Social Talk and Imaginative Play: Curricular Basics for Young Children’s Language and Literacy

Anne Haas Dyson, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Celia Genishi, Teachers College, Columbia University

It is writing time in the kindergarten class. As she does every day, Mrs. Bee (all names are pseudonyms), the teacher, urges her young charges to “think” before they write, to make a “quick sketch” of their idea, and then to write that idea, “stretching their words” and listening to their sounds, bravely spelling the best they can. Each child should do their “own” text based on their “own” true life, Mrs. Bee cautions. No one should copy anyone else, and most certainly, they should not spend the period drawing and talking.

After Mrs. Bee’s directions, the children begin to draw and talk; among the children are LaTrell and his tablemates, Cici and Della:

LaTrell: I seen a balloon when I went on my—
Cici: I seen a air balloon! It was up in the sky.
LaTrell: It was the color blue. Yeah, it went all the way in the sky.
Cici: It was over by my day care. MRS. BEE, WE SEEN THE AIR BALLOON!
Della: ME, TOO! I saw the air balloon.
[“Me, too” echoes from other students in the room.]
Mrs. Bee: Everybody didn’t see an air balloon, now. [“I did!” can be heard all around.] Only the things you really did see.
LaTrell: I’m gonna make a air balloon.
Cici: I seen an air balloon. Red, yellow, different colors!

Soon a virtual flock of balloons are taking off on children’s papers. As for LaTrell’s balloons, they sprout appendages and become him flying, propelled by his mother, who tosses him up in the air. “This how I went up in the sky when I was a baby… I didn’t know I couldn’t come down,” he says. (See Figure 1; see Dyson, 2010a, for the complete vignette.)

In the opening months of the school year, Mrs. Bee’s children were collectively finding a new kind of playground, one that existed on paper. From an
official point of view, though, they drew too much, copied from each other, did not focus on a true event, and indeed did not listen. They were unruly children who did not fall in line with the mandated curriculum, a commercial writing program that had been paced by Mrs. Bee’s school district and choreographed with expected benchmarks.

This view of Mrs. Bee’s children, and Mrs. Bee’s own view of her teaching challenges, were filtered through the demands of that district curriculum, which discouraged imaginative play and talk and emphasized individuals doing their work “by yourself” and thereby achieving basic skills (e.g., knowing letters and sounds and applying that knowledge to encode a brief narrative).

Language arts curricula focused on the basics are not uncommon in young children’s classrooms. Although a move toward more academic curricula for young children has been clearly evident since the 1970s, it has become increasingly dominant over the last 20 years (Russell, 2011). This is especially so in schools like Mrs. Bee’s that serve children labeled as at risk (e.g., children from low-income and minority families, including those learning English as an additional language). In such schools, academic curricula are designed to raise young children’s test scores and close achievement gaps with the more economically privileged (Pappano, 2010). Indeed, federal funds for, and the very survival of, many central city public schools are dependent on achievement test scores tied to the basics.

Given these trends, time-honored curricular basics for young children have not fared well. Among these lost basics are time and space for play, for nonlinguistic forms of communication, such as drawing, and for extended talk among children themselves.

In this chapter, we are interested in curricularly unruly children, especially children who are not considered mainstream and who bring to the classroom a
diversity of experiences with language and literacy. That diversity challenges the organized curricular path to academic success. Our purpose is not to call for a return to some mythic early childhood past. Indeed, narrow curricula focused on the perceived literacy basics have long been a part of what Haberman (1991) has called “the pedagogy of poverty” (p. 290; e.g., Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966). Rather, our aims are threefold.

First, we aim to reposition children and childhoods at the center of the curriculum. Drawing on the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, we approach children not simply as putty for society’s structures but as people of substance who respond to the institutional and societal structures in which they live. In this way, they have agency in the construction of their own childhoods.

Second, conceiving of children in this way entails taking seriously basic childhood processes through which children cross-culturally engage with their worlds. As we argue herein, this in turn brings new support for social talk and multimodal play, which may not be basic in many classrooms but are, nonetheless, basic to childhoods themselves (Montgomery, 2009).

Third, drawing on sociocultural and dialogic theories, we aim to illustrate the complex interplay between childhoods’ basics (e.g., social participation, play) and official school basics (e.g., working independently, using standard English, demonstrating orthographic knowledge and textual sense). This interplay has consequences for learning paths and teaching possibilities. Most striking, an awareness of this interplay allows teachers to read the signs of childhood actions and decipher unexpected childhood resources.

