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Introduction

For the spring of 2016, the International Journal of the Whole Child (IJWC) editorial team proudly announces publication of the first volume of the journal. Typically, IJWC includes the Introduction, three manuscripts, Pictures for Reflection, and the Spotlight on Real-World Practice.

The Introduction section provides a summary of the articles and underscores the relationship to the whole child perspective; the main content includes three original manuscripts with relevance for children birth through the adolescent years; Pictures for Reflection provides for readers a photograph, illustration, or graphic that, in a single moment, captures the learning of the whole child; and finally, the fourth component, Spotlight on Real-World Practice, demonstrates how practitioners make daily contributions to the lives of children; they appreciate children are diverse, unique, and holistic learners.

In this issue, three authors describe the importance of “messaging-about”, listening, and advocating on behalf of children.

In the first article, “Playing Around in Science: How Self-Directed Inquiry Benefits the Whole Child”, Brian Stone describes the integral connections among inquiry thinking, children’s choice, and play behaviors. Assuming a constructivist perspective, his discussion, strategies, and arguments for holistic learning are relevant for children of all ages. Stone describes the importance of providing children with opportunities, time, and materials to explore science content in a self-directed manner. He argues that through play and messaging-about, children develop higher-level understandings, and demonstrate more sophisticated approaches to science. The author discusses existing research supporting the academic benefits of self-directed or authentic scientific inquiry. Inquiry refers to questioning that belongs to the individual. He goes on to describe how, in adults seeking to promote inquiry, they often overlook an aspect of children’s distinctive ownership. This is play.

Through play, children learn to think creatively, plan divergently, and solve problems innovatively. They develop a unique scientific identity. But, within an understanding of the whole

child, Stone is quick to point out that play in science extends far beyond promoting academic understandings. He argues when a child engages in play activities, while simultaneously undertaking inquiry processes, the child can also choose to participate in social/collaborative scientific endeavors. Additionally, emotional development and connections can also be made when children play around with science content. Finally, since play activities typically involve movement, children are actively occupied in physical representations that can also make concepts concrete for their better understanding. With respect to nurturing the whole child, play in science promotes comprehension, but it also provides opportunities for children to become socially, physically, emotionally, and even culturally involved.

In the second article, “Conversations in an 8th-Grade ELA Classroom: Spaces Where Young Adolescents Can Construct Identities,” the author, Kathleen Reeb-Reascos, discusses how, since the mandates of *No Child Left Behind* and the subsequent integration of the *Common Core State Standards*, an era of accountability and high-stakes testing, have led teachers to a deficit-based approach to children’s learning. Instead of highlighting logical reasoning, critical thinking, expressing creativity, synthesizing text, analyzing information, posing and solving problems, communicating, collaborating and reflecting, this prescriptive approach targets basic skills of reading comprehension and technical writing composition. Consequently, children’s learning experiences lack in creativity, meaning, and empowerment. When instruction is superficial, students disengage. For the adolescent, it is critical the child reconciles his or her self-identity.

Using discourse analysis, Reeb-Reascos demonstrated how when students join together over a compelling literary text, they use this discursive space to transform into a practice in identity construction. She argues that the young adolescents’ scaffolded discussion and the substance of literary text facilitated the adoption and rejection of new facets of identity. The lesson became a means to explore identity in historical, generational and individual contexts. This led to the creation of students’ understanding of new discourses. Students gained a deeper awareness of society, justice, and their positions in relation to each.

L. Kathryn Sharp, in the third article, “Examining the Precepts of Early Childhood Education: The Basics or the Essence?” provides readers with a theoretical framework for holistic teaching and learning. This discussion encourages early childhood educators and the related professional

development and research communities to become the leading voices in determining the direction of early childhood education. In advocating on behalf of targeting the whole child, Sharp revisits fundamental aspects of what is meant by early childhood education. Using the four precepts identified by Jalongo and Isenberg (2008), Sharp offers a conceptual and philosophical starting point for creating learning experiences targeting the whole child. These precepts include: Precept 1: Young children need special nurturing, Precept 2: Young children are the future of society, Precept 3: Young children are worthy of study, and Precept 4: Young children's potential should be optimized.

Sharp's discussion examines the nature of these precepts and the potential each of these may play in responding to teacher recruitment, quality, and retention, and the role in fulfilling the anticipated promise of universally implemented early childhood education standards. She provides readers with specific language and strategies to build and justify holistic practices for young children. She identifies a clear and concise roadmap toward supporting the learning and development of the whole child. Finally, she describes ways in which teachers of all ages may promote children's social, emotional, physical, as well as intellectual learning and development.

Pictures for Reflection

In order to promote the learning of the whole child, children, of all ages, must experience a range of opportunities and continue to challenge and test themselves. In particular, the out-of-doors provides learning events not possible in the indoors. It is important for children to run, slide, feel wet, race with the wind, and embrace the joy of genuine ownership.

Spotlight on Real-World Practice

In "Puddle Ponderings," Cris Lozon provides practitioners with the extraordinary potential for using a puddle for children's deeper and more reflective learning.

Playing Around in Science: How Self-Directed Inquiry Benefits the Whole Child

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Children of all ages who have the opportunities, time, and materials to explore science content in a self-directed manner will develop higher level understandings, and demonstrate more sophisticated approaches to science. A vast and growing body of research supports the academic benefits of self-directed or authentic scientific inquiry, which is defined as a line of questioning that belongs to the individual (Llewellyn, 2011; Akerson, Hanson, & Cullen, 2007; Cacciamani, 2010; Eick, Meadows, and Balkcom, 2005). Embedded within a child's distinctive ownership of the inquiry process is a highly beneficial, yet often overlooked aspect, and that is the child's choice to engage in play. Playing around in science presents children with opportunities to think creatively and divergently, to solve problems in innovative ways, and to develop a unique scientific identity. Llewellyn (2011) states that children learn about the world through exploration, "play, creativity, curiosity, and wonderment" (p. 63). Play in science extends far beyond promoting academic understandings. In fact, when a child engages in play activities while simultaneously undertaking inquiry processes, the child can also choose to participate in social/collaborative scientific endeavors. Furthermore, emotional development and connections can be made when children play around with science content. Also, since play activities typically involve movement, children are actively occupied in physical representations that can also make concepts concrete for better understanding. Play in science promotes comprehension, but it also provides opportunities for children to become socially, physically, emotionally, and even culturally involved. This article

will discuss the benefits of play in science to the whole child as well as some of the obstacles that diminish or extinguish play behaviors and scientific exploration.

Definitions and Context

In order to unpack the benefits of play in science, some definitions and context are necessary. First, inquiry is a term that is heavily used in the literature, but can be poorly understood and not well manifested in the classroom (Stone, 2015). Different types of inquiry exist and form a spectrum of possibilities with the main distinction being ownership of the questions and processes (Llewellyn, 2011). When the teacher owns the scientific questions, processes, and outcomes, this is referred to as teacher-directed inquiry, and it forms one end of the spectrum. In teacher-directed inquiry activities, the emphasis is on standardization with students converging to a singular outcome, which was derived from a specific curriculum objective (Stone, 2015). Teacher-directed inquiry affords students little opportunity for creativity, divergence of thought or process, and has little to no capacity for play. On the other end of the spectrum, self-directed inquiry involves a line of questioning and developing processes, both of which belong to the individual student. The line of questioning is rooted solely in the interests and curiosity of the child, and is therefore highly intrinsically motivated. Self-directed inquiry allows students the freedom to explore, create, adapt, modify, and play with ideas because the child is the owner and stakeholder of the inquiry process.

Intertwined with self-directed inquiry is free play, which is a natural, inherent part of a child's interest-driven activities. The International Play Association (IPA) states that "the drive to play is innate," and that "play is self-chosen," involving "active choice and engagement" (IPA, 2014, p. 1). Play belongs to each individual child like self-directed inquiry. It is important for teachers and parents to know that an attempt to structure play in order to deliver a content objective is ill advised. Play must belong to the child, and the child must be free and unhindered by external constraints for the activity to still be considered play and not an academic task. Also, play is ubiquitous in human nature, as it is evident in all cultures, races, and genders. It is also important to note that play does not just belong in the realm of early childhood, but extends to children of all ages, including adults. Play is a process, much like science, which can take many forms including "bodily actions, social interactions and the development of symbolic thinking" (IPA, 2014).

