

The World Traveling Self

Play as Context and Tool of Critical Literacy

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Introduction

IN THESE TIMES of accountability-driven schooling, policy makers have increasingly disregarded the unpredictability and the seeming purposelessness of play (Dillon 2006; Jerald 2006). Instead, motivated by the demands of accountability and a vision of education that equates knowledge and academic skills with future economic gain, our schools favor teaching practices linked to measurable, predictable, and rationally justifiable outcomes (Gunzenhouser 2003). But a paradox emerges: While justified by the need to bolster the academic performance of our most marginalized of students, anti-playful schooling may exacerbate the very “achievement gaps” that the accountability movement seeks to close. This is especially true within the highly-valued and crucially important area of literacy. Research suggests that rather than being frivolous, play and playfulness provide us with ways to explore literacy and its relationship to students’ self understandings. Restricting the analysis of how a critical area of study like literacy intersects with student identity may thwart the efforts of reformers who wish to help all students to conceive of themselves as readers and writers. In what follows I develop a philosophical defense of the importance of playfulness within schooling, especially within the context of reading and literacy instruction in general. I am inspired to make this claim for the critical importance of playfulness in response to the accountability and testing measures many schools across the nation have embraced, eschewing pedagogy that might be playful in favor of “serious” methods like direct instruction and test preparation.

The Context

In response to accountability measures and testing pressures, schools across the nation and within my current state of North Carolina have increased the time spent on language arts and mathematics instruction, leaving less time available for other subjects like those associated with playfulness such as art, music, and physical education (Choices, Changes, and Challenges:

Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era 2007; Cornbleth 2008; Dillon 2006; Gunzenhouser 2003; Jerald 2006). Such narrowing can happen continuously throughout the school year, or only episodically during periods of focused test preparation or, as teachers in North Carolina often describe, in tandem. They report periods where instructional time is devoted solely to subject-specific test-prep in the weeks prior to a state-mandated test. Of course, as with national trends, play and playful instruction are the first aspects of the curriculum to be jettisoned.

Concomitant with the increased focus on literacy and numeracy instruction, the narrowing of the curriculum also entails increases in prescription of both content and pedagogy (Crocco and Costigan 2007). While many elementary school teachers are spending more time on literacy instruction, many are required to follow prescriptive “pacing guides” that mandate content and instructional strategies therefore limiting playful engagement with classroom literacy study (Crocco and Costigan 2007). High school teachers fare no better for, while they may not have to use the same sorts of pre-made curricular materials (although high school text-books can certainly be used in that way), their subject-area mandates are so packed with content-specifics that many teachers limit their primary instructional strategies to lectures, drills, and tests, with no space for innovation or student engagement, let alone playfulness (Crocco and Costigan 2007). Such trends are most reported in schools deemed as “failing” or “not meeting annual expectations,” and these educational practices have fostered “highly regimented and superficial rote learning in schools serving students who have historically underachieved on standardized tests, that is, African Americans and other students of color” (Nolan and Anyon 2004, 141). But even schools enrolling more affluent, middle class and white students are increasingly adopting the prescriptive teaching methods and curricula associated with mandated assessment (Cuban 2007).

While such prescription is generally troubling, within the context of literacy instruction it is particularly problematic because it restricts the notion of literacy to decoding texts and symbols. As the linguist James Paul Gee argues, literacy involves more than merely possessing the skills associated with decoding text (Gee 1996). Instead, literacy taps into ways of interacting with the world that run deeply into our socially mediated senses of identity. Gee argues that different sorts of texts hold different functional and symbolic meanings in different cultural communities and social contexts. Textual interaction, then, is partially mediated by those norms and situations, and by extension, classrooms draw upon culturally specific attitudes toward language use (Gee 1996; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). Thus, when schools restrict the ranges of textual explorations to pre-packaged materials and instructional strategies limited to test-related tasks like worksheet completion and textual decoding, students are denied opportunities to explore the complex ways that texts inhabit their daily lives. Furthermore, when the codes of classroom textual exploration are limited to test-prep, we induct students into a restricted textual universe that defines literacy as a discrete activity seemingly disconnected from the realities of daily life. We repackage an organic and multifaceted event. As both Stephen Jay Gould and Kathryn Anderson Levitt argue, we present it to students as official school knowledge, complete with developmental time-tables and strategies for “reading on grade” (Anderson-Levitt 1996; Gould 1996).