To illustrate this interplay, we draw on data from recent projects. Dyson’s (in press) was a study of the ideologies about language and childhood that undergirded the basics in two urban schools serving at-risk students. She focused on official writing curricula, highlighting how first graders and kindergartners interpreted those curricula. She met LaTrell during the kindergarten phase of that study. Falchi, Axelrod, and Genishi’s (2012) project was a longitudinal one in which four collaborators followed six children of Mexican and indigenous Mixteco heritage between the ages of 3 and 7 years old from Head Start through second grade in a public school with a Spanish/English dual-language program. The children’s collective story took them from emergent bilingualism in a prekindergarten program that emphasized children’s own pace of development in a play-based context to early literacy in English and Spanish in a structured program.

Ultimately, we aim herein to contribute quite literally to a level playing field on which children can enact diverse learning paths to academic success and, moreover, assume some social agency in their lives in formation.

Unruly Children in a Basics World

Children are born not into a “society” per se but into a childhood, that is, a particular configuration of ongoing relations that give social shape and cultural meaning to their initial membership in the human world. (Cook, 2002, p. 2)
Childhood is not simply a developmental period or a time of transition to adulthood. As Cook (2002) explains, it is a cultural institution influenced by societal forces, among them history, economics, technology, and the power-ridden dynamics of race, gender, class, and geography. How does the proper child show respect to elders, spend time, and relate to siblings? How does a well-mannered child interact with strangers, relatives, and neighbors? How does a normal child behave in gender-appropriate ways? There is no one answer to such questions; childhoods are part of the sociocultural worlds into which children are interactively guided (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001). Think of such directives as “be a big boy/good girl,” “don’t be a baby,” “give Grandma a hug,” and “don’t talk to strangers”; all are admonitions undergirded by ideologies of proper childhoods in relation to others.

In school, there are similar conceptions of what proper children should know and do, and these have changed dramatically in language and literacy education (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). In Mrs. Bee’s district, a recent newspaper article (reference not provided to maintain the anonymity of those named herein) voiced worries about unprepared kindergartners, estimated by local teachers to comprise about a third of the new entrants. Such children, the article declared, do not know their ABCs, cannot provide at least some letter-sound connections, nor follow two or three steps in directions. Children are thus positioned as individuals in hierarchical relationships with one another based not on social negotiations in particular contexts but on relative placement on a graded list of skills beginning at their very entry into school.

Our focus herein, though, is not only on the nature of the official curriculum but also on the nature of the unofficial one, the one governed by children. To borrow once again from Cook (2002), one aim of the relatively recent interdisciplinary field of childhood studies is to “dismantle the epistemological hegemony that has regarded children as being merely in transition, as nothings and nobodies in the here and now” (p. 5). These studies illustrate that within and against societal and institutional structures, children exercise agency in selectively attending to, resisting, and transforming their local worlds as they interpret them (e.g., Beresin, 2010; Corsaro, 2010; Dyson, 1999, 2007; Genishi, Dyson, & Russo, 2011; James & James, 2008; Thorne, 2005). In other words, whatever the curricular demands, young children do not just do as they are told.

**Childhood Agency: Playing in School**

Children’s agency, and their relationships with other children, is central to the concept of childhood cultures. These cultures entail the communicative and often playful social practices that children produce as they respond to the adult-introduced social practices that comprise, and constrain, their everyday experiences in time and space (Corsaro, 2010; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Playgrounds are spaces where children are relatively free to organize their own activities; thus, they are prime sites for the study of childhood cultures (e.g., Beresin, 2010; Corsaro, 1985; Opie, 1993; Opie & Opie, 1959).
Classrooms are spaces where children are not so free. Nonetheless, in these spaces, large numbers of children spend a great deal of time side by side. Whether they should or should not, young children tend to be drawn to other children and to play. Even in highly structured literacy activities, children may engage in playful banter and spontaneous competitions, as humble as “My H is better than your H” (refer to Glupczynski, 2007). In this way, official school tasks are driven not only by official demands but also by peer relationships, childhood practices, and their valued cultural resources, including the characters, themes, plots, and images from varied forms of popular media (Dyson, 2007, 2010b; Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

These practices within the unofficial community of children may contrast those in the official world in striking ways. Children, after all, may differ from their teachers (and from curriculum regulators) not only in age but also in aesthetic taste, sense of humor, communicative repertoire, and dominant intentions (including to play)—factors that are themselves shaped by the sociocultural particularities of everyday life (Chudacoff, 2007). To place children center stage in the classroom curriculum requires a view of them as complex social actors in childhood worlds.

