in the world are killed by the girls, except for Tim and Connor. Connor facetiously suggests that the argument between the boys and girls could be settled more peacefully, "with a game of chess!" Instead of chess, Lauren moves the imaginary drama into real time by playfully punching both boys' arms and declaring them to be "dead". Connor however, defies death. "You can't kill me," he drones. He shifts his weight stiffly from one leg to the other. He has come back from the grave, a ghost! Lauren laughs, but is unfazed. She

and the other girls have survived and emerge victorious. "Now we can play anything!" she declares, celebrating the girls' freedom.

Connor returns to his narration of the story but Lauren questions his logic. "Who actually buried them?" she wonders. The girls certainly would not have done it, Tim interjects. But, because of their supernatural powers, the boys *could* have buried themselves, he reasons. And then, with his paintbrush, Tim demonstrates a variety of similarly death defying acts. He deftly slides his paintbrush, now a "sword", alongside his face so that, from Lauren's perspective, it appears that he has been stabbed in the face.

The trio hypothesizes about how their experience would be altered as resurrected beings: about how their bodies would be changed, about their ability to feel pain and about their awareness of social conventions. Tim, assuming his ghost persona, wonders aloud, "Am I naked or something?" Connor cups his hand over his mouth and moves his head close to Tim, "Secretly, you have boobs!" he whispers, and all three laugh. Lauren and Connor imagine how others will treat Tim now that he is a boy with boobs. "Everyone will be looking at you", Connor teases. Tim says very little. His head rests in his left hand as he continues to paste tissue onto his turtle shell. When Connor laughs, Lauren reminds him that he, too, would have "boobs". Tim turns to Connor and grabs the front of his t-shirt. Connor quickly flashes the other two, lifting his shirt to expose his nipples, then quickly puts it down again. Boys with girls' body parts "would be scary" Lauren admits. She asks the boys if they have seen the movie *Freaky Friday*. Because neither of them is familiar with the film, Lauren briefly outlines the plot; the story of a teenage girl and her mother who exchange bodies. The teenage girl, she determines, "looks good either way".

The children continue to glue pieces of tissue onto the paper plates as together they create other hypothetical scenarios. The next one is brief and



takes a video game format. Lauren is the protagonist in this narrative. All the boys are trying to get her but she jumps away, eluding capture. Connor joins in, but Tim perishes. "Let's glue her," Connor proposes as the story concludes. Tim teases Lauren with his sticky paintbrush, tapping its bristles on her bare legs. She laughs, but then objects, stating that her clothes are new. Still, he continues. Lauren retaliates and a paintbrush sword fight ensues. Connor carries on, gluing tissues in place, watching and listening as the other two fence. Then, with paintbrush in hand, he gets up and warns the others to "settle down". But eventually, he joins in the fun, tapping both Tim and Lauren with his sticky, wet brush.

Lauren begins another narrative. This one involves a girls' club where boys are "not allowed". She describes how male intruders are trapped downstairs in a cage and how one of the boys, a teenager, cries because he is afraid of the dark. Connor joins the storytelling. "All the boys start laughing. And the rest are babies," he adds. "I'm a teenager boy and I'm ascaed (sic) of the dark", Tim squeals, taking on the role of the frightened boy. Lauren leaves to retrieve more tissue and, when she returns explains that she deliberately chose the only remaining blue pieces for the boys, alluding to Tim's earlier joke about wanting to use pink tissues for his turtle's shell. Tim snacks on potato chips that he has stashed beneath an extra paper plate. As he eats he reads aloud from the newspaper that covers the table. "Showers, showers, showers", he reads, his head bobbing up and down to the rhythm of his words. Stretching his arms upward and rubbing his armpits, he pretends to take a shower. Then he muses aloud that he hopes no one has seen his "private parts". "We did," Lauren taunts, leaning toward him, smiling broadly. And, once again, they all laugh.

## **Interpretation/Analysis**

Uneven, complex, and contradictory. Lauren, Tim, and Connor craft a series of playful narratives that traverse the complex genderscape of their young lives. Their carnival-like play scenarios draw from the gender roles, scripts, schemas, and stereotypes of life as they know it, and frequently turn them inside out.

Threads of evaluation and criticism are interwoven throughout the trio's playful, narrative constructions that juxtapose normalizing centripetal forces of the world's gender texts with critical, creative, centrifugal forces of their carnival-like interaction. Through their on-going informal and unofficial talk, the dynamic process of meaning making about the genderscape of children's lives is revealed. Tensions, questions, and preoccupations about gender relationships take centre stage. Rules, norms, and prescriptions are often suspended, or at the very least, called into question. In an atmosphere similar to Bakhtin's (1984) depiction of the world of carnival; a sense of freedom, familiarity, and eccentricity reigns. The laughter that infuses the children's talk is directed toward cultural norms, stereotypes, and the so-called truths that have been presented to them about gender.

Like Kate and Chloe and like Jake and Olivia, Connor, Tim, and Lauren's play discourse at the back table differs from the other official social languages and genres of school. Their playful, carnivalesque interaction is unofficial, set apart from the official hierarchy of the classroom. These children live two lives in class and, similar to the peasants of the medieval carnival, they sense a mutual estrangement of two systems at work in their everyday school lives. Their playful discourse at the back table is "free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 130). The "presence of carnivalization" in their social language creates a "fundamental common ground" (p. 160), an intersubjectivity, among them.

The relationship between the two boys, Tim and Connor, is long standing. They have known each other since preschool and spend time together outside class, during recesses, before, and after school. They have creative imaginations, often spinning elements of fantasy into their official school assignments.

During spelling practice Connor creates an elaborate, half-acted, half-drawn science fiction narrative on his chalkboard. His eraser becomes Sponge Bob, a space explorer, who journeys in his rocket ship to the stars and encounters aliens (from Field notes, May 10, 2006). During science, Tim transforms his pencil into a hockey stick, uses it as an implement to make fire, and fences with it in a bloody sword fight (Tape 23, Session 3, Butterfly Science Logs, June 5, 2006).

Despite her fun-loving, engaging interchanges with the boys, Lauren is usually quite purposeful and forthright about the official expectations of her life at school. She balances attention to tasks with the networking she sees as crucial to social success. Citing Writers' Club as a favorite school activity, Lauren notes how it bridges the academic and the social: "You learn how to write and you learn all the words. And you get to share with people, your book" (Interview 2, Lauren & Chloe, June 14, 2006). When working with partners, Lauren often takes the lead, ventriloquating the authoritative voice of the teacher: "You should know how to spell 'play' – it's on the word wall!" she admonishes Chloe (Tape 22, Paired Writing, June 2, 2006).

Clearly Lauren sees dichotomies in her life: work and play, adult and child, the social and the academic, the public and the private. But, she also sees opportunities to bridge between polarities. Her desire to break free of the authoritative discourse that dominates her life as a child is personified in her social talk with Tim and Connor during art. The playful narratives that Lauren co-constructs with Connor and Tim epitomize a shared understanding

of certain key problems posed by their precarious agentive position as children, among them, their immersion in adults' authoritative meta-narratives of power and gender.

The three children work out a response to the world's myriad gender texts through social talk and the narratives they construct together. Their responses are not uniformly predictable, traditional, or non-traditional. They do, however, appear to be grounded in a shared understanding of the dualistic relationship between the genders; boys and girls, dads and moms, men and women, are opposing forces. Each gender is a different "team", and, the relationship between the teams is, at times, adversarial. Whether the trio's reference to separate teams is a reflection of, or a response to, the bounded relationships they encounter in everyday life is unclear. Still, it *is* clear that Lauren, Connor, and Tim are struggling to decode the world's gender texts, the symbols, the signs, and the behaviours, and to understand what it all means.