Such limited textual exploration may reinforce the very learning gaps that such instruction seeks to mitigate because prescriptive, anti-playful literacy instruction fails to account for how exploring literacy also asks students to explore their self conceptions. Gee argues that literacy practices involve “ways of talking, listening (often, too, reading and writing), acting, interacting, believing, valuing and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display and recognize a particular social identity” (Gee 1996, 128). Students always engage in acts of literacy from within “‘social positions’ (perspectives) from which people are ‘invited’

(‘summoned’) to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe and value in certain characteristic, historically recognizable ways, combined with their own individual style and creativity” (Gee 1996, 128). Gee also argues that literacy involves “ways of being in the world...sort of identity kit[s] which come complete with the appropriate costume[s] and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (Gee 1996, 127). The important point here is that we should be careful to analyze how our classrooms match or vary from our students’ home cultures and how their “identity kits” match or differ from the ones that schools implicitly and explicitly value. Gee’s work is important in this discussion because he emphasizes that schools mark non-dominant culture students as *lacking* valuable literacy experiences—as being “illiterate.” In the related medical-model of schooling, literacy professionals measure student deficiencies and “cure” them through “proper” instructional strategies, rendering them “literate.” That way of defining literacy and its exploration, as demonstrated in the work researchers like Heath (1983), Delpit (1995) and Gee (1996, 2001, 2004; Gee, Allen, and Clinton 2001), fails to account for the varieties of valuable literacy practices that students bring with them into the school.¹

The key here is that such “alternative” literacy practices like those associated with specific cultural groups are not valued in the limited world of the test-prep classroom. Such an absence may be profound because we deny students the opportunity to explore a range of complex textual practices and how those practices help them understand themselves and their socio-cultural worlds. This is especially important for marginalized students.

As Diane Reay argues, the research repeatedly demonstrates that marginalized students describe school as a place where they either go to find or to lose themselves (Reay 2001, 2002; Reay and Ball 1997). Reducing literacy instruction to textual decoding and divorcing it from analyses of the ranges of linguistic and literacy practices (both textual and spoken) we find in our local and broader cultural contexts, helps those students whose home-preparation matches the skills and codes of the classroom “find themselves,” and it helps those whose prior-to-school experiences differ from the ones the school offers, not to see themselves as equal and valuable members of the school community. The former students are described as the bright students, and the latter are those in need of remedial attention, the problem students (Brantlinger 2003). The result may be that marginalized students come to understand themselves as different sorts of people than those who *belong* in school. This contributes to a widening of the achievement gap, and it also enables us to blame individual students for their intellectual inadequacies or lack of proper academic motivation rather than an examination of how schools define academic knowledge and, in this case in particular, school-sanctioned literacy practices.

The expanded notion of literacy instruction I am discussing here is often described as critical literacy, but it is also related to the general critical project associated with curriculum theory. While the critical approach entails textual and curriculum analysis, it is also concerned with the relationship of individual student identity to such investigation. The “critical” project, then, moves beyond the traditional academics of reasoned analysis to help students make judgments about “the personal and the political” connecting reading and writing with examinations of power and political issues. As Henry Giroux argues, the aim of critically-focused education is to help students examine how ideologies “distort or illuminate the nature of reality” (Giroux 2001, 143)—at both conscious and unconscious levels. Critical literacy, then, seeks to help students on a very personal level by helping them understand themselves as individuals existing within the variety of social collectivities in which they find themselves, from those of the immediate classroom and home, to those of larger communities like their schools, local communities, as

well as national and world contexts (Aronowitz and Giroux 1986; Burbules and Berk 1999).² Again, as Giroux describes it, such work is both personal and requires the expansion of the notion of text to include the disparate cultural artifacts that students encounter.