**Learning in Childhoods**

From a sociocultural perspective, the adults in children’s lives shape their learning through the recurrent social activities of everyday life, with their embodied human relationships, their material resources, their symbolic mediators (especially talk), and their enacted values (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Through their participation, children learn to focus on a common topic and to infer the relevance of their own actions; they learn to coordinate with others, anticipating others’ moves and acting accordingly themselves. In these ways, they become communicators and active participants, meaning makers in a shared life.

Children, though, learn not only through enacting activities with guiding adults but also through observing, listening to stories (real and invented) about how the world works, and through their own play (Rogoff, 2003). In that play, children assume control over what can be a confusing world; they examine the workings of the world around them, then assume roles, appropriate the language of those roles, negotiate actions, and face the consequences of their actions as pretend parents and children, superheroes and victims, party givers and invitees, and so forth. Cross-culturally, these are children’s ways of learning, even though their opportunities to observe, the nature of their interaction with others, the cultural material they play with, and even how that play is viewed by others may all vary (Konner, 1991).

In school, then, teachers organize practices through which children will learn. Even if the intention is to teach this skill or that one, from children’s points of view, the teacher is offering a kind of event, a social happening. Children are to figure out its purpose, what is relevant in that activity given their drive to make
sense and to make relationships (Nelson, 2007), and what resources they have—
that is, what basis they have for participation.

Because oral and written language use is infused with social and cultural meanings (e.g., Collins & Blot, 2003; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001; Schieffelin, 2000), children come to school—the official space for the public’s children—with different kinds of resources, among them languages, communicative experiences, and knowledge about symbol systems, including kinds of texts (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Kenner, 2000; Levinson, 2007). Whatever their nature, these provide the basis for young children’s entry into school practices.

Moreover, children are not making sense alone but in the company of other children. Within these relationships themselves may be unexpected symbolic and thematic resources, from the stuff of popular media to that of age-old playground games, like chase-escape, attack-defend, escape-capture (Sutton-Smith, 1995), not to mention rhymes and chase games involving play with gender, violence, and love (Beresin, 2010; Dyson, 2007; Thorne, 1993).

Children’s social actions in school activities are thus oriented to official and unofficial worlds. Their actions in language and literacy activities cannot be understood only by studying them as lone actors or as apprentices to adult experts. If we do that, we destroy the composing act itself; its symbolic vehicles—its images and words—are addressed to (indeed, in dialogue with) a voice-filled world (Bakhtin, 1981). Even a child acting alone is situated in a practice and, so situated, has intentions and resources linked to other experiences, other people, and other social places.

In the following case studies, we bring our focus close in on two small boys who were kindergartners, peers, friends, and initiates into school literacy. They were both students who tried, in the main, to “do good,” as LaTrell put it (if only to avoid “trouble,” finish their work, get lunch recess in LaTrell’s case, or get “choice” time in Miguel’s). Both boys sometimes found themselves outside the boundaries of a mandated curriculum, with its notion of proper children keeping pace with the benchmarks of basics to be mastered. As we looked from the sidelines, we sometimes found them playing alone and with others, lost in imagined worlds. The cases of these two unruly children are drawn from studies that reflect particular and potentially overlapping concerns of ours: children who are emergent bilinguals and engaged in learning English and children, glossed as nonmainstream, who are engaged in learning to use written language.

LaTrell: A Social Player in an Individualistic Writing Curriculum

LaTrell, the small boy who was surprised that he could stay in the air, was an earnest student and a playful peer in Mrs. Bee’s kindergarten class. His urban school is located in a small Midwestern metropolitan area (population of approximately 226,000, according to the 2010 U.S. census). All 21 of his classmates were, like him, African American, as was his teacher, Mrs. Bee.
Dyson observed, audiotaped, and collected child products in LaTrell’s class twice weekly over the course of an academic year (for methods, see Dyson, 2010b). He was one of three focal children, each of whom allowed entry into different classroom friendship groups; in the end, she came to know all the children in the class.

Mrs. Bee, like LaTrell himself, was relatively new to the public elementary school. She had spent years teaching preschool in a rural area, where the curriculum was play based; she had not expected, she told me, the pressure that she faced to get her kindergartners reading and writing. She followed official guidelines, which allowed no play period other than a short recess after lunch (if the weather and the school lunch behavior monitors allowed).