To make sense of it all, children must figure out how their lived experience fits with the texts they encounter. Repeatedly, children respond to the world's texts aesthetically, creating lived through experiences, the narratives of their play discourse. Like Bakhtin's (1984) carnival, their stories draw life out of "its *usual* rut", and turn life "inside out" (p. 122). Tradition, established order, rules, hierarchies, and social conventions, hold little power over the characters who inhabit Tim, Connor, and Lauren's narratives. Death is defied, bodies are resurrected, power resides with the weak. Gender scripts, stereotypes, and schemas are deciphered and, through the events and characters they create, the children do their best to turn convention on its head.

Lauren, Connor, and Tim experiment with different ways of seeing the world using its iterational elements, established social interaction patterns,

only as jumping off points, as places to start. Then, through projective narrative constructions, they venture into a playful imaginative world of possibilities. There they selectively reactivate, reconfigure, accept, and reject elements of the established genderscape of their lives. There, the implicit becomes explicit; through their playful talk they expose the issues children grapple with on a daily basis. A seemingly innocuous art activity becomes a discursive opportunity to exercise agency. Tim, Lauren, and Connor use their playful social language to contest dominant meanings and their attendant social connotations. Do real boys make pink turtles?

At recess the boys had been chasing the girls. Their recess pastime spawns a co-constructed chase narrative in which Connor, Tim, and Lauren challenge many cultural norms, while assimilating others, seemingly without question. The chase narrative takes on a game-like connotation, where girls and boys play together, yet maintain separate teams. On the one hand, Tim and Connor, in keeping with traditional perspectives, present themselves and the male characters they create as focused upon “winning” at all costs. Elements of aggression and violence are embedded into the way they play the game. “Charge”, Connor yells as he leads his imaginary team on to expected victory. And, Lauren, in keeping with traditional perspectives, expresses willingness to defer to the boys, to let them win, “if they want to”.

Perhaps more intriguing than their gender specific behaviours or their insistence upon dividing the characters in their narratives into gender specific teams, is the way Connor, Tim, and Lauren *play with* traditional, embedded meanings *within* the teams or game-like structures they create. Using symbolic recomposition the children take elements of meaning apart only to reassemble them in new and unexpected ways. Gender-centric behaviours are challenged. Characteristics that are often associated with boys, those that they typically emulate, strength and dominance, are turned

inside out. Connor wittily proffers a peaceful resolution to their problems while Lauren is physically aggressive in response. Lauren initiates a move from passive to active narrative by punching the boys and by pretending to kill them. Female characters in the narratives dominate. Lauren eludes capture. Tim dies. Girls trap, capture, and confine. Boys cry. Gender roles are pliant, shifting, and at times contradictory. And, somewhat surprisingly, all the narratives the boys create with Lauren converge around a common outcome: the dominance or victory of the girls' team.

Playfully Tim, Connor, and Lauren insert themselves into a variety of potential life trajectories and generate alternatives. In so doing, they expand their flexibility and ways of thinking about gender. Within the narrative constructions, many gender norms and ideals are resisted while they maintain the basic context – dualism, the separation into 'teams' – upon which their real-life recess chase game was based. Boundaries between boys' and girls' behaviours are crossed yet separation between male and female persists. That they toy with the entrenchment of dichotomous thinking as truth is tacit evidence of their ability to think critically.

Within their play narratives, the trio confronts certain biological truths, as well, the immutability of physical sex differences, for example. And, although, like Kate and Chloe and Olivia and Jake, Lauren, Tim, and Connor's sexual knowledge is incomplete, they too are cognizant of prohibitions surrounding certain gestures and sexually related dialogue. The carnival atmosphere that imbues their narrative co-constructions suspends traditional distance between them and frees them to engage in inappropriate, and otherwise prohibited, sexually explicit behaviours and talk. Through their playful, projective narratives, the children create a carnivalesque "zone of familiar contact" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 124) which is, in

many ways, at odds with the public distance that normally characterizes the relationship between young boys and girls.

Laughter is directed toward the authority of the world's gender texts, problematizing certain taken-for-granted gender scripts, schemas, and stereotypes. Connor turns proscriptions against nakedness inside out as he flashes Lauren and Tim, exposing his "boobs". All three laugh as Lauren informs Tim that both she and Connor have seen "his private parts". Both these projective, imaginative interchanges are rooted in the hypothetical and provide clear instances of the symbolic recompositions which Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose free social actors from the constraints that they recognize to exist in daily life. The boys' "boobs" appear as they gain *supernatural* powers. Tim's nakedness is exposed as he *pretends* to shower. Imaginative distance inhibits the constraints inherent in the normative conventions of everyday life. Boys *can* become like girls. Still, limitations persist on the acceptability of being transgendered; everyone will "look at" a boy with a girl's body parts. Whether the impact of their playful constructions will be to reinforce or loosen the dichotomization of sexual difference in their futures remains to be seen.

Still, for Lauren, Tim, and Connor, the ultimate goal seems to be power and control. Through their construction of narrative, they impart the power of independent action to the characters they voice. In everyday life, children are subordinate and powerless; in play, they can become dominant and powerful. The characters the children create are both liberated from and confined by the developmental age hierarchy. Their imaginative narratives are a step toward reflectivity, a response to the problem of power and control that is embedded in the structure of the world and their position in it as children.

On the one hand, Tim and Connor's narrative personas utilize fear of darkness to disempower an older child: "I'm a teenager boy and I'm ascaired (sic) of the dark!" Boys are rendered powerless, like babies. On the other hand, the personas the children create within the narratives enact governance over their everyday lives, yielding little or no authority to adults. In fact, the sole reference to adults within Lauren, Connor, and Tim's narrative constructions position them as equal players in the chase game. Moms and dads join; they do not direct. Adults meet the same fates as children; they are unable to exert the power to control events, actions, or choices. Work and play are dichotomized. Schools close. Moms get off work to join the game. School and work are equivocated. Constraints upon freedom are universal.

Clearly Tim, Connor, and Lauren understand their precarious agentive positioning as children. They also understand the restrictions on all people's freedoms. But, in play, anything can and does happen; hypothesization usurps limits. Constraints, whether they are cultural, social, or political, are overcome. Children emerge as agents, able, as Lauren declares, to "play anything!"

All three children interrogate the authoritative adult gender paradigms that are presented to them. Their narratives present different readings of the world as gendered text and offer different accounts of who they are or can be. Perhaps there are multiple, not singular ways of being girls and boys, male and female. Calling these *ways* into question relates directly to the power issues that dominate the exchanges. Nevertheless, their all-encompassing preoccupation with the power matrix, with exerting control, with exercising agency, with "doing what you want", directs Tim, Connor, and Lauren's imaginative narrative constructions.



Playful enactments are opportunities to take on roles, to accept or to reject them. The gender stereotypes that the children challenge are, indeed, authoritative discourses; their authority is embedded in the adult controlled social, political, and cultural context of the world in which they live. Do Connor, Lauren, and Tim, as members of the culture, resist the authority of the adult discourses they encounter, or do they accept them? As they playfully try on different meanings for the way things are, they begin to work out their own internally persuasive discourse. Their socially situated gender identities will ultimately flow from how marginally or centrally they adopt the gender discourse of the world, how much they accept or reject, how much of it is regarded as authoritative, and, whether or not, it becomes internally persuasive.

The narratives that Lauren, Tim, and Connor construct are in the “borderlands” (Gee, 1992, p. 147), between the established, authoritative texts of the world and, what will become their internally persuasive discourse. Borderland discourses are often characterized as oppositional. And, for these children, this seems to be the case. Together, Connor, Lauren, and Tim work through the power and gender matrix of their lives – the texts, symbols, signs, the discourses – by creating a carnival-like borderscape. Some may interpret the children’s narratives as immature, ineffective, and incomplete. Others may recognize potential power, insight, and metaknowledge involved in this type of maladaptation (Gee, 1992, p. 151) to authoritative discourses.

All three narratives – the chase narrative, the video-game narrative and the girls’ club narrative – exude themes of power and control. All three are hybrid constructions, inhabiting a discursive space between belief systems, and are characterized by unevenness, contractions, and multiple positions. Through their narratives, Lauren, Tim, and Connor gain

imaginative distance from power and gender meta-narratives and create agentive strategies for future action and, ultimately, the potential for social change.