The content of the curriculum should affirm and critically enrich the meaning, language, and knowledge forms that students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives. Academics can, in part, exercise their role as public intellectuals via such curricula by giving students the opportunity to understand how power is organized through the enormous number of “popular” cultural spheres that range from libraries, movie theaters, and schools to high-tech media conglomerates that circulate signs and meanings through newspapers, magazines, advertisements, new information technologies, computers, films, and television programs. (Giroux 2009, 17)

Prescriptive and test-focused literacy instruction fails students, especially marginalized ones, because the reduction in curricular flexibility means that teachers do not have the freedom to explore issues related to literacy that emerge from the local context of their students’ lives like the ones Giroux describes. Such prescriptive schooling prevents teachers from helping students to ground literacy in the very real issues concerning them and their communities. Moreover, the overly-prescriptive and restrictive curriculum devalues play, a somewhat hidden yet important aspect of the serious work associated with critical literacy. Play—and the related attitude associated with the activity of play, playfulness—supports critical literacy because they contribute to the “background conditions” necessary to support the complex analysis associated with moving between texts, individual beliefs, and socio-cultural power relationships. As such, I consider playfulness to be a “tool” of critical literacy, while the activity of play an important context for literacy and critical analysis.

Play as Developmental Resource, Attitude, or Activity

Play has become a “hot” topic in early childhood literacy in the last twenty years, and while what I am describing compliments a variety of research projects, my intention here is to provide a theoretical framework for considering play and playfulness within the context of critical inquiry, not to advance an argument for a causal relationship between developmental literacy skills and play, as is the case for much of that research. Briefly, that research moves in two broad directions. First, researchers contend that childhood play itself can influence general school readiness, and indirectly, student literacy. In this way, play helps children develop a variety of academically related skills that contribute to their readiness to develop literacy-specific ones as well. Jerome Singer and Mawiyah Lythcott (2004) argue that

pretend or imaginative play is linked not only to greater daily enjoyment but also to a series of generally adaptive and specific school readiness skills. Such skills include improved verbal fluency, imagery, delaying capacity or self-control, persistence, cooperation, less unwarranted aggression, and greater signs of creativity. (78)

Second, the literature on emergent literacy argues that providing students with literacy-related objects and early literacy experiences helps them engage in “emergent” literacy play that also

help them develop into readers. Thus, details like “pretend” reading and bedtime reading are important because they

give rise to the internal mental processes that are needed to do the intellectual work of reading and writing activity. Play activity in particular affords these experiences, creating bold and subtle opportunities for children to use language in literate ways and to use literacy as they see it practiced. (Roskos and Christie 2001, 60)

Dorothy Singer and Jerome Singer (2005) cite a number of research articles to argue that play in elementary school can help students develop complex literacy skills through experiential means like the dramatization of plot details. Dramatic play can also help students “learn the skills needed to deal with such issues as confrontations with adults or with their peers, gangs, or bullies” (Singer and Singer 2005, 145).

Rather than argue that play helps students develop textual interpretation-skills, I argue that taking a broader view of the relationship between play, critical literacy, and development helps us identify another reason for justifying the inclusion of play in schools in direct response to the anti-playful learning currently dominating educational policy regulation. Play provides a way of approaching the exploration of literacy and its relationship to students’ self-understandings. The first step toward making that approach clear is distinguishing between the *activity* of play and play as an *attitude*. As Brian Sutton-Smith (1997, 2001, 2003) argues, the two are often conflated which leads to confusion. In part, this may stem from the problematic nature of defining play. ‘Play’ is an ambiguous concept, and as a result, it comes to represent a range of hopes and beliefs granted to it by the variety of researchers and others who draw on the idea of play to advance some sort of aim. It often represents the hopes of adults who wish to carve out a social space for children free from a variety of pernicious adult influences. For example, in his wide-ranging and fascinating analysis of the rhetorics of play, Sutton-Smith offers seven different broadly defined ways that we can approach understanding play and its relationship to human life. Some have considered play to be a magical space free from the constraints of the adult world, while others have seen play as the place where children practice socio-cultural performances to prepare them for participation in the adult world (Sutton-Smith 1997). Sutton-Smith’s analysis helps us see that the activity of play is culturally and temporally bound; that is, forms of play and their particular meanings in the lives of “players” emerge in the context of specific places and times. One cannot disaggregate a play-activity from the particular place and time of its enactment. As a result, I will not offer a tidy definition of play here; instead, the question of what forms of activity constitute play should remain open and tied to the particular context of analysis. I will return to this aspect of the analysis in the last section where I discuss play as the context for critical literacy, but for now, let us consider “play” to be an *activity* whose identification as such is defined by those engaged in its performance.