Despite the numerous benefits, neither play nor self-directed inquiry are highly valued in the current school culture, which promotes a presumed efficiency model of education. This efficiency model is based on the manufacturing mindset and is constructed on the premise that standardization and high-stakes accountability will deliver predetermined content to the masses in the most timely, efficient manner. Play and self-directed inquiry are unique to the individual, are highly divergent, and require open time and resources that run counter to a school culture of compliance, standardization, and homogenization. However, the benefits of playing around in science, or any content area are clearly evident in the literature. Some of the many benefits are discussed in the following sections.

Benefits of Play in Science on the Whole Child

The advantages of play through self-directed inquiry are abundant, and are interconnected across academic, social, emotional, physical, and even cultural realms. For example, a child who is playing with magnets may be developing conceptual knowledge of the interaction between magnets or between magnets and metal objects. Through inquiry that is self-directed, the child may begin to ask questions and develop simplistic or even complex experiments to test ideas. The child may also ask or inspire others to join in a mutual scientific play endeavor where social interaction becomes a valuable element, and children co-construct their own scientific reality. The child or children will make use of movement, either repetitive (attracting magnets over and over) or non-repetitive (moving a metal object with a magnet under the table). Children may imagine that they themselves are magnets and can act out attraction and repulsion. The intrinsically motivated, choice-driven inquiry and play activities will help children develop strong emotional connections that are evident in their excitement and engaged passion for playing with the materials. In other words, children are having fun. It is a pleasurable experience, and one that will likely lead to deeper understanding (IPA, 2014). The children will often choose to repeat the experience if given the time and materials as well. Potentially, the child or children may connect the activity/content to a cultural experience or belief. To an uninformed teacher, a student engaged in these seemingly random, “disruptive,” and “off-task” behaviors is misbehaving and not learning. However, the internal and external processes, development, deep-level thinking, socialization, creativity and physical activity can be of the highest-level benefit to the whole child.

Academic Benefits

There are manifold academic benefits of play through scientific self-directed inquiry. Hamlin and Wisneski (2012) state, “play provides abundant opportunities for children to learn science concepts such as the diversity and interdependence of life, relationships between force and motion, and the structure of matter” (p. 82). Furthermore, play provides a “rich context” for children to explore the “process of scientific inquiry,” and has multiple modes for exploration including: functional or discovery play, symbolic play, and games with rules (Hamlin & Wisneski, 2012, p. 82-84). As part of a functional approach, which occurs through self-directed inquiry and play activities, Curren (2003) asserts children learn “through discovery and the largely spontaneous exercise of [their] own faculties, motivated and moved along from one topic to another by [their] own curiosity” (p. 236).

The National Science Teachers Association (2002) states, “Elementary school students learn science best when they are involved in first-hand exploration and investigation and inquiry/process skills are nurtured” (Elementary School Science, para. 3). Using the example of the child playing with magnets, he or she may discover the concepts of attraction or repulsion simply through his or her free reign of playing with the materials. After play events, teachers can guide and facilitate the attachment of terminology to the constructed conceptual framework already in place. However, teachers should not interfere with the play itself, as it provides a self-constructed experience in which the child makes use of his or her imagination, creativity, critical thinking, and capacity for thinking divergently to approach new and unfamiliar concepts. Therefore, a key benefit of allowing free play through self-directed inquiry includes building a child’s capacity to think beyond the parameters of a teacher-directed, boxed, inquiry event in which the questions, processes, and outcomes are predetermined. In other words, children become more adept at examining the world from multiple perspectives, and considering multiple possibilities to explain phenomena when they are given the freedom to explore through their own play.

The IPA (2014) states that play will help children discover and understand the world in which they live. Also, “play is the way humans develop efficient brains,” and by “playing [a child] enhances cortical connections and neural organization” (IPA, 2014, p. 2). When children become involved in choice-driven inquiry, they are actively using their minds to explore the endless possibilities of science.

Social Benefits

Social constructivism in science describes the nature of how human beings build scientific knowledge through various social experiences and activities. Fagan (2010) asserts scientific facts are socially constructed, as are the belief systems of scientists (whether true or false). Scientific knowledge is socially constructed, and therefore, when children embark upon inquiry/play endeavors that are of mutual interest, a co-construction of scientific “reality” takes place. For example, two children engaged in symbolic play pretend that they are astronauts. As their play progresses, their room might become their spaceship, and every day objects become their tools for conducting their experiments. The children mutually construct a play “reality” by building off of each other’s ideas and the entirety of their shared play experience becomes unique compared with what they might have done individually. Also, children will adopt new language and ideas from their peers. For example, as children are pretending to be astronauts, one might point to the window in the room and say, “let’s look out of the porthole to see if we can spot a planet.” The other child may never have heard of the word “porthole,” but may now associate the term with windows in spacecraft, and may begin using the word as well.

The NSTA (2002) posits children will value science best when they are given opportunities to interact with and share ideas with their peers. As they interact with each other, children will tend to improvise rather than following a set plan or script, and they will develop a high level of improvisational skill (Sawyer, 1997). Bergen (2002) found that as children play together, they will develop a high value pretense and that their involvement in such a pretense with others will aid in their socio-linguistic development. Also, children’s social play may help them avoid anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Rubin & Coplan, 1998). Ultimately, as children co-inquire and play around with ideas in science together, they will develop collaborative, socio-cultural, imaginative, co-constructed realities from which they can approach content and better understand their world.

Emotional Benefits

The emotional benefits of play-based inquiry extend beyond “fun” and “pleasurable” (IPA, 2014). When referring to the affective domain, Stone and Glascott (1998) note that emotions in

children's science understanding are interconnected with the cognitive domain. So as children explore science content through self-directed inquiry and play, they are simultaneously thinking about and feeling the emotions of their exploration. Stone (2004) posits play in science is self-rewarding, intrinsically motivated, and personally satisfying because the play is owned and operated by the individual child.

Even though emotions are difficult to gauge or measure, the internal processes of play and self-directed inquiry can incorporate personal gratification, a sense of security and control, and pleasure. As children explore science individually or socially, they have chosen to pursue an activity for a reason, and typically the experience is interesting or pleasurable. For example, a child who is playing with oobleck (a non-Newtonian substance with differing physical properties) will create semi-solid shapes with the substance and then allow the material to revert back to a semi-liquid state. As the child is manipulating the substance, multiple, integrated, affective and cognitive processes are taking place. The child may be questioning why the substance behaves the way it does while also experiencing the satisfaction of controlling the substance according to his or her will (e.g. creating shapes or squishing the oobleck between fingers). As part of this process, play also helps children regulate emotions by moderating "primary emotions into more nuanced and subtle forms" (IPA, 2014).

Physical Benefits

The physical benefits of inquiry-based play are perhaps the most observable, as children move to manipulate, explore, or understand scientific concepts. The IPA (2014) states that play is a biological necessity as it contributes to healthy "muscular growth, physical health and well-being," while also developing "flexibility, agility, balance, and coordination." (p. 1). However, beyond the health benefits of simple or even complex movements, children can also develop understanding of concepts through their movements. For example, if a child is attempting to understand the motion of the planets, he or she in collaboration with interested peers may actually act out planetary orbits. When the child engages in self-directed inquiry, bodily movement may help the child develop a more concrete understanding of the scientific concept.