The mandated and district-paced writing curriculum was undergirded by particular ideologies or values and beliefs about childhood and language. The proper child should learn the basics of written language as early as possible, and this belief was evident in the benchmarked skills involving orthographic spelling and organized texts. Moreover, the proper child was diligent and reflective and concentrated on writing. That child did not play around with seatmates. The text was not a playground; it was a private drive on a benchmarked road.

The approach to both childhood and written language could be described by what Appiah (2005) refers to as an unattractive view of individualism. In this ideology, individuality and sociality are competing goals. Although there were times when peers were directed to share their writing plans, the overriding notion was that the proper child went inside the self, thought about an experience, and then, quite deliberately, crafted that true experience on paper. The child was supposed to write a text (and by extension, a life) in which the self mattered most.

When the children met on the classroom rug at the beginning of writing time, Mrs. Bee often talked to them about “working independently,” writing only about what was “really real,” and not copying a story that she might model, that another child might tell, or that the popular media may have presented. Those were not their own “true” stories; indeed, such copying was “illegal,” Mrs. Bee told them; in adult terms, it was plagiarism. Moreover, they were told to try to spell independently, although she and adult volunteers would help when necessary.

As LaTrell and his peers have already shown, the children were not so proper. They listened dutifully to Mrs. Bee as they sat on the rug. Then, they made their way to their work tables, where they negotiated, and even argued over, supplies and jointly invented worlds and sought help for “making words.” They learned fairly quickly that Spider-Man, Superman, and SpongeBob were banned topics. Such topics could elicit a peer’s “ooo” if anyone so ventured on his or her page (although writing about having, say, a Tinker Bell doll or Hannah Montana video seemed OK; commercial possession was fine, even if imaginative play was not).

**On True Stories of the True Self**

The air balloon vignette illustrates Mrs. Bee’s worries about the “realness” of the children’s stories and their veracity for individuals. “Everybody didn’t see an air
balloon, now,” she said. Yet, the children’s proliferating balloons suggested that even if “everybody” did not see an air balloon, most of the children would like to see such appealing flying objects (and LaTrell, of course, became a flying object).

The air balloon event, which happened in the fifth week of school, also illustrates how LaTrell and his peers could participate in composing as if it were a form of play. LaTrell’s topics came not so much from inner reflection, nor from straightforward copying, but from social interaction with paper and peers. Indeed, his writing seemed at times situated, at least in part, in playful practices appropriated from his childhood world, as in the opening of the snowmen event described below.

Shortly after the balloon event, LaTrell initiated another event with what seemed a variant of “playing the dozens,” a verbal game of the African American oral tradition. Although playing the dozens typically involves competitive insults about the other’s mother (Smitherman, 2000), the opening of LaTrell’s event seemed a truncated version, reminiscent of childhood versions of the game that did not seem particularly insulting (see Jemie, 2003):

LaTrell is sitting by Alicia, who is in her second year of kindergarten and previously solicited his involvement in an evolving scene of her own. While Alicia once again draws her extended family at birthday parties, LaTrell first draws a snowman and then moves to add a person hanging on to what turns out to be a broom:

LaTrell: Your mama’s gonna hit the snowman.
Alicia: [laughing] No, that’s your mama.
LaTrell: [adds a small snowman] Your mama’s gonna hit the other snowman. Your mama hit the other snowman, hit the baby snowman. That’s your mama.

Alicia looks and smiles but does not respond. She is drawing the relatives who are at her sister’s and her birthday parties at the park.

LaTrell: [to the table] Her mama hit the head with a broom.

LaTrell adds more snowmen and then, like Alicia, begins to draw his relatives amid the invading snowmen. When Alicia adds a baby brother, LaTrell does, too. When he draws his brother being bitten by a dog, she creates her own dog. When LaTrell adds a sun, so does Alicia (although his spells doom for the snowmen). In this dialogic way, LaTrell’s yard full of wild snowmen and Alicia’s park full of celebrating relatives take shape together.

When Earnest, sitting nearby, decides that he will make a snowman, the more experienced Alicia sees trouble ahead:

Alicia: Ooo. He copied offa you.
LaTrell: So?
With this last comment, LaTrell suggested that he (like Earnest, among others) did not seem initially to understand that he was to do more than learn to write. He was to transform his relationship to his peers, as well as to his own imagination. In fact, Alicia was copying LaTrell, and he was copying her. They were both contributing to and appropriating from the conversational gathering of ideas—referred to years ago by Britton (1970) as a “sea of talk” (p. 29; see Salvio & Boldt, 2009). This was a common dynamic among the children, who were supposedly doing their work independently.