Defining the spirit of play—playfulness—is a less daunting task, even though one could still argue that even a definition of playfulness emerges out of particular socio-cultural contexts. Be that as it may, for our purposes here within this discussion of critical literacy, I agree with Sutton-Smith’s argument that playfulness is concerned with “meta-play.” It takes a broader view and “plays with the frames of play” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 147). As such, it is an attitude of creative rule engagement. This becomes clearer if we examine the details of play and the rules that govern play activities like games and sports. For example, despite the rhetorics that describe childhood play as being wildly ludic and free from constraints, research shows that children’s

games and play time are marked by consistency and reference to agreed-upon rules to define the boundaries of acceptable play activities. We find this also in adult play. Play activities are often routine; when we play games, for example, we naturally draw upon relatively stable and context-specific game-related rules and expectations (Sutton-Smith 1997). We play baseball a certain way; likewise, when children play imaginative games, they do so within the implicitly agreed-upon play-rules that sustain the play framework. Now, if we approach such play, “playfully,” we do not jettison a dependency on rules; it is important to emphasize that they enable the activity to exist. Rules are necessary to create a play space or activity. This detail is important. Current educational policies that embrace prescriptive, test-focused instruction have caused schools to disregard playfulness as a luxury they cannot afford to offer their students. Schools thus seem to embrace the related epistemological stance that considers school policies and academic curricular “rules” to be sacrosanct and immutable. Test-driven classrooms emphasize educational practices that deny students opportunities to negotiate the rules governing academic inquiry. In contrast, a playful approach to schooling views school policies and curricular “rules” as serving the larger aim of academic inquiry, and as such, remain flexible and revisable.

Playfulness as a Tool for Critical Literacy

The second approach to engaging with the rules of games, the *playful* approach, is the kind of playfulness that supports the complex work of critical literacy, the work that asks students to engage in a dynamic analysis of how their self-understandings intersect with particular literacy practices, the texts studied, and the issues raised by those texts. Distinguishing between an agonistic playfulness characteristic of perniciously competitive environments and a creative playfulness that supports the cooperative and generative analysis associated with Freirean-inspired critical literacy, Maria Lugones (2003) describes playfulness as entailing “*openness to surprise*” (17). Lugones goes on to argue that “this is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the ‘world’ to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing” (Lugones 2003, 95). Though she claims playful activities have no rules, the playfulness that Lugones describes here should not be seen as one that draws upon the rhetoric of rule-less ludic activity. Instead, Lugones is arguing that the rules themselves are open to possibility, to revision, and to surprise. They support the activity’s emergence, but they themselves do not constitute the essence of the activity. These features of playfulness are an important component of the type of critical literacy I advocate because, as Lugones goes on to argue, they form a metaphysical stance connected to self-identity, an approach to working with a sense of self that supports the broader work of critical literacy. It is grounded in an openness to self-construction, a seeing of rules as being mutable, for rather than *creating* the self under construction, they are *in service* of that self. As such, the creative playfulness that Lugones advocates is not passive. Lugones’ discussion of playful world-traveling helps us envision how to help students negotiate the potentially conflicting self-understandings that arise when they travel between home and school “worlds.”