Cultural Connections

Fleer and Pramling (2015) posit that it would be inappropriate to only focus on the conceptual development of science understanding without taking into account social processes and the cultural societies of children. Furthermore, scientific knowledge is “a cultural construction by society” and is “historically evolving” (Fleer & Pramling, 2015, p. 24). As children inquire and play around with ideas in science, they are connecting, relating, modifying, or adapting what they know and discover based upon their own socio-cultural experiences. Curiosity and inquiry are fashioned and directed by the characteristics of the child, including: race, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion and socio-economic status (Wong & Hodson, 2010). Play in science provides an opportunity for children to act out internally held beliefs or traditions in relation to their developing understanding of scientific concepts. For example, a child may ask the question, “why is the sky blue?” After some internal consideration, he or she may answer the question by saying, “I think God painted it blue.” This response may show the child’s internal belief system, or it may also show a socio-cultural construction that has been passed to the child through his or her family. In any case, play in science through self-directed inquiry presents a child with multiple opportunities to understand, strengthen, or even question their cultural experience and internally-held belief systems.

Obstacles or Barriers to Play and Inquiry

Many barriers exist that preclude children’s self-directed inquiry and play experiences in science (Stone, 2015). As mentioned earlier, the dominant school culture values and expects compliance, standardization, and convergence. Not only are these aspects prioritized, but also time and materials in schools are regimented for efficiently delivering content to children. Zion and Mendelovici (2012) recommend moving away from what they call “instructionism.” In other words, the curriculum is often predetermined and inflexible, leaving no room for child-centered practices. The standards are used as benchmarks to rank, order, and sort children, and the instruction is paced with timely coverage of material being of the highest priority. In such a rigid system, little time, materials, and opportunities are present for children to make use of divergent, self-directed inquiry and self-chosen play experiences. Some of the effects of this lack of play in science include students’ reliance and dependence upon teachers to provide science content and

answers (Stone, 2015). Also, students will be less likely to develop an individual and unique identity as a scientist. Finally, students will become accustomed to canned lessons with scripted procedures and given answers in science. They will not have a high capacity for thinking creatively and critically, and they may not be able to look for multiple possibilities when involved in inquiry processes.

As a part of the school culture that often dictates the types of tasks children do in class, teachers may not be aware of the valuable nature of play and self-directed inquiry. Furthermore, teachers may be uncomfortable giving up classroom time and materials for children to approach the content with their own curiosity intact, and with their own questions, play ideas, and explorations in mind. Teachers may fear that children are not learning. However, teacher-created obstacles such as fear or the devaluation of child-centered practices such as play can be overcome through professional development, research-based practices, and spreading awareness of the value of play and scientific self-directed inquiry.

Conclusions

Children will play regardless of their situation or circumstance, but to limit play and self-directed inquiry in schools based upon assumptions that children are not learning is unacceptable. Schools in Finland provide children with ample playtime, encourage scientific inquiry in its purest, most authentic forms, and limit the amount of “academic” homework as well as the time spent testing (Hancock, 2011). Teachers in Finland are respected and valued for their knowledge-base and are able to provide children with safe environments to learn at their own pace and through ownership of individual processes, like play. Unlike many schools in the United States, Finnish schools consistently demonstrate success due to their value for play and reduced standards/high-stakes accountability. In order to capitalize on the many benefits of playing around in science, it is important for teachers and parents to know and understand that play and self-directed inquiries provide a high level of cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and even cultural development. Play in science is a necessary and beneficial element of childhood, and it should be treated as such.

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Conversations in an 8th –Grade ELA Classroom: Spaces Where Young Adolescents Can Construct Identities

Kathleen Reeb-Reascos, M.A.

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The public discourse surrounding English Language Arts (ELA) education in the United States imitates the ongoing debate over state standards and high-stakes testing (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). Since the inception of *No Child Left Behind* and the subsequent integration of the *Common Core State Standards*, a paradigm shift toward accountability and the “quantifying of ability” (Beach, Campano, Edmiston & Borgmann, 2010, p. 8) has fostered “a remedial and deficit-based approach to teaching” (Beach, et. al., 2010, p. 8). This prescriptive approach prioritizes the “basic skills” of reading comprehension and technical writing composition and dissuades the integration of logical reasoning, critical thinking, creative expression, text synthesis, information analysis, posing and solving problems, communication, collaboration and reflection (Beach, et. al., 2010; Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). Lacking the opportunities to utilize these skills or *explore* in the ELA classroom, students experience teaching and learning devoid of meaning, empowerment and creativity, which has become associated with widespread student disengagement and superficial instructional practices (Alsup, 2010; Beach, et. al., 2010; Cunningham, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Considering the push to take constructive exploration out of ELA curricula in favor of technical skill building, it is necessary to question of what students are being deprived when they are denied the opportunity to engage in, and make meaning from, discursive literary work. The current study looks to an ELA classroom that has remained committed to authentic discourse and literary exploration for their potential benefits to young adolescents. Specifically, this study investigates the following research questions:

- How do young adolescents talk about identity in conversations about literary texts in an 8th-grade ELA classroom?

- What discussion mechanisms do young adolescents use in conversations about identity in classroom conversations?

Theoretical Framework

Engaging the psychological theories of Edward Thorndike, Arnold Gesell, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky, we learn that maturation and development manifest through the facilitation of, and participation in, oral communication (Hill, 2001). According to Thorndike (1910), children needed direct oral instruction to enhance their ability to speak, listen and interact but, Gesell (1925), asserted that talking supports children to mature and develop knowledge of self in a natural way. Drawing on cognition and development perspectives, Piaget (1955) believed talking supported the internal construction of language as it captured children's modes of thinking and problem solving (Woolfolk, 2013). Around the same time, Freire (1970) concluded that talking could facilitate the identification and change of sociopolitical power relationships among children and adolescents. Likewise, Vygotsky (1978) drew on a socio-psycho linguistic model to connect talking with the social construction of language, learning and the acquisition of knowledge (Hill, 2001; Woolfolk, 2013). Vygotsky's theory furthered the idea that learners were not alone in the learning process, and that learning was guided by social interactions with parents, teachers, peers and family members (Woolfolk, 2013).

Incorporating the role of the school institution, Michel Foucault (1980) studied how discourses existed within the school paradigm (Hill, 2001). Foucault (1970, 1972, 1980) realized the transmission of knowledge and power as a subtle "coercive force" (Hill, 2001, p. 21) instead of an overt act or top-down process¹. Foucault (1972) argued that power existed within the relationships among people and manifested through their subsequent discourses to create "grids of identity" (Hill, 2001, p. 21). Elaborating on Foucault's assertions, Susan Hill explained:

"...discourses make up practical grids of specification for diagramming, classifying and categorizing the subject in the social world. These grids are put to work in institutions in ways that generate self-surveillance, wherein the subject internalizes the disciplinary and cultural gaze as his or her own" (2001, p. 21).

¹ A top-down process of learning is defined as "making sense of information by using context and what we already know about the situation" (Woolfolk, 2013, p. 286).

Foucault (1980) further concluded that these power forces underpinned the processes of teaching and learning, on which Hill (2001) expounded, “[This] provides insight into how the everyday classroom organization, grouping patterns, management structures, language and teaching practices...work to construct [learning] success or failure” (2001, p. 22).

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) provided further insight into the relationship between the learner and learning environment by introducing the idea of *capital* (i.e. cultural, economic, social and symbolic composition and resources) in concordance with *habitus* (i.e. worldview, aspirations, dispositions, norms and rituals). He found that a student’s *habitus* and *capitals* combined to form his/her practices when confronted with unlike discourses, events or spaces (Bourdieu, 1986; Hill, 2001; Knapp & Woolverton, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Weis & Centrie, 2002; Wong, 2000). Through the acquisition of new discourses and the integration of learned knowledge, Bourdieu concluded that individuals moved across various cultural spaces that conflicted with, affirmed or called into question the person’s *habitus*, which ultimately led to a rejection or adoption of new capital and/or discourses ((Bourdieu, 1986; Hill, 2001; Knapp & Woolverton, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Weis & Centrie, 2002; Wong, 2000).

James P. Gee (1991, 2014), purported that discourse spaces and literacy events were the intersections of competing *Discourses*, which he defined as:

“Ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities. [They] are ways of being ‘people like us’. They are ‘ways of being in the world’. They are ‘forms of life’. They are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social products of social histories. Each Discourse incorporates taken-for-granted and tacit ‘theories’ about what counts as a ‘normal’ person and the ‘right’ ways to think, feel, and behave. These theories crucially involve viewpoints on the distribution of ‘social goods’ like status, worth, and material goods in society” (2014, pp. 3-4).