**On Making Words Independently**

During the air balloon event, LaTrell, like most of his peers, did not “make the words” on the bottom of his paper to go with the picture, which itself was linked to different told stories. The basic skill of “stretching and sounding the words out,” a major emphasis of rugtime lessons, did not quite capture the children's difficulty. The children were beginning to associate letters with sounds, but the link between those associations and the production of meaning was not clear (Bialystok, 1991; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Tolchinsky, 2003). The whole business of putting speech, not an image, on paper was tenuous. This is hardly atypical (e.g., Clay, 1975, 1998), but given the new basics demands, it was locally a sign of parents not doing their job and children not meeting benchmarks (as per the newspaper article noted earlier).

As the curricular guide urged, Mrs. Bee aimed for the children to spell as best they could, to be independent. Still, as learners do when they are faced with a new task (Rogoff, 2003), the children sought help despite the curricular guidelines. They pooled their collective knowledge. In fact, sometimes a child got caught up and joined in the repetitive monitoring of a peer trying to put talk on paper syllable by syllable; their written messages could thus merge, just as Alicia’s relatives and LaTrell’s snowmen did.

In the snowmen event, LaTrell sought help from Alicia, who was going through kindergarten for the second time and initially had relatively more encoding knowledge than LaTrell. In the episode, she shifts roles from responsive peer to good teacher, using her speech as a meditational tool to model, guide, and generally be supportive (Vygotsky, 1978):

LaTrell is trying to write snowman, the name of the objects most salient to him in his drawing (cf. Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Tolchinsky, 2003). He knows that he needs an s, but he also knows that a single letter is not enough for snowman. He relies on Alicia’s experience:

LaTrell: What else?
Alicia: /Sno/ /m/ /m/ /m/ m.
LaTrell: How you write m?
Alicia: Like this. Line down. Like that. [makes an m on her paper]

As Alicia models how to write an m, LaTrell watches and then tries it himself.
Alicia: Yep. Like that.
LaTrell: Now what else?
Alicia: /Snowma/ /n/ /n/ /n/.
LaTrell: What?
Alicia: N. Want me to show you?
LaTrell: I can write it like this.
Alicia: Ooo. That good.

Although the above interaction was quite serious, sometimes LaTrell manipulated the sounds of words in quite playful ways, as in the following exchange with Earnest. The two boys have been arguing about whose turn it is to use the eraser, when seemingly out of the blue, LaTrell changes the subject:

LaTrell: Yippeo jibeeo jibeeoo.
Earnest: Cheerio cheerio cheerio.
LaTrell: Jibeeo.

On Being a Good Writer

The children’s imaginative play and social responsiveness could be viewed as the beginnings of what we as authors are doing right now, writing to respond to others’ voices on a topic. The children were engaged in a kind of exploratory play that could conceivably be channeled into such relations as text performers and audience members (through sharing times), authors and actors (through dramatizing of texts), and official collaborators who share a page.

Or, their sociability, the linking of their individual papers into a social networking of ideas and relations, could be viewed as simply unruly. Their imaginative exploits could be deemed a distraction from the real stuff of life. To be a proper child, LaTrell would have to learn, as he did, that official writing was a kind of individual competition; one had to get a topic first, before anybody else did, like getting the ball first on the playground. Moreover, one had to produce true (or apparently true) sentences. Any playful imaginings had to stay in the free space of drawing or the social space of talk. Thus, in his dialogic storytelling with peers, LaTrell was bitten by a shark in the local pool, his friend Charles had a baby lion as a pet, and in her drawing, his peer Odette rode an elephant to the local mall.

By spring of the school year, LaTrell’s collective play, and mutual helping, during writing time did not stop, but the composing of imagined worlds did. He could use his growing orthographic knowledge to write straightforward sentences (e.g., “I GO T [to] The Prc…and I GO T The Hos [house] and I a [had] Jos [juice]”). His texts about playing in the park, swimming in the pool, and going to his grandma’s house were like those of other children in his room.

The very individuality that the curriculum seemed to desire was more apparent when a child could fly and snowmen could invade. The curricular guide’s
insistence that children stretch out true narrative moments with details seemed to make little sense to the children, who were still exploring lines and curves and figuring out connections between sounds and graphics. Ironically, such details were the stuff of the intricate details of drawing, the lively rounds of child storytelling, and the moment-to-moment enactments of worlds in formation.