## **Conclusion**

The possibility of social action and social change has, at its core, human agency. The narrative constructions, symbolic recompositions, and hypothesizations that permeate Kate, Chloe, Jake, Olivia, Tim, Lauren, and Connor's social talk are episodic examples of their agentive, dialogic responses to the world, particularly their response to the world as gendered text. These vignettes clearly demonstrate how children actively grapple with the "problematic present" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1006), the complexities and the multi-layeredness of their lived experience.

Through their play discourse these seven children address, interrogate, and contest the essentialized tone and authority of gender knowledge that they encounter in their daily lives. Their projective perspective allows for the manipulation of certain entrenched ideas, particularly those that depict gender as more complex, multi-layered, and contradiction-ridden than immutable and natural. Through their play discourse, Kate, Chloe, Jake, Olivia, Tim, Lauren, and Connor have gained imaginative distance between themselves and established gender schema, and determined, at least discursively, that gender is both negotiable and alterable. Their playful discourse is representative of children's diverse ways of knowing and constitutes a blatant challenge to extant epistemological assumptions about the critical competence of young children.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**IMAGINATIVE DISTANCE:**  
**THE TRIUMPH AND CHALLENGE OF CHILDREN'S PLAYFUL SOCIAL**  
**LANGUAGE**

**Introduction**

A relatively new image of childhood has been proffered in this document. Traditionally, research about young children has been shaped by a developmental approach which persists, even today, in framing them simply as incomplete adults. Fixed in the meta-narratives of modernity, which were and are driven by the idea of progress, traditional invariant perspectives on early childhood research have tended to trivialize and obscure the possibilities inherent in children's multiple ways of knowing.

Embedded in this inquiry is an emerging sense of children as competent interpreters of their everyday life experience, as true collaborators in the research process. Interviews conducted with the research participants, video recordings of interactions among them, field notes, and observations, were utilized to foreground the forms of knowing and being that the children identified and displayed in their social talk. Three key ideas emerge from the data collected. First, that children are able, articulate, dialogic interpreters of their own lived experience and research participants in their own right. Second, that play discourse among children is agentive behavior. And third, that children utilize agentive play discourse to reflect upon and to grapple with problematic everyday experiences, in particular, their response to the world as gendered text.

Children's culture, their discourse, and their social interaction is an assemblage of texts awaiting interpretation. They are texts which, as

researchers and as educators, we should feel compelled to read over their shoulders (Geertz, 2005, p. 86). Geertz writes that when interaction becomes text its meaning persists "in a way its actuality cannot" (1980, p. 175). Thought and meaning are, as Bakhtin (1986) has argued, made accessible to researchers "only in the form of text" (p. 104). The force of this inquiry resides in its presentation of children's otherwise silent voices in a forum where they *can* be heard and valued. And, "being heard", as Bakhtin so aptly put it, in itself, is a dialogic relation (p. 127). Moreover, my response as researcher to the children's voices, my attempts at interpretation, are inherently dialogic. And, my responsibility as researcher is to bring their talk, front and center, into mainstream educational discourse about children's lives.

As I wrote about the children's social language in class and about their interpretations of play, I made a concerted effort to be ever mindful of the dialogicity of the research process itself, to incorporate the children's voices into each aspect of the analysis. Bakhtin (1981) asserts that "one may speak of another's discourse only with the help of that alien discourse itself, although in the process, it is true, the speaker introduces into the other's words his own intentions and highlights the context of those words in his own way" (p. 355). The qualitative research community recognizes that writing is interpretative and dialogic, that the knowledge it seeks to share cannot, and should not, be presented exclusively in finite terms. Acknowledging that my words can be neither objective nor neutral, my burden has been threefold: to select a textual genre that frames reality as I have seen and experienced it, to afford these young research collaborators opportunity to speak for themselves, and to craft my writing to enhance others' understanding of the knowledge children co-construct discursively, at school and in class.

There are, of course, “an infinity of meanings” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 161) one could associate with the children’s words. My study is merely my response to the children’s texts; its intention is to open dialogue with and about young children and to deepen understanding of their lived experience. Crafting it heightened my understanding; it helped me, as researcher, and hopefully it will help readers as well, to examine “both the phenomenon of interest”, in this case, children’s perceptions of their lived experience and their actual in-class social discourse, and our “analytical understanding of it” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 221). This speaks directly to what Dyson (1998) referred to as mediating “the theoretical constructs and the everyday” (p. 193). My challenge has been to write with sensitivity and precision, to ensure that, as much as possible, the children’s words emerge from these pages without transformation into my own.

### **Children As Active Research Participants**

Young children have traditionally been considered unable to reflect actively upon their lived experience. Even though children’s ways of knowing and doing may not be *like* adults’, advocates of a children’s culture approach to research do not assume that children’s ways are *less* than adults’. Their mandate has been to honor children’s voices. Still, there are attendant risks attached to such an honorable perspective. Although children may speak and be heard, they may not *matter*. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) say it best: “one of the things being subaltern means is not mattering, not being worth listening to, or not being understood when one is ‘heard’” (p. 559).

Historically children’s views have had little noticeable effect upon their school experience or upon teachers’ day-to-day professional practice. This study presents children’s ideas about the role of play and social talk in their lives as one way to involve them in their school experience, as a strategy for informing educators’ practice, and, ultimately, as a way of potentially

benefitting all children from the knowledge gained from research. Education, policy, and practice can become more meaningful for children only if they matter, if educators and the academy truly honor their ideas and opinions, and if researchers make forthright attempts to represent children's voices as fairly as possible.

Mattering – being asked, being heard, and being valued – places children firmly within the research community as collaborators in, not merely objects of, research. It moves them from a position of deficit to a position of competence and agency. Increasing the sheer number of opportunities children have to participate in education research, to express their ideas and to share their ways of knowing, is a crucial first step towards moving their knowledge into mainstream educational dialogue. And this can occur only if educators and researchers rethink what *counts* as knowledge.

To that end, and to remain true to its conceptual framework and to its intended empirical purpose, a clearer understanding of children's use of playful social language, my research has been designed in a manner that highlights first, the *children's* perceptions of the role of play in their lives as articulated in the interviews. In turn, analysis and interpretation have been presented as a dialogic response to these ways of knowing. The children's actual lived experience, documented in the video recordings, was subsequently examined in light of their stated understandings about play to uncover conceptual links between their ways of knowing and their lived experience at school. And so, the interpretive elements of this inquiry pivot upon children's own philosophical understanding of play and their perception of it, and how this understanding can inform extant educational discourse. What many may have been considered to be risky business, a plan to build an interpretive, theoretical piece upon the wisdom of children, has become, thankfully, the soundest choice of all.

## **Play Discourse**

Through their answers to interview questions and their spontaneous conversations, Olivia, Kate, Lauren, Chloe, Tim, Brooke, Connor, Belle, Celia, Ally, Evan, and Jake expressed a layered understanding of play and, similarly, of work. The meanings they attached to play, in particular, were contextual, free of certainty and absolutes, sometimes contradictory, always multilayered. The children understood play and work officially, at school and at home, as dichotomous, as endpoints on an experiential continuum. They understood them unofficially, in their local culture, as ephemeral and contingent.

Particular instances of the children's in-class social language, the vignettes, were selected for in depth analysis because they exemplified the sense of and attitude toward play that the children had articulated in the interviews, and because they revealed that sense in observable, meaningful ways. In addition, the participants' responses to the interview questions about play illuminated a dual track understanding of life in general. The existence of two cultures, one official, the other unofficial, became apparent through the children's answers to the interview questions and through their social discourse. A clear sub-text emerges from their recognition of this duality, that, to a certain yet to be determined extent, these children understood the struggle for hegemony that Bakhtin insists is crucial to the process of ideological becoming and that their often times counter-hegemonic play discourse is integral to that struggle.