Gee’s social linguistic Discourse perspectives viewed interpersonal discourses as the mechanism for identifying, articulating and realizing Discourses. Gee wrote, “A good deal of what we do with language, throughout history, is to create and act out different ‘kinds of people’ for all sorts of occasions and places” (2014, pp. 2-3). He stressed, however, that Discourses may not be compatible and may conflict with one another. He wrote:

“Each of us is a member of many Discourses and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities. These Discourses need not, and often do not, represent consistent and compatible values. There are conflicts among them and each of us lives and breathes these conflicts as we act out our various Discourses’ (2014, p. 4).

Therefore, according to Gee (2014), engaging in discourse with others activates individual Discourses and become points of conflicting ideologies, multiple identities and possible transformation (Gee, 2014).

Methodology

To carry out this study, I reached out to an 8th-grade ELA teacher at a prestigious 5-12 test-in magnet school that ranks as one of the top public schools in the Northeastern United States for permission to observe classes. After receiving permission, the teacher, Miss Rose², advised me of the “discussion-based” lessons for the upcoming units and encouraged me to visit on those days. Over the course of five field days in a three-week³ span, I observed 18 40-minute class periods that consisted of 5 distinct lessons. Three of the five days, I observed four class periods, and on the remaining days, I observed three periods. Table 1 outlines the lesson themes, instructional methods and texts used for each field day. Each class was comprised of 25-28 students⁴ between the ages of 12 and 14.

As I observed whole and small-group discussions, I took detailed field notes of what the teacher and students said. For the purposes of anonymity, no student names were taken and all indicators of identity were obscured. On the final day of observation, I was given permission to record the lesson due to the rapid nature of whole-group response. Once I felt I secured enough data, I transferred my hand-written field notes to the computer and transcribed the recording using the same software. Once all data were transcribed, I used soft coding methods to make connections across classroom discussions and identify dominant themes. Those themes provided the basis for this paper and have situated the trajectory for my discussion.

² The teacher’s name was changed in an effort to protect her privacy.

³ Due to testing, days off and other instruction requirements, the observation days were not consecutive.

⁴ The racial demographics for these classes are unknown, but the groups appeared diverse

Table 1 – Lesson Themes, Activities and Texts

Lesson Themes, Instructional Methods and Texts Used by Field Day			
Day	Lesson Theme	Instructional Method	Texts Used
1	Claims and rebuttals Multiple perspectives	Whole and small group discussion	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas</i> (1995) “The Blessings of Slavery” by George Fitzhugh (1857)
2	Author purpose and theme articulation	Whole-group discussion and chapter title creation (small group activity)	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas</i> (1995)
3	Theme articulation	Chapter title creation (small group activity)	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas</i> (1995)
4	Bias, claims and rebuttals and multiple perspectives	Whole and small group discussion	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas</i> (1995) “Refuge of Oppression: To the Public, Falsehood Refuted” by A.C.C. Thompson (1845)
5	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> pre-reading	Opinionnaire (teacher generated), survey and whole-group discussion	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Dover Thrift Edition) (1993)

Emerging Identities

Through the process of coding, the theme of identity emerged in three contexts - history, generation and individuality; and within these discussions, linguistic patterns emerged as indicators of these contexts. These findings are detailed in this section.

Identity in a historical context.

Working in the framework of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995) and supporting texts (see Table 1), students discussed the positions and relationships of blacks and whites during the age of legalized slavery. The emergent pattern of discourse used across these discussions was dialogic, which created allusions to the process of conceptualizing the historical text and reconciling the identities of blacks and whites. Students spoke in phrases with upward inflections consistent with a questioning tone or overtly asked questions about the text and/or aspects of slavery. The following conversation was taken from a small-group exercise in which students had to conceptualize an underlying theme to use as a chapter title. This conversation showcases the interrogative pattern of these discussions:

S: *This [chapter] was about all the murders and stuff?*

S: *Yeah*

S: *So ummm...*

S: So, I guess it describes how cruel people can be toward slaves and how they beat them to death?

S: I really don't know how to summarize this.

S: They use a lot of violence for stuff.

S: so how much slaves...?

S: So like how they are beaten?

S: So we?

S: So like slaves...?

S: Umm...this is confusing.

S: I guess like the violence slaves have to undergo?

S: No, I guess in the chapter he describes how nobody are worth...like ...like justice?

S: ...so like the will and injustice?

S: ...so like 'The unjust worth'?

S: ...so like they are not that worth like...?

S: ...like violence toward society that is not worth that much...like violence toward a 'half cent' ...no no no...like violence toward animals...?

Although the dialogic pattern persisted across discussion spaces, it was most apparent in relation to historical events within the context of slavery.

Another pattern that emerged was the way students began categorizing whites and blacks as good and evil by determining their overall beings as worthy or unworthy of the students' respect. In the following examples, the students demonized white people and projected negative motives for their actions by ascribing negative traits to the white characters and using religious terminology (e.g. 'angel', 'devil', 'demon') to represent them.

S: They're mean...the slave holders ...they're lazy and they don't want to do [things] on their own.

S: We could also talk about Sophia Auld being the only smiling white person he knows...

S: Sophia went from angel to demon.

S: I think he has hopes people can change...like he sees slaves get hurt and are human too...that gives Douglas hope people can change, if one can.

S: 'Mister' Covey to make it formal.

S: He doesn't deserve a title.

S: I mean like some people could do like...like news and story titles with a slash...when they cannot decide...like 'plan for escape/whatever' ...I think it should be 'Life with Covey/Life as a slave' ...

S: ...so we could say like 'life with the devil/life in hell' ...

Likewise, the students advanced the good versus evil categorization by adding descriptions of terror to detail the abuse blacks faced at the hands of white owners. In the following selections, the students associate white people with cruel and violent behaviors:

S: *What's chapter 4 about?*

S: *The Savage Barbarians* [referring to white people]

S: *Chapter 3...is about the Aulds...?*

S: *It's about the garden...*

S: *We should call it 'forbidden fruit'...*

S: *Forbidden fruit?*

S: *We should call it 'Creating Slavery'.*

S: *...so insensitive.*

S: *...the 'terrible trade'?*

S: *.... 'Horrors of the farm'?*

S: *... 'Horrors of the plantation'?*

S: *This is all about his owner...*

S: *'Mean Mr. Gore'?*

S: *'The Gory Gore'?*

S: *Spooky sounding...*

S: *what does it mean?*

S: *...like bloody and violent*

S: *'Gory Mr. Gore'?*

S: *'Gory Gore'?*

S: *It has a nice ring to it*

S: *This is basically what he is like.*

S: *I don't like these people, so I shouldn't talk about them*

In other discussions, students activated their “moral identities” (Cunningham, 2010) by using the conversations to judge whether certain actions of whites and blacks were right or wrong. In the following exchanges, the concept of right versus wrong emerges through judgmental rhetoric and rhetorical questions:

S: *Pfft...it's saying slaves have no willpower to think for themselves...*

S: *Hehe...it is...?* [The laughter implied a sense of disbelief]

S: *I don't like how he is saying it. Miss Rose said he is like saying that slaves have no imagination...like that's the dumbest thing I ever heard.*

S: This [paragraph] is really sad. How could you give kids one shirt and one pants and no shoes? That's like really awful neglect.

The discussion of right versus wrong also emerged while discussing the trustworthiness of Douglas' narrative. In an evaluation of the authors' motives for writing – both the *Narrative* and A.C.C. Thompson's opinion article – students questioned the veracity of the writings and seemed to reach a consensus that Douglas could be trusted, but the white writers could not be. The students conceded that Douglas' stories were probably exaggerated, but dismissed his hyperbole as unimportant since his motives of ending slavery were of greater significance. For A.C.C. Thompson, however, the students criticized all his claims and disregarded his evidence on the basis of who he was. The following excerpts were taken from a whole-class discussion and illustrate the varying perspectives on these two men:

S: At some time, I think Douglas exaggerated because he uses really descriptive quotes from when he was young, but it is kinda okay because he was doing it to end slavery...