As we leave LaTrell’s classroom for Miguel’s, we leave these thoughts for now and return to our reflections on curriculum and assessment in the last section of our chapter.

Miguel: A Player for Whom the Social Is Complex

We now turn our attention to Miguel, a multilingual child with a rich imagination that he sometimes kept to himself and sometimes opened up to others. His family had immigrated to the United States from southwestern Mexico before he was born, and his language story reflected the family’s history. He understood but did not speak Mixteco, the indigenous language that he heard at home, and began to speak both Spanish and English in a Head Start program with a largely Latino population. He helps us illustrate the complex relationships among talk, play, and the basics of written language.

As a preschool child, Miguel was characterized as “not a talker.” We surmised that as a preschooler, he was in the process of learning Spanish and English and that he also preferred activities he could do on his own. Because Genishi and her collaborators followed him since his prekindergarten days as a 3- then 4-year-old, we documented his path from the textual playground of pre-K to what we earlier called “a private drive on a benchmarked road,” the road of the prescribed kindergarten literacy curriculum.

But first, we examine scenes from the playground. The administrators and teachers at the Head Start center that Miguel attended were committed to maintaining a play-based curriculum, in which adults honored children’s choices. The teachers followed the HighScope curricular structure of plan-do-review (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979), as mandated by Head Start. Within that structure, children in this center chose activities ranging from the family area to tabletop toys to the block area. During the 4s year, the computer was an area of choice. Children could transform any of the multiple areas into stages for sociodramatic play, but the family and block areas were especially open to it.

Miguel most often chose the block area, where he preferred action or nonlinguistic activities over talk. Thus, he became notable for his constructive play with blocks and trucks and for his gestures and the creation of his own soundtrack, on which sound effects like “beep beep” and growls predominated. His friends, or associates, were the boys who also liked the block area, but his usually independent actions seemed to be impelled by his imagination and not motivated by friendships. Still, his pre-K days unfolded on the indoor and outdoor playgrounds of the Head Start center, which featured ample space and time for child choice. Like his classmates, Miguel was able to choose activities, playmates, and languages that came together via a fluid curriculum supported by flexible teachers. This
The confluence of complex curricular pieces formed a social web prior to the onset of school: the kindergarten of today, with its academic curriculum and the attendant pressures that we were introduced to in Mrs. Bee’s room (see also Graue, 2011; Hu, 2008, 2011).

**Signs of a Social Miguel**

As in real estate, location matters in schooling. Miguel’s kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Em, was required to use the same balanced literacy curriculum that Mrs. Bee used. However, because the teachers and their kindergartners lived in different states within the United States, the ways in which they implemented the curriculum varied by school district, neighborhood, school, and classroom. Despite curricular prescriptions, teachers, of course, had their own ways of implementing them. Miguel was in a classroom and school where kindergarten teachers were able to fit time for play into the daily schedule. In short, he had sanctioned opportunities to keep alive or extend the playful social web that was constructed in pre-K.

In this space, where there was room for social talk and play, Miguel was still a bit of a loner, often choosing to work or play alone and following his own timeline. Peer relationships only occasionally seemed important to him, as this poem about his friendship with Josué, a friend from Head Start, reflects (conventional Spanish spellings and English translations are in parentheses):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Yo soi (soy) su (I am his)} \\
&\text{amgo (amigo) Di (de) (friend of)} \\
&\text{Josue (Josué)} \\
&\text{Yo si soi (Yes I am)} \\
&\text{su amgo (his friend)} \\
&\text{con Jose (Josué) (with Josué)} \\
&\text{Yo me une [uni?] (joined with?)} \\
&\text{soi amgo Di Jose (Josué)} \\
&\text{sha sha sha.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 51)

This songlike poem, an index of a newly social Miguel, was one of a number of pieces of creative writing that contrast with what he produced during writing time. The creative writing assignment was in fact not part of the balanced literacy curriculum, but rather a teacher insertion. Moreover, it was an insertion that Miguel responded to with long stories, as compared with his peers’ pieces. His tendency to be independent revealed itself again.

**Picture a Sad Frog Versus Talk With a Purpose:**

**“You Need More Dinosaurs”**

Miguel’s teacher, Mrs. Em—and the school’s dual-language program—modified the balanced literacy units of study so children could begin to read and write in both English and Spanish. She also included choice time in the daily schedule,
when children could choose to play as long as they completed their work. That is, choice time could be withheld if, for example, a child had not completed an assigned writing task.