As a Latina, lesbian, and feminist academic raised in a position of privilege in her native Cuba, Lugones herself “world” traveled across social contexts that positioned *her* differently—both as a person of privilege and as the target of oppression and discrimination. Like the marginalized students who struggle to resist identifying with the labels that schools use to describe them (i.e., “at risk,” “below grade,” unmotivated, etc.), Lugones faced the danger of essentializing some

sort of static self-understanding based on the discursive material available in the differing social contexts or “worlds” through which she moved. The reflective traveler she describes has an awareness of the differences amongst those worlds and how they give rise to different forms of potential agency. Like the accounts of marginalized students, these differences create tensions that she finds difficult to resolve. She observes:

Those of us who are “world”-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different “worlds” and of having the capacity to remember other “worlds” and ourselves in them. We can say “That is me there, and I am happy in that “world.” So, the experience is of being a different person in different “worlds” and yet of having memory of oneself as different without quite having the sense of there being any underlying “I.” When I can say “that is me there and I am so playful in that ‘world,’” I am saying “That is *me* in that ‘world’” not because I recognize myself in that person; rather, the first person statement is noninferential. I may well recognize that that person has abilities I do not have and yet the having or not having of the abilities is always an “I have...” and “I do not have...” (i.e., it is always experienced in the first person.) (Lugones 2003, 89)

Since Paul Willis’ (1977) work revealed the ways that marginalized students have “partial” insights into the ways that the social worlds of the school and of the home help them have access to being differing types of people in those contexts, we have heard many voices articulating similar insights (Brantlinger 2003; Weis 1990; Wexler 1992). Researchers emphasize that marginalized students describe themselves as having multiple selves, depending upon the social context, but unfortunately, unlike Lugones’ more sophisticated insight, many marginalized students still often turn the analysis onto themselves in an essentializing way. While they describe feeling complex emotions like guilt, shame, and anger over their struggles with reconciling the different selves they encounter in different contexts, the disconnected, individualistic discourse of schooling encourages students to internalize their emotional and intellectual struggles as personal failings. Students then conclude that academic success depends upon their increased ability to discipline themselves, to work harder at being “good students” (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). They often attribute their fundamental difficulties to individual inadequacies and thus attempt to shore themselves up and solve their “problems” by appealing to inner traits of discipline and strength of character. When marginalized students falter on the self-discovery “completion projects” associated with pursuing academic success, they experience these contradictions as revealing static “truths” about themselves as people. Once again, this reinforces the stereotypes that students’ backgrounds—and not our schools and their policies—are responsible for exacerbating achievement gaps (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001).

As Diane Reay argues, marginalized students often internalize the message that they are unfinished and incomplete in some way (Reay 2001). They turn to the school to help them work with the seemingly essential aspects of their identities and do not necessarily contemplate how the school itself creates the context for the contradictions and the selves they discover. Again, this self-disciplining move essentializes a self by drawing upon the unexamined relationship of the social context to the sort of person that that context helps students become. We see this at work in Diane Reay’s transcripts of the statements made by a sixth grader who scores a below-normal test score on a major grade-level exam.³ The girl defines herself *as* the score; she states: “I’m a 3, 3, 3” (Reay 2001, 343). She then remarks that as a result, she is a “nothing” (Reay 2001, 343). It is here that we see a profoundly troubling aspect of the accountability movement’s prescriptive, anti-playful schooling that reduces complex academic study like literacy instruction

to something limited like textual decoding. We fail to provide students with the opportunity to analyze how differing social contexts give rise to different types of literacy practices *and* how those contexts and practices intersect with aspects of how they understand themselves as people and students. Standardized exams *are* literary practices, powerful ones that regulate and promote certain types of literacy, and through their juridical functioning, they promote certain types of students. Within a more robust, playful version of critical literacy, such an exam would be seen as one of the many academic practices that values and promotes a certain type of literacy, and as such, we would help students analyze how it calls forth certain types of people. It also requires that we help them answer the question the critical literacy educator Ira Shor asks of his students: “How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter?” (Shor 1992, 1).