S: I think most of the content [in the book] is sort of an exaggeration...?

S: Why wouldn't he be trustworthy? He's writing against slavery He got so lucky during slavery. He learned to read and write during slavery. Could you imagine that? I could see how he is not trustworthy, but I think he is.

S: His story is like slavery. It's certainly bad, but maybe it was somewhere in the middle?

Discussing the Thompson letter...

S: ...like literally...all of his claims ...are like the same? Like [re-voice] 'I was there'

S: ...like he argues with Douglas about the system...it was confusing...

S: At the end of this letter, he is a hypocrite [re-voice] 'I own slaves. I love slaves. I didn't like slavery.'

S: He seems fairly....

S:He's gay

S: ...so it is obviously true that he was white...so his claims are like [re-voice] 'yeah, [Covey] is really nice'

S: ...slave owners treat [slaves] around guests well...but they don't really know how they treat the slaves...?

In this exchange, re-voicing (Heath, 1998) as a linguistic technique is noted, but will be addressed in the following section.

Identity in a generational context.

Stemming from the discussions following the pre-reading survey for *Romeo and Juliet* (1993), emerged a discursive construction of identity in the context of generation. Specifically, the conversations about romantic love and parents as plot themes stimulated talk around the students' identities as young adolescents and their identities as part of a generation. The use of generalizations (e.g. 'us' v. 'them'; 'you' instead of 'I') and re-voicing (Heath, 1998) became indicators of these identity constructions. According to Heath (1998), re-voicing "appears in the talk of older children when they take on the role of someone else and speak as that person" (p. 227) and is modeled after peers, authority figures or popular culture figures.

The following excerpts were taken from the whole-class discussion to illustrate the generation of a group identity from a 'young adolescent' perspective:

T: *Do parents know what you are thinking about?*

S: *No...No...No...[In unison]*

S: *What they don't know won't hurt them.*

S: [Applause from class]

S: *We have friends for a reason...you tell your friends some things and your parents others...but I guess if you are a loner then you might have to talk to your parents.*

T: *Why don't you tell your parents about things that are important to you?*

S: *In some cases, parents may not be supportive...*

S: *...because we don't know how to tell them...*

T: *Do you think your parents want to know?*

S: [loud uproar of yeses and other ramblings]

S: *...like they'll get engaged with it and will keep questioning you about it...so like you don't tell them.*

Through the discussion of parents, the students spoke of themselves as a group of 12-14 year olds and used language (e.g. 'they', 'them', 'we' and 'us') to portray parents or adults as "other". By doing so, the differences between young adolescents and adults became apparent. In

the following exchanges, the distinction between the groups is realized through the articulation of opposing opinions between the students and their parents:

S: It's sort of like...at our age, you sorta forget like your parents were kids once...like they look really old...you don't really think like they sort of understood...at some point of time...ya know...about school and our lives...like I kinda see why you wouldn't tell your parents these things...

S: ...like I see it in a different way...like what if you want to go to one school, but your parents want you to go to another, but they're like both good schools...or like you want to study math, but they want you to study science, or you want to go to camp and they want you to get a job...they are both good choices...how do you choose?

S: Going off of what she said, about opinions, despite what parents think, their children can be very different from them...or have very different viewpoints....just like you don't go up to a vegetarian and wave a hamburger in their face...sometimes you can't go up to your parents and say certain things ...sometimes if you share your opinions you're like provoking them...like you're trying to start an argument...sometimes there's just major differences between the parent and the child...different viewpoints...different opinions...different things they believe in...and a lot of those things can be very important to a person, so certain things you just don't do out of respect almost...

In addition to delineating a 'young adolescent' group identity, it appeared that the students situated their collective identity in the context of the macro society by addressing certain social issues that are defining features of the millennial generation. In the following exchanges, the students discuss the belief in acceptance that is often attributed to current youth culture (Gollick & Chinn, 2013; Twenge, 2014):

S: Well, like, let's say a person is like....gay...and their parent is are like homophobes...that definitely won't work out...so the parents definitely wouldn't like be okay with that and the person is like [re-voice] 'well, that's who I am' ...so I don't really know where the understanding would come from...

T: So, like the parents don't have all the information or that they are predisposed to a certain way of thinking...?

S: This doesn't apply to me, but like I have a lot of friends who aren't straight...and if they were to tell their parents ...they would say like [re-voice] 'oh it's just a phase'...or 'it's bad' ...I guess they like have like old-fashioned opinions I guess...and those get in the way...

S: I guess like my mom...she was bullied a lot...and she like thinks it's going to happen to me...so she's always like saying...like always giving me advice like 'you don't want to do that...[re-voice] 'you don't want to be bullied...you don't wanna be like me'....so sometimes it's kinda like annoying...because she doesn't see the

change and like people have become more accepting...also it's very similar to what they said ...it's kinda hard because she's like always trying to be aware of the things I say, but we usually have conflicting opinions ...

Across discussions, other aspects related to the millennial generation (e.g. college admissions, physical appearance, technology and religious disaffiliation) emerged (Gollick & Chinn, 2013; Twenge, 2014), but the themes of acceptance related to sexual orientation was discussed most.

Identity in an individual context.

The final context for identity construction that emerged from the classroom discussions addressed the students being individuals with personal opinions, beliefs and attitudes. While discussing these concepts, students tended to use personal narrative and spoke using 'I' and 'me' to convey their ideas. The following exchange illustrates the use of personal narrative:

S: [Parents] are reliving their lives through you...like what they didn't um...couldn't do when they were your age; they want to do with you. So like, uh,...say like...I don't know...like my mom wanted to always play volleyball....she'd be like [re-voice] 'hey hun, why don't you join the volleyball team?' ...and then she'd be like [voice] 'hey let's go get ice cream' and then she'll drop me off at volleyball ...like she'll do all this weird stuff...just to make me do what she wants to do or what she wanted to do...

Across discussions, students seemed to use these spaces as opportunities to share personal information about their individual experiences and concerns. In the following excerpts, students express their individualities as *they* see them:

S: I can't really tell my parents about my relationship status or my crushes because they don't ...know my sexuality...

T: Okay, so sometimes there are really big parts that you don't really know how to broach that conversation...

S: I never...I usually try not to tell my parents about my opinions...because certain opinions I have...like I don't know...like my parents...like if I say like I like that ...and they like...like they don't always respect my opinions....so I don't really like share them with really anybody...They respect me, but not my opinions.

S: I feel like a lot of the time...like...like...my parents...like I don't want the reaction of [re-voice] 'oh that's kind of ridiculous...that should not bother you'....Well,

right it does...I'm sorry you don't feel that way' ...well, I like having opinions and not being judged by them...

Advancing the discussion of personal identity, students expressed a desire to be respected and validated as individuals. In the following exchanges, students express frustration over being dismissed and their subsequent worry of being seen as different:

S: Well, if I told them all [the stuff I was thinking], they would probably be like [re-voice] 'what are you talking about' and see me in a different way and they'd think I was a weirdo...

S: I don't know who said this, but someone said that parents do legitimize your opinions, but sometimes I like know my parents call my interests stupid...like not stupid like that...but stupid like put it down or say it's not interesting...so I don't like talking to them about those things because they'll say like [re-voice] 'that's just a teenage thing, you'll grow out of that' ...it's a phase, basically...I don't like when my parents tell me that it's a phase...like my mom will say 'it's a phase, you'll regret it when you're older...

S: So, whenever, I wanna talk to my mom about something...like she tries to relate to it...like she knows kid feelings... [re-voice] 'I know what you are feeling; I had the same experience when I was a kid' ...yyyyou don't know how I'm feeling because it's not you...they think that they know, but the feelings...they don't...they don't like know what like I'm feeling...