As in playful and creative settings, in the prescribed curricular context, Miguel also worked on his own, following Mrs. Em’s suggestions as best as he could. When he talked, he was often reading aloud what he had written, apparently for himself. “Yo tengo que jugar con mi hermano” (“I have to play with my brother”) was a sentence that the teacher dictated and Miguel dutifully wrote with quite a few hints from his teacher, a child co-author, and the word wall (field notes, 2/08). The orientation of the curriculum toward individual learners and learning was clearly reflected here. Thus, as a student who mostly liked to work alone, Miguel should have been a good match for this curricular feature.

Still, we could rely on him to show how hard it is to categorize a child as a loner, not a talker, or a good match for a curricular approach when we looked at his writing. The following are two examples from his writing journal:

Frogs rana le tongo quiero cet [comer?] a flies para no le tengo a worms

The text is accompanied by a drawing of a frog with its tongue out and flies and a drawing of a sad frog with a worm. Falchi, the observing researcher, thinks the message is that the frog doesn’t like worms.

A rana le gusta comer. (The frog likes to eat.)

Miguel wrote with difficulty, even when the topic was appealing to him, as animals were.

Indeed, when Mrs. Em assessed him early and then later in the kindergarten year, he did not meet the expected benchmarks for the balanced literacy curriculum. (Whether these were reasonable benchmarks for children who were learning to read and write in two languages is an open question, of course.) In sum, Miguel may not have shone as he engaged in scripted literacy lessons, but because of opportunities for creative writing and the inclusion of choice time, he had notable moments of spoken and written expression about topics that interested him. As we saw above, a favorite topic was animals of all kinds.

While playing with plastic animals, this time of the extinct kind, Miguel and another kindergartner spoke to each other in English, occasionally making their dinosaurs fight with each other (field notes, 3/24/08). At one point, Miguel asserted, “You need more dinosaurs,” surely a promising line to launch a prehistoric minidrama. However, because the substitute teacher then told the two boys in Spanish that they should be building something with their LEGOs—being literally constructive in their play—their conversation stopped, and they proceeded to build things individually. Hence, the social was unintentionally curtailed, and both boys then appeared to be loners.

At other times, when children were able to develop their play, dinosaurs reappeared (field notes, 4/28/08). In response to his peer Marco, who asks where the
bad guys are, Miguel tells him that his dinosaur is “the good guy.” The two dramatists have the dinosaurs attack each other while the boys provide a soundtrack with occasional explosions. Miguel later says, “My dinosaur has spikes,” which is true because his plastic dinosaur is a stegosaurus. In a few minutes, Tommy joins them, and suddenly the dinosaurs are dead or dying, so Marco says to one of the animals, “Run for your life!” This play seems unremarkable as the boys animate the plastic dinosaurs and invest the energy of invented dramas in their scene, an energy quite invisible in a dictated sentence like “Yo tengo que jugar con mi hermano” (“I have to play with my brother”), which sounds like the weary complaint of an older brother about a younger one. Actually, Miguel has two sisters and no brothers, making his diligence in writing the sentence all the more impressive. Additionally, perhaps the contrasting scene in which dinosaurs are in demand is remarkable because it could only have happened in a context that allowed for playful, social talk, a context that is increasingly rare in kindergarten classrooms.

Curricula for Young Children: We Need More Dinosaurs

“We are to be in all things regulated and governed,” said the gentleman, “by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether.” (Dickens, as quoted in McDermott & Hall, 2007, p. 11)

We could not help but sense a kinship between the mandated language arts curricula of today and Mr. Gradgrind’s proposal for “commissioners of fact” in Charles Dickens’s (1854/2007) 19th-century novel Hard Times. The administrators monitoring children’s progress according to the No Child Left Behind Act and the updated Race to the Top must feel as if they have been given fact sheets, containing, for instance, the number of letters a child should know to be ready for kindergarten or the number of words that must be correctly spelled in order to reach a writing benchmark.

The facts appear to be suffocating “Fancy altogether” as reading and writing become the center of early childhood curricula. Resistance to the transformation of the kindergarten into the first grade, traditionally where most children learned to read, seems to be disappearing. Experienced teachers are leaving the classroom, states are eviscerating public employees’ unions (Karp, 2011), and teacher educators seek to align themselves with steadfast teachers like Mrs. Bee and Mrs. Em who do the best they can.