To answer Shor’s question and to support students’ examination of the ways that the social context of a place like school helps them become certain types of people requires that we help them understand the rules that support the emergence of the metaphorical games played in that context. Like the rules that enable us to make sense of the activity called “basketball,” and people as players, coaches, opponents, and audience, etc., schooling is guided by complex rituals and discourses and rules that enable us to recognize it as “school.” Specific academic disciplines likewise play even more specific types of games within school. Gee argues that,

A science like biology is not a set of facts. In reality, it is a “game” certain types of people “play.” These people engage in characteristic sorts of activities, use characteristic sorts of tools and language, and hold certain values; that is, they play by a certain set of “rules.” They *do* biology. Of course, they learn, use, and retain lots and lots of facts—even produce them—but the facts come from and with the doing. Left out of the context of biology as activity, biological facts are trivia. (Gee 2005, 4)

These often hidden rules create what Charles Taylor describes when he observes that “things take on importance against a background of intelligibility” (Taylor 1992, 33). Joel Anderson argues that we can conceive of this “background of intelligibility” as any inquiry framework we use to make sense of our beliefs or to understand ourselves and our worlds (Anderson 2003). Such inquiry frameworks include informal ones as well as the more formal tools that schools teach. They thus include the beliefs and ideologies we absorb consciously and unconsciously in our myriad social interactions, whether at home, the larger world, or in schools. Importantly, within schools, our approaches to literacy and the literacy practices we promote contribute importantly to the “background of intelligibility” through which students process their beliefs about themselves and their larger worlds.

In contrast to the restrictive forms of inquiry that dominate the current backgrounds of intelligibility we offer students, approaching self-understanding with the type of creative playfulness that Lugones describes utilizes a much different set of self-inquiry tools. Beyond learning about the complexities of literacy, students would also engage in an exploration in keeping with the postmodern perspective that there is no essential self, that instead we are marked by “fractured” identities. World traveling captures the ways that individuals adapt to social necessities, developing the qualities and dispositions needed to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of specific social situations.

While conceiving of identity playfully helps us make sense of the way the self who world travels shifts depending upon the social context, if we are to help students analyze social contexts and to make sense of the selves they encounter in some healthy fashion, we need a way of thinking about the self that resists succumbing to the essentializing trap. In a metaphorical

description that fits well within the framework of critical literacy, David Velleman playfully describes this guiding self as a fictional narrator, one who spins a self-told tale to unify the discontinuities of self across evolving social spaces (Velleman 2006). For example in the following passage, Velleman argues that humans are at essence, story tellers, spinning self-told tales that we tell to ourselves and to others:

These strings or streams of narrative issue forth *as if* from a single source – not just in the obvious physical sense of flowing from just one mouth, or one pencil or pen, but in a more subtle sense: their effect on any audience is to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a *center of narrative gravity*. (Velleman 2006, 205)

Velleman’s description of the self as a center of narrative gravity is helpful within the context of critical literacy because it emphasizes that there is no *essential* self at the center of the action of story telling, while also offering a way to conceive of a self who world travels in the way that Lugones discusses. This relatively thin description of self at the center of the narrative act resists describing itself as an essential, unalterable self. Of course, philosophers, psychologists, and religious scholars in each of those fields disagree on the true nature of the self, and the nature of narrating self that I am advocating here can accommodate a range of viewpoints, but it does require that there be some self at the center of the project. How “thick” a self remains an open question for inquiry.

Another way to describe the problem with the prescriptive, anti-playful schooling currently dominating our schools is that it provides students with a truncated set of narrative materials from which to fashion the self-narrations Velleman describes. Offering such limited narrative resources is especially detrimental within the context of helping to close the much-publicized achievement gaps associated with marginalized students because rather than providing them with materials to fashion complex counter-narratives to the ones that position them as less academically gifted and interested than dominant-group students, testing-focused schooling provides a narrowly defined “background of intelligibility” that encourages students to understand themselves as possessing static and essentialized identities. In response, we should do more than ensure that students retain the opportunity to play during regularly scheduled recess. Beyond embracing actual play time, we should infuse schooling itself with a sense of creative playfulness, a way of engaging with all aspects of the curriculum that consider the academic rules of inquiry as mutable if they thwart an important focus of schooling: inquiry. Such an educational approach would necessarily not be domain-specific, nor should it be.