On one hand, the children recognized the finite, closed, official, authoritative discourse of school and of the world. On the other hand, embedded in the social language of their local culture, the children's play discourse embodied an open, dialogized, contextualized, unofficial response to those authoritative texts. Rather than assuming an attitude of

“unconditional allegiance” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343) toward authority, through their play, the children created a zone of contact where, spontaneously, they created variants of it. These children knew that daily they dealt with two separate world views. And, with that knowledge in mind, they crafted their responses to the interview questions to reflect both their official and unofficial understandings.

From the children’s perspective, as expressed in the paired interviews, play inhabits multiple, contextually determined points along an experiential continuum. Play emerged as an attitude, a state of mind, an aesthetic response to life experience, often equated with matters of power, agency, independence, liberty, self-determination, and self-governance. As such, the children frequently referred to play as “doing what you want”. Clearly the children envisioned play as a centrifugal force in their lives, as an opportunity for creativity and innovation, for gaining control, and for exercising agency. For them, play shifts the locus of control away from the iterative to the possible, from the centre to the margins.

Expectations that the children would define play simply as fun were quelled early on as several interviewees cautioned against such an essentialist perspective. Play was characterized as multilayered and contingent, often fun, but not necessarily so. Children declared that you could be playing yet not specifically engaging in pleasurable behavior. The word play, although understood by all children, was not understood by all children similarly. More often than not, their *sense* of an event determined its characterization as play, not some fixed notion or set of features. Events that were *called* play, could be placed “in the middle” of the experiential continuum: neither play, nor *not* play. Contradictoriness and variability in the children’s definitions had more to do with their aesthetic response to an event than it had to do with semantics, per se. And, although all children



understood the sense of it, a consensus about play's particularized meaning was not reached. This aspect of unfinalizability, the nebulosity of the children's definitions of play, has guided the writing of this analysis.

Throughout the interviews social play was cited as most fulfilling, so much so that some children spoke of how they would invoke their imaginations to transform solitary play into social play. Still, the children did not equate play with sociality; several children talked about playing alone, pretending, swinging, drawing. And, the border between the arts, crafts, drawing, constructing, and play was blurred and permeable. Once again context, specifically ability to position themselves as agents, became a determining factor in a creative activity's characterization as play.

Neither was imagination associated exclusively with play. Several children saw attendant benefits to imagining, benefits outside the realm of playful activity. Imagination can help solve problems, provide an opportunity to practise life skills, make the mundane (schoolwork, for example) more enjoyable, and is intellectually stimulating. The media, television, movies, video games, and toys were regarded simply as props for play. There was a certain degree of critical consciousness and spectatorship associated with the children's use of them; they spoke freely of how they evaluated, reconfigured, reinvented, and transformed the materials of popular culture to meet the particular needs of their play, thus shifting the locus of power away from those who had created the cultural images, and into their hands. Even though rooted in and undeniably related to adult controlled popular culture, the meanings the children imagined were at the same time social, local, dialogized, and agentive.

Still, the pervasiveness of furby-play in the classroom, most notably between Belle and Evan, is evidence of the limiting effects of, and power of, popular culture upon children's lives. Furby language and voice inflections

seeped into their ways of talking and interacting with others, even during the interview process; Evan agonized, "I can't get the furby talk out of my head". Like Evan, these children recognize the tensions inherent in their contact with the authority of others' texts. Their playful social language was a response to these texts, evidence of a consciousness of the "world of alien discourses" which surrounds them and from which they "cannot initially separate" themselves (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345).

### **Play, Agency, and Response to Gendered Texts**

The local culture of this group of six and seven year olds, their playful social language, is representative of a veritable mosaic of disparate understandings of power, agency, and gender. Clearly, these children do not take everyday, established meanings for granted. Rather, they challenge entrenched, authoritative discourses and the implications they hold for their lives, now, and in the future.

The video file, comprised of the interviews and the in-class recordings, is a testament to the children's nested, often contradictory notions about what it means to be children, the tensions they sense to exist between the world's authoritative texts and their lived experience. Their insistence upon the freedom to play as articulated in the interviews – the importance of "doing what you want" – is their agentive response to the everyday world, which, in many ways, they consider to be problematic. Certain situational contexts engender more playful discourse than others. For these children specifically, what it means to be a boy or girl, gender scripts and schemas, and the dichotomization of gender, are key issues raised repeatedly throughout the video file of their in-class social language.

By listening to the participants' social language, we are privy to their ways of thinking about crucial topics. Their play discourse makes the implicit, explicit. Through their imaginative talk – their narrative

constructions and their symbolic recompositions – they give tangible form to the issues that they grapple with on a daily basis. Their play discourse is an outward sign of the projective dimension of agency to which Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer. Hearing, listening to, and seriously considering the significance of children’s playful, often imaginative social talk uncovers a key conflict in their daily lives, their struggle to enact agency, and raises fundamental questions regarding the real impact of traditional power structures upon children’s lived experience both in and out of school. Revealing the agentic nature of children’s playful social talk makes the potentially rich, yet previously under-researched, study of projectivity and imaginative phenomena possible.

The children’s capacity to imagine alternatives is key evidence of their agentic response to gendered texts they encounter or construct in their world, of critical thinking, and of problem solving. For these first graders several gendered ways of being can be imagined. Their playful, often carnivalized social language, examples of which are documented in the three vignettes, presents a commentary upon the genderscape of the world as they see it. Unwilling to align themselves with the authority of those texts, Jake, Olivia, Chloe, Kate, Connor, Tim, and Lauren blatantly disputed their veracity. For them the power and univocality of the authoritative word *can* be divided. For them, the world’s gender texts demand a dialogic response. Their playful exchanges are authentic examples of a search for Bakhtin’s theoretical “internally persuasive word”. For these children, however, the authority of world’s texts is not finite; it *is* possible to “agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part”; to find “new ways to mean” (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 343 - 346).

Still, by listening closely to their playful social discourse, it is clear that these children *have* assimilated portions of existing gendered texts and

discourse. For example, very few challenges to mainstream, heterosexual texts exist on the tapes. Nevertheless, embedded within this tacit acceptance is a sub-text, an incisive resistance, that manifests itself in the children's manipulation of certain roles, scripts, and schemas embedded *within* the idea of heterosexual relationships, maleness and femaleness.

Seldom were these children unquestioning or accepting of what they considered to be problematic contexts. Iterational responses were present, yet uncommon. Typically the children's responses were edgy, reconfigurative, and transformative, a constant search for internally persuasive discourse, a series of steps along the pathway to ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 341). All the while, the children constantly pushed the boundaries, tested limits and exposed themselves as critical thinkers, risk takers, and often, rule breakers.

Similarly the tone of the participants' social language should push our thinking beyond established, predetermined, Westernized views of childhood, among them, those that characterize young children as essentially asexual beings. These first graders knew enough about the gender landscape and about power structures, to call many assumptions into question. Their agentive, playful discourse dialogizes iterational, privileged, power-laden gender texts. It distances them from the status quo and enables them to consider alternate courses of action, other ways to be boys and girls, men and women, now, and in the future.

Carnivalization in the children's talk establishes intersubjective, communicative deliberation among them. Instead of reverting to heavily scripted gendered patterns of behaviour, through jointly conceived playful hypothezations, narrative constructions, and symbolic recompositions, the children discover alternative, often original ways of fusing, elaborating, and transforming the world's authoritative texts and of experimenting with new

ways to be. Symbols of authoritative gender texts are decrowned as, like the peasants of the Medieval carnival, the children celebrate the “joyful relativity” of “structure”, “order”, “authority”, and “position” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 124).