The beliefs students held also became evident through these discussions. In the following exchanges, individual opinions about life and love began to emerge:

T: ...so half of us said we believe in soul mates...but only a quarter of you said you believed in love at first sight...most of you think that that is nonsense...but some of you think it is possible...obviously our main characters Romeo and Juliet would answer yes...

S: Isn't that kind of shallow?

T: 27% of you in here...she just called you shallow....why do some people think that love at first sight is shallow?

S: I said I didn't believe in love at first sight because at first sight, you don't know the person...so how are you gonna know if they are really attractive or really weird...

T: so you get partial information...incomplete information...if you're just using vision?

S: Personally, I would never know...like yeah...it hasn't happened but...based on things I've seen, it can happen...but it's sort of very uncommon...but even if it's common it doesn't always work out...

S: A lot of times, I think about a lot of like future plans like that are kinda important to me, but I don't tell my parents, because a lot of things that I think about pass – they come and they go – and I'm not quite sure on a lot of things that I think about....like one month I think about something and if I say it, then the next month they bring it up and I'm like never mind...I changed my mind...it's not what you thought...and then everyone gets confused...so I prefer to keep things to myself until they're finalized...

The students' discussions about individual beliefs also suggested a connection to how students made decisions. Much of the conversation related to sharing information with parents was indicative of how the students perceived consequences and chose actions based on those perceived consequences. In the following examples, we see how students made decisions based on personal beliefs and perceived consequences of sharing those beliefs:

S: I listen to my mom's advice on a lot of things...but there are things I don't want to tell her because she like blows it out of proportion...so it's easier to get advice from friends...they know what else is going on and they know what is happening...whether you tell your parents even if it's not about you they'll like blow it out of proportion...

T: What categories of things do they blow out of proportion?

S: If you...like I don't mention crushes or anything like that to my parents...because they'll be like [re-voice] 'no...you're too young for that'...

S: Honestly, I talk to...like I like to talk to the people who are least like me...'cause my mom is a lot like me...and she's like [re-voice] 'ok, so like we're like exactly alike and I know exactly what you should do and you have to do this or like you're going to die'...and my dad's like more accepting like...he's like...[re-voice] 'okay'...he doesn't really like go into detail with his comments ...he just says like [re-voice] 'okay, okay' and like [re-voice] 'that's how you feel...it's okay'...so it's like easier to talk to him 'cause he like doesn't have like this really opinionated response I guess...

S: ...like this happens to me a lot...like I tell my parents a joke that I think is funny and they're like... [re-voice] 'that's mean to dogs' or something...but I wasn't trying to be mean...and I end up getting lectured about something that has nothing to do with the story I was telling...They use everything as a teaching moment and that's why I don't like sharing with my parents.

In these examples, students' allude to the perceived consequences of being lectured and getting into trouble, which suggested their beliefs in avoiding conversations with their parents or deliberately withholding certain information. Likewise, these examples hinted at the young adolescents' appreciation of privacy secrecy and self-expression (Dore, 2004; Feinstein, 2009).

Conversations Transformed

To better understand how the whole and small-group conversations in Miss Rose's classroom transformed into spaces of identity construction, we must analyze three underlying dynamics that converged to remake these spaces – young adolescents, discussion and literary texts.

In Jane Kroger's *Identity Development: Adolescence through Adulthood* (1996), we learn that young adolescence is a “period of disorganization” (p. 39) resulting from the combination of puberty, new relationships and new transitions, which leads to perplexity and “identity considerations” (p. 34). Kroger (1996) further elaborates that language is “a text through which identity is made, justified and maintained” (p. 22) as early adolescents undertake the process of distinguishing one's own values, ideas, talents and aspirations from those of their parents. In the following example, we see one student articulate the visceral frustration of being dismissed while attempting to separate from her parents' ideas:

“I feel like a lot of the time...like...like...my parents...like I don't want the reaction of [re-voice] ‘oh that's kind of ridiculous...that should not bother you’Well, right it does...I'm sorry you don't feel that way'...well, I like having opinions and not being judged by them...”

For young adolescents, many of their actions and reactions stem from the need to distance themselves from the “dictates of the internalized parent” (as quoted in Kroger, 1996, p. 39). This became apparent in this study as the students “re-voiced” (Heath, 1998) many of the things their parents had told them in order to establish their individuality. In the following example, the student takes on his mom's voice to assert himself as his own person:

“So, whenever, I wanna talk to my mom about something...like she tries to relate to it...like she knows kid feelings... [re-voice] ‘I know what you are feeling; I had the same experience when I was a kid’...yyyyou don't know how I'm feeling because it's not you...they think that they know, but the feelings...they don't...they don't like know what like I'm feeling...”

The students also used “re-voicing” (Heath, 1998) to allude to the parent-child conflicts that arise during this developmental stage (Hill, 2001; Feinstein, 2009; Kroger, 1996). In the following example, the student takes on the role of an unsupportive parent of a child who is gay and attributes the conflict to differences in generation:

“This doesn't apply to me, but like I have a lot of friends who aren't straight...and if they were to tell their parents ...they would say like [re-voice] ‘oh it's just a

phase'...or 'it's bad' ...I guess they like have like old-fashioned opinions I guess...and those get in the way..."

Young adolescence is a period heavily influenced by the parent-child relationship; however, it is also greatly affected by peer groups and the value of belonging (Dore, 2004; Feinstein, 2009; Kroger, 1996). Moreover, Kroger states that "peer groups and friendships provide context for later identity development" (1996, p. 54). In the following example, we see the collective peer identity emerge through the students' use of a generalized 'you', 'we' or 'our' to represent their generation and cast those without friends as 'loners' who have to talk to the 'others' (parents):

"We have friends for a reason...you tell your friends some things and your parents others...but I guess if you are a loner then you might have to talk to your parents...."

For young adolescents, the challenges of integrating new social and institutional structures (i.e. teacher, school, peer etc.) are considerable since they must mitigate the varied expectations from the various structures and institutions with which they interact (Kroger, 1996). To do so, the young adolescents in this study employed personal narratives to mitigate the extrinsic and intrinsic forces at play during these lessons (Bruner, 2002; Kroger, 1996).

Jerome Bruner (2002) describes narrative telling as "self-making" and describes it as:

"[being] from both the inside and the outside. The inside of it...is memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, subjectivity. Part of this insidedness is almost certainly innate...like our irresistible sense of continuity over time and place and our postural sense of ourselves. But much of self-making is from outside in-based on the apparent esteem of others and on the myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up from the culture in which we are immersed" (p. 64).

As a result, the personal stories that the students shared in class became more than just pre-reading exercises for *Romeo and Juliet* (1993); they became practices in sharing personal identities. For one student, a teacher-led discussion about confiding in parents became an outlet to express their⁵ sexual orientation.

"I can't really tell my parents about my relationship status or my crushes because they don't ...know my sexuality..."

⁵ Due to the sensitive nature of this exchange, I am purposely using the ungrammatical 'their' to protect the student's privacy.

Across classroom conversations, the process of “self-making” (Bruner, 2002) extended beyond the cultivation of physical and emotional identities to incorporate cultural and historical Discourses (Bruner, 2002; Gee, 1991, 2014; Kroger, 1996).

Self and group identity takes into account the shared values and history of a people, but for young adolescents, “beginning to challenge these new capacities using culturally appropriate means of expression is another demand” (Kroger, 1996, p. 40). For this reason, the students’ interactions with the historical texts *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1995) and the supplemental texts (see Table 1) became practices in conceptualizing the historical legacies of blacks and whites in American society and their subsequent identities (Alsup, 2010; Gee, 1991, 2014). For these students, engaging with the text became almost as real as engaging with another person. As Janet Alsup (2010) explains:

“[For young adolescents] identifying or relating to a character involves a mental and emotional grappling with what the character represents an ongoing interaction between the reader’s lived experience and the narrative with which he or she is engaging. While reading can and does evoke emotion and memory, the reader uses the narrative experience to reconsider these personal responses in a new, vicarious context” (p. 10).