What is also disappearing is the vision of teachers as professionals, or more accurately put, teachers’ abilities and voices are disappearing as administrators are pushed to measure the quality of teaching via the facts of students’ test scores. Teachers are no longer able to make judgments within the context of children’s own social and cultural realities, to decide that LaTrell and his peers were not plagiarizing but collegially, even collaboratively, constructing graphic worlds or that Miguel could create his own sentences to later write correctly. Neither curriculum developers nor diligent teachers can easily destroy childhood imagination.
and play, so central are they to the essence of childhoods. But curriculum developers and teachers can drive them underground, denying teachers the opportunities to know and build on children's interests, predilections, and ways of working. Indeed, in the wider educational world now, youths are forging ahead outside of school in social networks oriented to participation in newly evolving (and sometimes virtual) communities (e.g., Kirkland, 2011); school is marginal to their literacy practices.

**Teachers Measure Their Teaching: Partnering Curriculum With Assessment**

The balanced literacy curriculum that shaped much of LaTrell’s and Miguel's school days had means of assessment embedded in benchmarks and book levels. These constraints lined the private drives that children were to take as they became readers and writers. In some schools, teachers are assessed by the degree of fidelity to the details of a prescribed curriculum. In some schools, at a given hour, say 10:00 a.m., the topic must be nonfiction because at other times in the 90-minute literacy block, teachers must address other topics. That is one meaning of **fidelity of implementation**, which enables administrators to state that benchmarked measures are valid because the curriculum was faithfully taught. (See Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992, for a comprehensive definition of **fidelity of implementation**, and see National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, 2007, for an evidence-based definition linked to Response to Intervention.) Of course, teachers and children vary in their ability (and willingness) to be faithful to curricular prescriptions. Children often veer away from prescriptions; they take detours off the drive as they use multiple modes, such as drawing, moving, and gesturing, to express or help themselves arrive at their own literacy benchmarks of fanciful air balloons or sad frogs.

The stuff of teacher-based assessment, then, incorporates drawings, the children's talk about them, and the printed text, which are all inseparable from literacy learning. Particularly for emergent bilinguals (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008) and multilingual children, assessment should feature their talk. How much and in what context do children speak their home language, English, or both? What do they talk about? What kind of talk does the prescribed curriculum engender? Despite Miguel's tendency to be independent and not especially talkative, choice time allowed him a verbal range beyond assigned texts. His growing knowledge of the social world and its print counterparts often depended on the fanciful dramas of choice time, when children traded dinosaurs or warned the plastic creatures to run for their lives. LaTrell's verbally elaborate stories needed the imaginative space of textual playgrounds, complete with companions. Without them, his texts bespoke just another little boy who didn't do anything “special,” as he explained it; he just rode his bike to the park.

Teachers, whose children need the time and space to create the social and imaginative contexts in which literacy begins to make sense to them, in turn need the time and space to be professional observers—to listen, watch, sense, and make sense of children's spoken and written texts. Such observations tell teachers...
what pieces of the curriculum their children need. Just as young children need private drives to reading and writing much less than they need the public spaces of imaginative play, teachers need the time to observe those spaces, to see how the happenings in play might productively connect to new understandings in literacy lessons. Further, when what teachers observe is puzzling, or when they are faced with their own set of facts, they feel stuck because a child seems stuck, and they need the time and space to collaborate, to build on their own sociability to ask peers or staff developers where they might consider going next (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, ch. 6).

Talk of “might consider going” puts us on the expansive stage of the imagination. Unfortunately, that fanciful stage is shrinking, as the lament becomes more and more familiar: In early childhood classrooms, time and space for talk and play are hard to find; they’re going the way of the dinosaurs. Yet, just as children continually revive these extinct creatures, adults can take their cue from Miguel and Marco to affirm the need for literal and figurative playgrounds where children can control dinosaurs and their eventual textual representations of them.

As we close this chapter, we leave readers with these questions about facts and fancy in early childhood schooling: Given the curricula we have described, their uniform pacing toward set benchmarks, are kindergartners learning what we as a society want them to learn? Are play and childhood imagination curricular problems or basic forces for individual growth as societal participants? It is past time for us as a society to dialogically construct these exam questions as we aim to intervene in these educational “hard times” for the very young.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. What are the values and beliefs embedded within mandated language curricula?
2. What do the stories of LaTrell and Miguel tell the researchers?
3. To what degree does your interpretation of these students’ stories correspond to the researchers’ interpretation?

**REFERENCES**