Children’s lives are multiply embedded in a variety of structures and situations at once. Their ability or inability to implement a projective, agentive stance is very much a function of their positioning as children. Children’s everyday lives – at school, at home, in the world – are constantly subject to the authority of adults. Some may suggest that such young children are blissfully unaware of, or unconcerned with, their subordinate positioning. Yet these research participants’ responses to interview questions indicated a clear understanding of their precarious agentive position as children, a recognition that they exerted little, if any, power over their everyday life experience, that the adults in their lives made most decisions. They were fully aware that play impacted upon the nature of their social world and upon their potential for accessing power and control. Throughout the interviews and through their play discourse in class, the children articulated a yearning for the freedom associated with playful interaction. Real power and agency exists only in play. But, opportunities to play are strictly controlled by others.

So, the *situation* in which children find themselves, by their own definition, has an impact upon the possibility for agentive action. Situations can be either constraining or enabling. Educational structures, entrenched in developmentalist perspectives of childhood, encumber children’s capacity for invention, choice, and agency by limiting access to social talk which is separate from adults. There are few places where children are free to respond critically to the world. By keeping them under control, and by

restricting their social talk, adults continue to maintain the status quo, to subjugate, and to silence children's voices.

In contrast, the freedom the participants experienced through their engagement in social discourse and their participation in the interview process imparted to them the potential for power and agency. Through play discourse these children projectively enacted a form of governance over their lives, away from the relentless gaze of adults. And, through their answers to interview questions, the children were able to go on record, to talk about their experience, to express opinions, to tell us what they know and what they think.

### **Present and Future Implications**

Too often children's views are overlooked. Few school children, particularly first graders, are afforded the opportunity to talk in class as freely as these children were. Because a place was set aside for them to interact, away from the direct authority of adults, they may have been more prone to projective discourse than other children their age. Or, it may be that young children are primarily projective in their orientation to the world, whenever and wherever they find themselves outside the immediate presence of, or beyond the gaze of, adults. Limited life experience and unfamiliarity with certain entrenched discourses may predispose children to adjust to the exigencies of their daily lives in more, rather than less, imaginative ways. It may be that, *within* children's culture, critical responses to the world emerge relatively unencumbered. We just don't know for sure. And, the reason that we do not know, is that researchers, educators, and academics have yet to be convinced that what children say and think matters.

Children remain in the margins, essentially without voice, because they appear to display a dearth of meaningful frames of reference. The

playful social language inherent in their responses to the world's texts are often dismissed because they are unexpected, unrecognized, and misinterpreted; they are not what adults, steeped in the routinized discourse of school, count as meaningful. As we race from one significant life event to another, adults, in and out of school, are, perhaps, overly reliant upon the reactivation of preexisting knowledge. Children's new ways to mean, ways that exist 'outside the box', are not understood simply because, as educators and scholars, we seldom respond to them. It is only in the primal act of response that we can anticipate understanding, that children's and adults' words can enter into what Bakhtin (1981, p. 282) refers to as a dialogical relationship.

Still, children have been, and continue to be, situationally constrained in their attempts to exercise agency, locked into certain hegemonic, cultural patterns and structures at school, at home, and in the world. Because they have been presented as truth so convincingly, for so long, few educators are prepared to consider alternatives to established linear, developmentalist perspectives that place children in the margins. Few educators are willing to break with modernist assumptions, to recognize children's unique, aesthetic reading of the world's texts, their multiple, often contradictory and ambiguous responses to it.

So, what does this all mean – for future research, for practising educators, for curriculum? For starters, this study illustrates how young children's spontaneous, undirected social talk can destabilize and deconstruct long-standing assumptions about what counts as knowledge and social truth. As such, it should compel educators to redefine what they consider to be legitimate classroom conversation, to reconsider how young children discursively make meaning and construct themselves as social actors at school and in the world. This may mean fewer scripted and more

spontaneous open-ended discourse in primary classrooms, further opportunities for children to explore issues without the interference of the ever-present adult voice, and ultimately, curricular decision making in concert with children.

To re-envision early childhood pedagogy in such a way requires that we regard young children in a new and somewhat complicated manner. It points our thinking in new directions. Like the children whose voices inhabit this study, educators must imaginatively distance themselves from the way things are and have been. This presumes a shift in educators' and policy makers' agentic orientation from the iterational to the projective. To confront the efficacy of Western pedagogy's developmentalist heritage is, admittedly, an arduous task. Its powerful influence has maintained within early childhood discourse a subtle, yet palpable subtext that this inquiry calls into question.

What this research suggests is the need for long term study of the impact of independent social discourse among children. Further inquiry could help to determine whether or not opportunities for playful interaction and spontaneous social discourse in classrooms can result in perceivable, long term changes to children's attitudes, behaviours, and discourse in school and ultimately, in the world. Or, it could shed light upon additional issues of concern to young children.

Undoubtedly *these* twelve first graders' social language was playful, agentic, and problem-centred. Further similar research could determine the discursive place power, agency, and gender hold in the social language of other six and seven year olds. This study was, admittedly, limited, in that its participants were all white, mainstream, and middle class. Increasingly the social world of Canadian elementary schools is becoming more diverse, multiethnic, and complex. Marginalized groups are, in some schools, the



norm. Supplementary research into the playful discourse of more culturally diverse groups of children, its nature, and its impact upon agentive behaviour, is warranted. We need to know more of and to appreciate, the diversity and differences among all children, the complexities that exist in the multiple ways children make meaning together socially, in classrooms.

Another apparent limitation of this research project is its temporal specificity. Although it is a clear representation of the here and now, admittedly, it fails to be generalizable across time and space. It cannot determine how the projective tones inherent in these children's play discourse may or may not impact upon their future responses to life's challenges and, ultimately, upon their active involvement in processes of social change. Nor can it be considered generalizable to other young children's discursive interaction. Still, from a purely postmodern perspective, generalizability is not a particularly sought-after outcome. Instead, this project will, hopefully, stimulate reflection and provoke readers to ask further questions. Does discourse differ over the life span? If so, how, and why? Does agentive, projective discourse underlie the potential for social change? Do educators, by limiting young children's opportunities to engage in social language, prevent them from imagining alternatives to the hegemonic culture in which they live and, inadvertently, proliferate the status quo? And, what contexts provoke imaginative, agentive discourse?

Children's positioning places them in situations where, even if they have generated imaginative responses outside the realm of routinized behavior, they are doubly damned in their attempts to evaluate their practicality. First, their marginalized position as children often prevents them from autonomously executing a chosen plan, from taking concrete action. And second, their responses - often unofficial and carnivalized - are

frequently perceived as subversive and resistant, on the edges of acceptability.

The tacit assumptions inherent in their dichotomized positioning as children, not adults, attribute a value to one and not the other. Children are, in essence, blocked social actors, voiceless, and without power. So, although they may imagine flexible, inventive, alternative responses to what they consider to be “contradictory or otherwise problematic situations” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 1012), young children are powerless to enact change. By ignoring children’s playful discursive responses, we are essentially ignoring concrete examples of the creative transformative potential of human agency.

Discussion of human agency seldom considers children as members of subaltern groups; researchers are generally more concerned with issues of race, gender, and socio-economic status as they apply to adults. This research is concerned with how meta-narratives of modernity have reified key determinants in terms of *children’s* lives. Listening to children’s play discourse reveals a certain level of consciousness they have of their positioning in the world, their response to, and evaluation of it. It is in free, social talk, undirected conversation, away from adults, that children are able to pursue issues that they consider to be problematic.

Placing unnatural limits on playful social discourse in schools and classrooms restricts children’s social thinking, or, as Belle described it, their ability to “talk to each other to think” (Interview 4, Belle and Connor, June 14, 2006). Freedom to “do what you want” also implies liberty to *think* what you want. Playful discourse is, in essence, a triumph of children’s imaginations over authority, power, and control. It creates within their culture a space between and among them for critical, unbridled reflection upon the world in which they live.

These twelve first graders were undeniably embedded in authoritative Western culture. Yet that culture became dialogized through their playful talk; the children's play discourse deprivileged the scripts and schemas that were ceaselessly presented to them as truth. Their play discourse was transformative and powerful. Addressing the taken-for-granted, turning it, "inside out" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 122), is an exercise of discursive power. For these children, play discourse became the nascence of cultural critique.