Across discussions spaces, it became apparent that the students engaged with the text on a more intimate level. As the conversations progressed, they began to identify the mistreatment of blacks as unjust and began empathizing with them by demonizing the white owners. For instance, white owners were called ‘devils’, ‘demons’ and ‘savag barbarians’, and the slaves were associated with hope and strength. These students further developed a moral connection (Cunningham, 2010) with Douglas by outwardly questioning the actions of white people. In the following example, the “moral identity” (Cunningham, 2010) or “one’s affect” of the student is activated by her realization of the neglect slaves endured:

“This [paragraph] is really sad. How could you give kids one shirt and one pants and no shoes? That’s like really awful neglect.”

Upon reflection, the work these students did in relation to *Douglas* (1995), surpassed decoding and reading comprehension. Their discussions prompted them to conceptualize the historical identities of black and whites in the US, as well as categorize their actions as right or wrong, good or evil; which, in turn, created “a pathway to cross-cultural understanding and

heightened awareness of the goals of social justice” (Alsup, 2010, p. 13). In addition, these spaces contributed to expanding the students’ “social imagination” (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263) by building their “competence and propensity to recognize the self in other and the other in self... [through] conversational contributions about socioemotional logic” (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263).

Conclusion

Reconciling identity is of the utmost importance for young adolescents (Dore, 2004; Feinstein, 2009; Kroger, 1996), so when they join together over a compelling literary text, the discursive space can be transformed into a practice in identity construction. Although this study was limited in scope, population and duration, it suggests that the confluence of young adolescents, scaffolded discussion and the substance of literary text can facilitate the adoption and rejection of new facets of identity (Alsup, 2010). The students in Miss Rose’s classes utilized her lessons as a means to explore identity in historical, generational and individual contexts, which ultimately led to the creation of understanding of new Discourses (Gee, 1991, 2014) and a deeper awareness of society, justice and their positions in relation to each (Alsup, 2010; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Moving forward, more comprehensive research should be done in this area to better articulate the significance of discursive classroom spaces and the subsequent implications they may have.

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Examining the Precepts of Early Childhood Education: The Basics or the Essence?

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to encourage early childhood educators and the related professional development and research communities to become the leading voices in determining the direction of early childhood education. To support this vital, and complicated transition, this discussion revisits fundamental aspects of what is meant by *early childhood education* and intends to spark discussion and the direction needed to guide thought and action as nations begin a shift towards more affordable, universal and, most importantly, high-quality early childhood education.

Introduction

Jalongo and Isenberg (2008) described four precepts of early childhood education that offer a conceptual and philosophical starting point for an examination of what may be found at the essence of early childhood education. These precepts are:

Precept 1: Young children need special nurturing

Precept 2: Young children are the future of society

Precept 3: Young children are worthy of study

Precept 4: Young children's potential should be optimized" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2008, p. 46-49).

The current discussion examines the nature of these precepts and the potential each of these may play in responding to teacher recruitment, quality, and retention, and describes the role in fulfilling the anticipated promise of universally implemented early childhood education standards in "high-quality" programs.

Precept One: Young Children Need Special Nurturing

“You have to do the Maslow stuff before you can do the Bloom’s stuff.”

A. E. Beck

What do we mean by “early childhood education?” Bredekamp (2011) defines this practice as, “a highly diverse field that serves children from birth through age 8” (p. 5). This is the typical age range used in research, funding formulas, curriculum, and discussions related to developmental stages. This stage has many distinctions from other age or developmental groups (e.g., elementary, middle school, secondary, etc.). This early part of the life cycle is unique and one that requires particular awareness and pedagogical approaches. In order to become productive members of society, Young children require protection and safety, as well as stable loving relationships (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2001). During the early childhood years, one of the most significant differences is the awareness of the need to approach children’s learning *holistically*. That is, we, as early childhood educators understand that cognitive development is only one aspect of the *whole child*. The skilled and caring educator understands that children’s social/emotional, physical, linguistic, and moral development are just as important as cognitive growth (<http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/KeyMessages.pdf>). These skilled and caring individuals understand that this nurturing has enormous impact on each child’s potential as a learner, a community member, and a citizen. This holistic approach is a clear distinction from the upper elementary, middle, and secondary levels. In contrast with the early childhood holistic perspective, the upper grades emphasize content learning. This difference begins during university coursework and teacher training. For example, in the upper grade ranges of teacher preparation, more coursework is focused on teaching math, science, and language arts. In contrast, early childhood education for pre-service candidates begins with studying developmentally appropriate practice and human development. NAEYC, in its position statements and standards, clearly emphasizes the consideration that must be given to developmental and cultural facets for the individual child and for groups of children (National Association for the Education of Young Children). A review of early childhood education programs reveals that the coursework and content is rich in theory and foundational principles of early childhood. There is an abundance of information to guide us in our early childhood work, and yet, is there a need to consider the current definition for learning?

In this era of high-stakes evaluation, prevalent today is to value convergent thinking and performance on standardized tests, summative evaluations, and benchmark assessments of academic achievement. Yet, early childhood educators, guided by the first precept, provide children with special nurturing. They value creative activity, divergent thinking, and innovative problem solving. This means, instead of in-depth content, the early childhood candidate learns how to instill higher-order thinking, creative activity, and problem solving into instruction and curriculum for young children (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The dilemma for early childhood teachers is the current emphasis on assessment which contradicts the first precept stating that young children *Need Special Nurturing*.

Precept Two: Young Children Are the Future of Society

“Old men can make war, but it is children who will make history.”

Ray Merritt, *Full of Grace*

By rereading Plato’s (427-347B.C.) reasoning, we are reminded of the importance of educating young children. Plato stated children should be nurtured and educated so that the collective society benefits from having healthy and informed citizens. In turn, these citizens elevate the democracy, the economy, and the arts. This same concept has been echoed by many past theorists. Dewey (1897) underscored this belief as it relates to America in *My Pedagogic Creed*. Dewey stated, “...I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of a proper social life. I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling” (as cited in Gordon & Browne, 2007, p. 12). This “dignity of his calling” also speaks to the worthiness of children and elevates the profession. As early childhood professionals, we ask ourselves if we are following through on behalf of children’s social wellness. If not, how can we correct the narrow trajectory of the profession? This would mean that early childhood educators were professionally motivated, highly skilled and knowledgeable educators who were supported and valued by society. It would mean that salaries are commensurate with the demands of the profession. Ultimately children, families and the general society benefit from a reassessment and restructuring of early childhood and its educators. The evidence is abundant and

clear: What happens in early childhood matters! It matters to the child, to the classroom, the community and to society. It matters to the future.

Precept Three: Young Children Are Worthy of Study

To borrow from Sir Isaac Newton, those of us in early childhood education stand on the shoulders of giants.

Theorist and researchers such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Montessori, Malaguzzi, Katz and countless others made timeless contributions to the field. Again and again they offer rich information about how to best support young children in a way that optimizes their potential. Clearly since Pestalozzi and Froebel, we know that to teach children we must study them (Gordon & Browne, 2007). We learn how to teach by watching interactions. We watch how children interact with one another, how children interact with objects, and how children interact in different environments. This leads us to move away from layering on what the adult world sees as important or relevant, but instead, we seek to understand children's individual thinking. Through this lens, we honor children's unique qualities and consider the most appropriate adult response. In this way, we do not evaluate or judge, but as responsive adults, we acknowledge and dignify children's differences. We come to understand this range of difference by studying the world of children. Early childhood teachers have rich and abundant research, but we have to ask if we are using the findings to determine what is best for children. For example, Reggio Emilia, considered by many educators to be an outstanding program, is studied intensely, but where and how often are we seeing these ideas interpreted and applied into classrooms?

Early childhood research describes the positive relationship among creativity, cognition, and social learning (Koster, 2009). In order to create optimal experiences for young children, are we, as early childhood educators, using the existing research on behalf of children? If not, why not?

Ashton-Warner, Kozol, Elkind, DeVries, and many others eloquently demonstrated the value and power of studying children (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2008; Wortham, 2002). Their works are studied but how are they seen in practice and how are they ignored? As one example, Ashton-Warner (1963) left an indelible mark on early childhood education through her study and writings, but do we celebrate children's stories? It seems rare indeed to see children's words and stories

used as working material. Instead, current practice imposes commercial curricula and one-size-fits all texts and basals with “stories of the week.”