This study raises key theoretical as well as practical questions about what counts as knowledge in schools and about how curricula should be read and enacted. If educators value critical consciousness, discourse, and agency, then the task becomes to locate specific contexts that are most conducive to them. Such a perspective implies a fundamental paradigmatic rethinking of early childhood education. And, logically, this would include a sea change in the pre-service, professional development, and graduate education of teachers. It would presuppose a more critical, postmodern, constructivist perspective, one that would provide educators – both those in the field and those preparing to teach – with authentic opportunities to unpack the taken-for-granted truths and attendant presuppositions that historically have guided the field of early childhood education.

Unfortunately not all Canadian universities' faculties of education currently offer programs specifically aimed at the early childhood educator. This study suggests that a radical rethinking of university level pre-service teacher training and in-service professional development is required to focus upon the evolving field of reconceptualized early childhood education. The incredible perceptivity of the six and seven year old participants in this inquiry should force us to reconsider teacher training, curricula, and practice that are based upon seductively familiar modernist characterizations of childhood as a condition of deficit. If, alternatively, we regard young children

as agentive social actors, then we must reimagine and reconfigure the nature of, and the assumptions associated with, the opportunities we provide education students prior to entering their chosen field and local decision making regarding curriculum delivery in our schools. The challenge is, to re-imagine curricula as local and particular. This can only occur if colleges of education, local school divisions, and ministries of education regard children's play discourse as authentic and sentient, as dialogic space for the effusion of their voices, and as evidence of their unique ways of knowing.

Basing curriculum decisions upon in-class observations and recordings of children's social language, similar to the methods employed in this study, would forefront children's ideas and interests and guarantee their position as collaborators and negotiators of their educational experience. Curriculum enacted and actualized in this manner would reformat early childhood education as dialogue, with a Bakhtinian emphasis upon the "primacy of context" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 428). There are, of course, pragmatic issues that arise when determining how to implement a negotiated and co-constructed curriculum with very young children, issues worthy of further exploration, but beyond the scope of this research.

As educators and researchers, we study children at school to help us understand what the world is like for them so that, conceivably, we can make reasoned and reasonable decisions about their education. If postmodernism has taught us anything, it is that there are no definitive answers to our questions about how children make meaning. We should as a result, become increasingly aware of and responsive to the particularities and the richness of children's lived experience.

Instead of believing that children are developmentally or cognitively incapable of understanding certain topics, evidence from the participants'

frank, undirected conversations suggests that education decision makers should reconsider the arbitrary limits they place upon early childhood curricula by providing opportunities for young children to grapple with complex, and potentially controversial issues.

The strength of this study lies in its responsiveness to the ideas and lived experience of the twelve first graders who so graciously agreed to share their thoughts. If we have learned anything from Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism it is that everything is "understood as part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (p. 426). Recognizing this, the most effective way forward is to act upon what we know: that children are competent interpreters of their lived experience and reliable research participants, that children's play discourse is agentive behavior, and that play discourse acts as a response to authoritative texts that children determine to be problematic. Understanding this should become for educators, an "activating principle" (p. 282); it should move us forward in our thinking so that we recognize and critically examine how the presumption of exclusive adult power, control, and knowledge, easily identified by our youngest students, affects children's lives. Simply acknowledging children's voices is not enough. Rather, we must commit ourselves to listen closely and to act on what we hear, to address the inequities, to insist upon more liberatory praxis based upon the results of research and dialogue, to ensure that children really do matter.

## **CODA**

### **BELLE**

**"I have the power now."**

**"I only get it at recess times when I get to play."**

The bell rings signaling recess. "Now I have lots and lots of powers" Belle explains to whomever will listen. She wedges herself into the narrow wooden cubby she shares with two of her classmates, rustling through her backpack, searching for her elusive mittens. A boy's voice answers, muffled, from the adjoining cubby, "You have the same powers as me. I have the four powers of the earth!"

At last, she finds them. Her mittens are pieced together from yarn ends of various colours, fuzzy and worn. It is early spring, yet the wind bites, forcing memories of winter just past. Evan waits impatiently by the classroom door. "The bell rang already!" he says. His hand clutches a small, crumpled piece of paper, a magazine photograph of a vividly plumed parrot, lovingly salvaged from a project he and his classmates had been assigned earlier that day. The children had spent much of the morning creating collages of animals that hatch from eggs. The classroom is tidier now, only a few errant bits of paper remain on the floor. Earlier it had been strewn with magazines, paper, scissors, glue, pencils. Children had huddled together at tables, desks, on the floor, and in the hallway, thumbing through nature magazines, searching for just the right pictures.

Like many of their classmates Evan and Belle had salvaged favorites from among the myriad magazine photographs. Evan has managed to keep his prized parrot safe since morning, clutching it in his small hand, reading

to it at book time, carrying on hushed conversations with it during math and sharing time. He perches the bird gently on Belle's shoulder. "He's going to give you a birdie kiss", he says as Belle emerges from her cubby, mittens in hand. "Let's play bird family". "We should play pirates instead," she counters. "That's a pirate bird!" Together they swagger through the classroom door, out into the hallway, shifting their weight deliberately from side to side on stiff straight legs. Evan's parrot flies alongside in his outstretched hand as they make their way through the boot room and outside into the crisp afternoon air.

Ten short minutes later, the bell has rung again. Recess over, children stream through the heavy metal door. Evan and Belle are among the final few to re-enter the warmth of the school. Ruddy cheeked from the brisk air they kick their shoes high, scramble to retrieve them, then head back, through the boot room, and into the hallway. As they reach the classroom Belle lingers in the doorway, clutches Evan's arm and, leaning her face close to his, she entrusts him with her secret: "The cold keeps my powers. But when I get warm, I lose my power". She stuffs her mittens deep into her pockets and wriggles her arms from her jacket sleeves. The warmth of the classroom is a relief for many. Not for Belle. Turning from her locker, she slowly heads toward her desk. (From Fieldnotes, May 3, 2006)

## **APPENDICES**

### Preface to Appendices

The following appendices have been reproduced with minor omissions indicated by blanks (\_\_\_\_\_) and broken lines (-----). Blanks have been used to indicate places where names of specific individuals or school divisions have been deleted. Broken lines ----- indicate the removal of text that, if included, could lead to the possible identification of the participants, their school, or its location. The removal of these details from the documents was undertaken to maintain and protect the anonymity of the participants involved, to honour agreements with the cooperating school division, and to keep the study within the ethical guidelines and directions indicated within the study's approval by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board.



## **APPENDIX A**

### **Consent Form**

Your child is invited to participate in a study entitled "Talking in Class: Reconsidering Children's Social Language". Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask questions you might have.

#### **Researcher:**

Megan Lee  
Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan

#### **Purpose and Procedures**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research study is to examine the role and significance of children's social language in a primary classroom.

**Procedure:** The research study will take place in your child's classroom at \_\_\_\_\_ School. All research will take place during regular school hours. It is estimated that the study will take approximately three months.

The research study is to be conducted in two parts: 1.) daily video-recording of children's in-class social language and 2.) unstructured group interviews.

In order to guarantee *all* students' anonymity video recordings will be made of all students. If I video taped only those who chose to participate, then everyone would know who was participating and who was not participating in the study. The video-recordings will be made of small groups of children in class as they go about their regular day-to-day curricular

activities (E.g. reading, writing, group projects, completing math assignments, art projects etc). The school program will continue as normal. Small groups of 2 - 4 children will be interviewed together to determine how they use their social language to communicate and to make sense of their school experience. The interview should take about 10 minutes. The purpose of the group interview is to provide a forum for the children to share *their* ideas and experiences of talking in class. Children will only be interviewed once.

Only if you consent and your child provides assent (see below), will the video-tapes of your child in class and his/her participation in the group interviews be utilized in this study.

**Potential Risks:** There are no foreseeable potential risks to participants in this study.

**Potential Benefits:** Research tells us that talking is a powerful tool for thinking. It is my belief that the knowledge gained from this study of children's social language in class can greatly benefit educators, scholars, and parents as they seek a more complete understanding of how young children use talk to help them make sense of their school experience, how children's talk impacts upon their early encounters with literacy, and what children's social language can tell us about their culture. Although these benefits are not specifically guaranteed, a study of this nature can lead to discussion of these issues, while, at the same time providing an opportunity for the voices of children to be heard.

**Storage of Data:** All data (video tapes and interview transcripts) collected for this study will be kept in a secure place with my supervisor (Dr. Trevor Gambell) at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years. Pseudonyms will be utilized to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of your child, the school and the teacher. A list of the children's names and

their pseudonyms will be stored in a secure location *separate* from the video tapes to ensure anonymity.

**Confidentiality:** The results and interpretations of the study will form part of my doctoral dissertation. Data from this study may be published and/or be presented at conferences. However, the videos provide raw data only. That is, *they will never* be shown in presentations or shared publicly. Dr. Gambell and I are the only persons with access to the raw video footage. Although direct *quotations* from the children's in-class video-taped conversations may appear in the texts of resulting written documents or in conference presentations, your child's pseudonym will always be used. All other identifying information (name of school, its location, the class, and teacher's name) will be removed from the resulting documents.

After your child's group interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit. The transcripts will only include your child's words, not the words of joint participants in the interview. Once again, this strategy is utilized to preserve your child's confidentiality and anonymity as well as that of the other children in the study. To further maintain all children's confidentiality, it will be made clear to the children at the beginning of the interview sessions that what is discussed during the interview should not be shared with others.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your child's participation is voluntary, and s/he may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. If s/he withdraws from the study at any time, all data that s/he has contributed will be destroyed at your request.

Prior to beginning the interview phase of the research, your child will again be asked whether or not s/he would like to participate. Even if s/he agrees, s/he may decide not to answer *any* question.

Children have the right to leave any small group that is being video taped but not to stop the recording outright. Otherwise they may impact upon others' rights to participate.

Withdrawal from the study will have no effect on your child's academic standing. ----- And, no analysis of the data will occur until after both the video-taping of classroom events and the interview phase of the research is complete (July 2006). -----

**Questions:** If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are free to contact my academic advisor, Dr. Trevor Gambell, at his office in the Department of Graduate Studies (966-5759) at the University of Saskatchewan if you have questions now or at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (March, 2006). Any questions regarding your child's rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). Copies of the results of the project (completed doctoral dissertation) will be available to you and your child at the conclusion of the writing and analysis phase of the research (tentative date May 2007).

**APPENDIX B**  
**Consent to Participate**  
**Parent/Guardian**

I have read and understood the description above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to my child's participation in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of Parent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Parent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

**APPENDIX C**  
**Assent Protocol: Letter to Child**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am studying at the University of Saskatchewan. The University is a school for adults. At the University I am studying about how children talk to each other in class. I will be writing a book about what I am learning about children's talk. I would like to invite you to take part in a research project I am working on. I will be video- taping in the classroom when groups of children are talking to each other and working in small groups. If you agree to help me with this study, that means that I can use the words you say on the video tapes to help me write my book.

I am also interested in what kids *think* about talking in class. I will be interviewing you along with one, two or three of your friends. At the group interview we will talk together about things you do in class. The interview will probably take about 10 minutes or so.

Even though I will be writing a book about what I learn about kids' talk, I will not use your real name in the writing that I do. That way everything you talk about will stay private.

You can decide if you want to do this or not. It's your choice. Even if you do decide to do this, you *can* still change your mind later and decide that you don't want to do it. If you do not want to be video-taped you can leave the video-tape area and work at your desk, any time you want.

When I finish making the videos and have written my book I will give the videos to my teacher at the University. He will keep all them in a safe place at the University for five years.

If you would like to do this please sign this paper. (Letter of Assent - Student Participation). You can keep a copy of it. -----

Please remember that you can change your mind any time and no one will punish you or be upset or angry with you.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Megan Lee

**APPENDIX D**  
**Assent Protocol: Child's Participation**

I have read the letter from Mrs. Lee with my parents/guardians.

I agree to let Mrs. Megan Lee use the video tape of me talking in class and in the interview in her research project.

I understand that doing this is my choice and I can change my mind at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(child's signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(researcher)



**APPENDIX E**  
**Transcript Release Form**

My parents and I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the transcripts of the interview with Mrs. Lee. I have been given a chance to make changes if I want to. The words say what I want them to say. Mrs. Lee can now use the transcript the way she said she would in the consent/assent forms that she wrote to me and my parents. I have received a copy of this Transcript Release form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of Participant/Child)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant/Child)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Parent/Guardian)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

**APPENDIX F**  
**Recruitment from Organizations:**  
**School Division**

Dr. \_\_\_\_\_

Coordinator Research and Measurement

\_\_\_\_\_ School Division

March 15, 2006

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,

Please find attached my application for permission to conduct research in our school system. I have included a parent/guardian consent form, a letter of assent for the children, a children's assent form, and a transcript release form as well as a brief outline of my proposed research methodology. My dissertation proposal entitled "Talking in Class: Reconsidering Children's Social Language" has been approved by my committee: Dr. Trevor Gambell (my primary advisor, 966-5759), Dr. Angela Ward, Dr. Sam Robinson, Dr. Janet McVittie, and Dr. Sheila Carr-Stewart. Two key questions form the basis for this research inquiry. 1.) What is the significance of young children's social language in a primary classroom? And, 2.) What is the role of play or playfulness *within* children's in-class social language? Two subsidiary questions will also guide this research. What does children's social language tell us about children's culture? How does the unofficial social discourse of childhood impact upon young children's early encounters with literacy?

The research study is to be conducted in two parts: 1.) daily video-recording of participants' in-class social language and 2.) unstructured group

interviews. Since the 'social language' to be studied is among children, and not teacher directed or solicited, video tape recordings will be made of children's interaction as they complete curricular tasks together in small groups. All students will be video-taped but data will be used only from children who have consented to being part of the study. The study will also attempt to uncover children's perceptions of the role of play and talk in the classroom and at school. All children will be interviewed, but data will be utilized only from those who consent (assent). Video-taped interviews will be held in pairs or small groups to promote conversation about the topics broached and to ensure that the children feel at ease with the process. Dr. Gambell my advisor will recruit participants by distributing and collecting the consent and assent forms. He will establish separate groups of participants and non-participants for the small group video tape sessions. I will not be aware of which groups of students are participants and which are not. Video-tapes of children who are not participants in the study will be destroyed.

I have applied to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan and will submit my letter of ethical acceptability to your office as soon as it is available. The Behavioural Research Ethics Board can be contacted at (306) 966-2084. I plan to conduct my research study at \_\_\_\_\_ School. I have spoken with principal, \_\_\_\_\_, and she has indicated her willingness to allow research to be conducted in the school. The classroom will not be identified in any resulting documents. The teacher, students, and school will be assigned pseudonyms; the school's location will be described as being "in a western Canadian city". Thank you for your consideration in this matter. I am eagerly anticipating your response.

Sincerely,  
Megan Lee

## APPENDIX G

### Recruitment from Organizations: School

Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ School

March 15, 2006

Dear Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_,

This letter is written seeking permission to conduct research in your school, \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary. I have included a parent/guardian consent form, a letter of assent for the children, a children's assent form, and a transcript release form as well as a brief outline of my proposed research methodology. My dissertation proposal entitled "Talking in Class: Reconsidering Children's Social Language" has been approved by my committee: Dr. Trevor Gambell (my primary advisor, 966-5759), Dr. Angela Ward, Dr. Sam Robinson, Dr. Janet McVittie, and Dr. Sheila Carr-Stewart. Two key questions form the basis for this research inquiry. 1.) What is the significance of young children's social language in a primary classroom? And, 2.) What is the role of play or playfulness *within* children's in-class social language? Two subsidiary questions will also guide this research. What does children's social language tell us about children's culture? How does the unofficial social discourse of childhood impact upon young children's early encounters with literacy?