It is a most relevant topic of debate to consider that there is a vast amount of research telling us how children need the time to learn and develop, they need rest, healthy foods, playtime, time to talk to each other and time to explore (Feeney, S., Moravcik, E., & Nolte, S., 2016).

It is familiar to observe kindergarten children working in isolation at tables writing out worksheets and workbooks filled with tracing and copying “learning activities.” One teacher said, “We don’t have time to cut and paste and all that cutesy stuff. We have too much learning to do.” Are these cutesy things? At the same school a teacher explained why there are no learning centers: “Our principal doesn’t allow them. He said we have too much work to do.” Gone are the blocks, props for dramatic play, and listening centers. Another example of ignoring early childhood research is the removal of rest and play times for young children. For precept three, the early childhood profession is well grounded in evidence-based findings to maximize learning for all children.

Percept Four: Young Children’s Potential Should be Optimized

“One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade.”

Chinese proverb

We have all heard that children are the future; a simple statement, but one that should give us an impetus to pause. Yes, they are the future and part of the great lure of teaching and surely a cause for the sense of duty and purpose it should evoke. Plato (427-347B.C.) made clear statements of the reciprocal nature of civilization (or society) and education. Education should be a function of the nation, or society, and in turn, that society benefits from education. Further, Plato made straightforward statements regarding the early care and nurturing of its youth in order that the society, as a whole, is elevated in its dignity of character, but also in its scholarship and democratic foundation (Cooney, Cross, & Trunk, 1993). Much of this foundational theory has been echoed by leading theorists, and it is apparent that how we value, nurture, and educate our children is our legacy. It is what we cast into the future. It is the harvest we plant for others to reap. Katz (2011) eloquently conveyed this precept thusly:

“I really believe that each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must come to see that the well-being of our own individual children is intimately linked to the well-being of all other people's children. After all, when one of our own children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it; when one of our own children is threatened or harmed by violence on the streets, someone else's child will commit it. The good life for our own children can only be secured if it is also secured for all other people's children. But to worry about all other people's children is not just a practical or strategic matter; it is a moral and ethical one: to strive for the well-being of all other people's children is also right” (Katz, 2011, p. 19-20).

Discussion

Are things changing in early childhood education? The good news is that education is about change—or should be. It is about learning new and better ways to do things. Early childhood education policy and practice continue to evolve in our country and around the world. Some trends are promising and others are causes for concern. One promising trend is the emphasis being placed on teacher preparation that has resulted in many states requiring teacher educators to spend much more time working in the field with mentor teachers and students to learn their craft (a “residency” experience). This is an enormous shift in thinking and one that holds great promise for a new generation of highly-skilled educators. These new initiatives call for improved collaborative relationships between teacher preparation programs and the pre-K-12th grade schools. Increasing site-based training in itself will not be the solution. These teacher candidates and even the in-service teachers will need ongoing coaching and mentoring to become the highly skilled professionals our children need. New and innovative work has been done in this area and the results are promising (Pinata, 2011). Again, bridging this gap will help new teachers develop their knowledge, dispositions and skills more effectively and will provide a much needed supply of fresh, energetic, and passionate educators to participate in schools. This isn't a pipe dream; it is an attainable goal that meshes with the time-honored precepts of early childhood. We can be certain that a great deal of the onus lies with teacher educators, those who deliver professional development for practitioners, and the new educators entering the field. Their voices and actions have the potential to alter the current landscape of early childhood education.

Another promising trend is the additional funding early childhood education continues to receive. One of the most significant examples of this is the universal prekindergarten movement. This has resulted in improved access to education and nutrition for all children. In particular, this

movement has had a great impact on minority children and children in low-income homes or those who live in poverty. The success of this movement will depend on the degree to which the standards of success are driven by early childhood educators vs. politicians. While politicians recognize the dire need for the additional funding, professional, highly skilled educators may be best suited to select instructional methods, curriculum materials, and varied assessments.

The development and availability of high-quality teaching materials, including technology resources, hands-on materials, and an amazing array of children's texts is at an all-time increase. This is a trend that gives many educators and care givers hopes for a brighter future for children. These learning materials and resources help educators provide rich and varied learning opportunities for children and their families.

There is a national focus on improving the quality of school lunches and snacks. Chef Jamie Oliver has led a "food revolution" and school lunches are at the heart of this movement. Chef Oliver put the spotlight on school lunches and revealed some very disconcerting information and organized petitions for improved school lunches. We could no longer ignore the links between nutrition and learning (<http://www.jamieoliver.com/us/foundation/jamies-food-revolution/school-food>). It is very promising that these resources and public awareness is at its peak. Michelle Obama has made exercise and nutrition her leading initiatives. Television programs, commercials, books, magazines, etc., have all spotlighted this important movement. Far too many of our nation's children are overweight, not getting adequate rest and physical activity, or malnourished. Children's health has been forced into America's consciousness, which resulted in a reexamination of our children's health and nutrition and a consideration of how wellness may impact student learning and healthy citizenry. Abundant supporting resources are available in print and online (<http://www.letsmove.gov/>).

We also know that not all trends are as encouraging. We are working in a time wherein, in many schools, prekindergarten and kindergarten-age children are not allowed time to snack, nap, or rest. We continue to learn of horror stories about young children not being allowed time to play or to explore learning centers in classrooms so that they have more "learning" time. We have too many children in poverty, suffering from neglect and abuse (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). Consequently, we have far too many children who do not want to go to school and who cannot see the beauty of their minds and spirits. They are confined to a world of intellectual poverty while seemingly surrounded by opportunities and well-intentioned adults.

Final Reflection

Too often we seem to be in a race to skip over early childhood entirely. As a nation, we seem to be very intent on young children learning and achieving without giving adequate thought to what those words mean. As advocates, taking the time to reflect on these four basic early childhood precepts provides the language and purpose to refocus on behalf of the holistic learning required to maximize young children's learning and development.

Please join the discussion at: <https://preceptsofearlychildhoodblog.wordpress.com/>

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Pictures for Reflection



Spotlight on Real-World Practice

Puddle Ponderings

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“Will it float?”

“You need to make it lighter to make it more floatier!”

“What? How come my boat started to sink? I’ll wash it. It might be the mud.”

“I think my sail made it move faster than yours. I’ll help you make one.”

“Where did the puddle go? We were just floating and now the puddle is getting more little.”

Science, language, critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, all this learning comes from a simple puddle. Today was the first day of heavy rain in a long time at our little school on the hill.

When a spot of sunshine showed up a treasure of puddles came with it. Our kindergarteners had a wonderful opportunity to learn from a simple floating and sinking lesson. Their only parameters were that their boat fit in the little basket at “testing station” before they go out into the puddles and that those with no boots on ask a friend with boots on to help them get their boat out of the middle of the puddle.

We talked about going back to the drawing board if their boat sank and we talked about how not every experiment will work the first time. The children were off and running, grabbing items from the creation station, paper from the communication center, and miles and miles of tape from the supply shelf. The children designed, tested, observed, discussed, hypothesized, retested, and redesigned. They watched plastic float and cardboard sink. They pondered about the depth of the water, the speed of the boats, and the disappearance of the puddle. But in the middle of the science lesson, they showed compassion as boats floated into the middle of the puddle, helping each other to retrieve boats for the no boot friends or offering a popsicle stick for friends who didn’t have any. The children called each other over to share their new discoveries or to show each other how to add something new. When the experiment was over, they found wet clothes on their bodies and they offered each other their extra dry clothes if they didn’t have some of their own.

Our youngest learners will have a rich curriculum with the hands on experiences we provide, but they also receive an education that honors them as learners and brings the culture of friendship and compassion to the forefront. Educating the whole child is more than the curriculum; it is the child’s opportunity to use knowledge in an engaging, challenging, and safe environment supported by caring, perceptive, and qualified adults.