The research study is to be conducted in two parts: 1.) daily video-recording of participants' in-class social language and 2.) unstructured group interviews. Since the 'social language' to be studied is among children, and not teacher directed or solicited, video tape recordings will be made of

children's interaction as they complete regular curricular tasks together in small groups. Only children who have consented to being part of the study will be video-taped. The study will also attempt to uncover children's perceptions of the role of play and talk in the classroom and at school. Only children who have consented to being part of the study will be interviewed. Video-taped interviews will be held in pairs or small groups to promote conversation about the topics broached and to ensure that the children feel at ease with the process.

I have applied to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan and will submit my letter of ethical acceptability to your office as soon as it is available. I have also secured permission from Dr. \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ Public Schools, to conduct research in \_\_\_\_\_ school division.

I plan to conduct the proposed research study in \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ School. ----- The teacher, students, and school will be assigned pseudonyms; the school's location will be described as being "in a western Canadian city".

Thank you for your consideration in this matter. I am eagerly anticipating your response.

Sincerely,

Megan M. Lee

**APPENDIX H**  
**Unstructured Interview Guiding Questions**

- 1.) I want you to pretend that a new kid is coming to grade one and s/he doesn't know anything about it. What would you tell him/her?
  
- 2.) What do kids do or talk about in class?
  
- 3.) Pretend that I am a new kid in the class. What would you tell me about talking in class?
  
- 4.) When do you play at school? Tell me about what you play in the classroom.
  
- 5.) If I were a new student, how would I know how to behave in class?
  
- 6.) What is the best part/favorite thing about school? Why?

## REFERENCES

- Apple, M. & King, N. (1990). Economics and control in everyday school life. In M. Apple (Ed). *Ideology and curriculum*. New York: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1984). *The problem of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Barnes, D., & Todd, F. (1977). *Communication and learning in small groups*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Britton, J. (1993). *Language and learning: The importance of speech in children's development*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Calhoun, Emily. (1999). *Teaching beginning reading and writing with the picture word inductive model*. Alexandria, VA: Association for supervision and Curriculum and Development.
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (2005). *Tri-Council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans*.
- Cannella, G. & Viruru, R. (2004). *Childhood and Postcolonization*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

- Christensen, P., & James, A. (2003). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1990). Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.
- Corsaro, W.A. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA; Pine Forge Press.
- Dauite, C. (1989). Play as thought: Thinking strategies of young writers. *Harvard Educational Review* 59(1), 1-23.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2000). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 3-28). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Dewey, John. (1933). *How we think*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.
- Dewey, John. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: MacMillan.
- Doidge, Norman. (2007). *The brain that changes itself*. New York: Viking.
- Doll, William E. (1993). Curriculum possibilities in a "post"-future. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*. 8(4), 277-292.
- Dyson, A.H. (1987). The value of "time off task": Young children's spontaneous talk and deliberate text. *Harvard Educational Review*. 57(4), 396-420.
- Dyson, A. H. (1998). Making sense in children's worlds: The meaning of Tina and the weeping superheroes. In E. Graue & D. Walsh (Eds.), *Studying children in context: Theories, methods and ethics*. (pp.192-200). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Dyson, A. H. (1999). Transforming transfer: Unruly children, contrary texts, and the persistence of the pedagogical order. *Review of Research in Education* 24(1), 141-171.



- Dyson, A.H. (2001). Where are the childhoods in childhood literacy? An exploration of outer (school) space. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. 1(1), 9-39.
- Dyson, A. H. (2003). "Welcome to the jam": Popular culture, school literacy, and the making of childhoods. *Harvard Educational Review*, 73(3), 328-361.
- Egan, K. (1988). The origins of imagination and the curriculum. In K. Egan & D. Nader (Eds.). *Imagination and education* (pp. 91-127). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Egan, K. (2002). *Getting it wrong from the beginning: Our progressive inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Eisenhart, M. (2001). Educational ethnography past, present, and future: Ideas to think with. *Educational Researcher* 30(8), 16-27.
- Emirbayer, M., & A. Mische. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 103(4), 962-1023.
- Erickson, F. & Schultz, J. (1992). Students' experience of the curriculum. In P.W. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum*. New York: MacMillan.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 645-672). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gallas, K. (2001). "Look, Karen, I'm running like Jell-O": Imagination as a question, a topic, a tool for literacy research and learning. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 35(4), 457-492.
- Gee, J.P. (1992). *The social mind: Language, ideology, and social practice*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.

- Gee, J.P. (2001). A sociocultural perspective on early literacy development. In S.B. Neuman & D.K. Dickinson (Eds.). *Handbook of early literacy research*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Geertz, C. (1980). Blurred Genres: The reconfiguration of social thought. *American Scholar*, 49(2), 165-179.
- Geertz, C. (2005). Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. *Daedalus*, 134(4), 56-86
- Grahame, P.R., & Jardine, D.W. (1990). Deviance, resistance, and play: A study in the communicative organization of trouble in class. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 20(3), 283-304.
- Graue, M.E. & Walsh, D. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Gubrium, J.F. & Holstein, J.A. (2000). Analyzing interpretive practice. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 487-508). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Haworth, A. (1999). Bakhtin in the classroom: What constitutes a dialogic text? Some lessons from small group interaction. *Language and Education*, 13(2), 99-117.
- Hinchey, P. (2001). *Finding freedom in the classroom: A practical introduction to critical theory*. New York: Peter Lang.
- hooks, b. (1990). Marginality as site of resistance. In R. Ferguson, M. Gever, T. Minh-Ha & C. West (Eds.), *Out there: Marginalization and contemporary cultures*. New York and Cambridge, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and the MIT Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- James, A. (2004). Understanding childhood from an interdisciplinary perspective: Problems and potentials. In P. Pufall & R. Unsworth (Eds.), *Rethinking childhood* (pp. 25-37). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- King, N. (1987). Elementary school play: Theory and research. In J. H. Block & N. R. King. *School play: A source book* (pp. 143-165). New York: Garland.
- Langer, J. A. (1987). *Language, literacy, and culture: Issues of society and schooling*. Norwood: Ablex.
- LeCompte, M.D., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Lee, M., (2001). *Children talking: Sharing books and making meaning in a primary classroom* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.
- Lensmire, T.J. (1994a). *When children write: Critical re-visions of the writing workshop*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lensmire, T.J. (1994b). Writing workshop as carnival: Reflections on an alternative learning environment. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(4), 371-392.
- MacLean, R. (1994). Language education, thematic studies and classroom learning: A Bakhtinian view. *Language and Education*, 8(4), 231-250.
- Maguire, M.H. (2004). What if you talked to me? I could be interesting! Ethical research considerations in engaging with bilingual/multilingual child participants in human inquiry. *Forum: Qualitative social research*, 6,1. Retrieved November 5, 2005, from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/>
- Mercer, N. (1996). The quality of talk in children's collaborative activity in the classroom. *Learning and Instruction*. 6(4), 359-377.

- Power, B.M. (1992). Rules made to be broken: Literacy and play in a fourth-grade setting. *Journal of Education, 174(1)*, 70-86.
- Rommetveit, R. (1979). *On "meanings" of situations and the social control of such meaning in human communication*. Paper presented at the Symposium on the Situation in Psychological Theory and Research, Stockholm.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text and the poem*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1993). The transactional theory: Against dualisms. *College English 55(4)*, 377-386.
- Saskatchewan Education. (2002). *English language arts: A curriculum guide for the elementary level (K-5)*. Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Education.
- Schwandt, T.A. (2000). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 189-213) Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Schwandt, T.A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Scott, J. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vidich, A., & Lyman, S.T. (2000). Qualitative methods: Their history in Sociology and Anthropology. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 37-84). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher mental functions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wertsch, James. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Wertsch, J. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.