We can also help students, especially marginalized ones, to approach the intersection of self and schooling *playfully*. Such a task requires that we help them “see” themselves as world travelers, while also promoting self-understandings that deny essentialism. Critical literacy is an especially important tool for helping students to *world travel* in at least three principal ways. First, the meta-exploration of literacy practices helps students examine the ways that differing social contexts lead to the valuing of different types of literacy experiences. Shirley Bryce Heath’s example of second graders trained as linguistic ethnographers in the late 1970s remains a clear and powerful example of the ways that even marginalized, young students can conduct analyses along these lines. Second, critical literacy can help students examine the ways that their self-narratives intersect with those varieties of literacy practices that populate their differing social worlds. It is important to explore a wide range of literacy-related practices and tools, no more important than exploring the very ones employed by the school itself, specifically tools like

educational labels and tests. Third, related to the last two issues, critical literacy also can help students directly analyze the complex social issues facing them, their families, and their communities through the wide array of literacy-related experiences. A clear example is the world traveling afforded through reading fiction. I agree with Nel Noddings who describes the engagement with the lives of others through textual encounters as opportunities to join in the immortal conversation (Noddings 2002, 2006). That conversation, she argues, is one that can and does transcend the classroom. As such, we can help students learn how to engage in critical examination of the world traveling that literature provides us so that such thought is not contained only in the classroom.

While it is a contested text because of its ambiguous dealings with racism, *Huckleberry Finn* represents an interesting case for world traveling and critical thought, especially for dominant culture, white students. Amidst the analysis of racism, the demands of friendship, and what it would be like to be either Jim or Huck traveling on that raft down the Mississippi, Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan eloquently describe the possibility of world traveling afforded in the immortal conversation of literature:

Engaging with a text can allow us to extend our existential repertoire; it adds to our range of possible subjectivities; it allows us to rehearse other ways of being. When we read *Huckleberry Finn* sympathetically, we understand—we have felt—a whole range of thinking and feeling that we never knew before. We understand the paradisaical nature of the rhythm of days spent in harmony with the river—“you feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft...” (Misson and Wendy 2006, 123)

Again, as a tool of critical literacy, playfulness aids these textual and meta-textual explorations by helping students engage in such analyses with a creative openness. Reading a text like *Huckleberry Finn* playfully, means that we are not satisfied with interpretative details, with “decoding” and what Blythe Clinchy describes as a “separate knowing” (Clinchy 1994). Instead, we want to world travel, to explore the subjectivities revealed to us in their complex existential fecundity, and furthermore, to use such experiences to explore our own subjectivities and the rules that define them. Engaging imaginatively with Huck’s struggle to define his moral identity with respect to race and racism, affords white students a character through which to explore their own potentially mixed experiences of confusion and conflicted perceptions of race.⁴ Once again, an important goal here is to reveal the ways those social rules influence the people we become and the social “games” we play with one another. Making visible the rules of our social play through a “background of intelligibility” of playfulness focuses on rule mutability and the creative possibility afforded to those who creatively alter rules to enhance the serious games they play. In this case, the imaginative play attempts to open spaces for reflecting upon the rules of racism, how social, economic, and political contexts influence racialized rules, and how such features influence individual subjectivity.

Play as the Context of Critical Literacy

It might be objected that I have argued for playfulness but not actual play. While I have differentiated between the two in the interest of analytic clarity, it would be a mistake to cleave the relationship too cleanly for too long. While the exact relationship between forms of play and

literacy practices is an empirical question, one beyond the scope of this discussion, it seems counter-intuitive to suppose that one could fashion education described as playful without making room for the activity of play itself. I believe that we *must* include play in schools in a variety of forms, and regardless of its direct link to developing specific reading skills, it has a place within the context of critical literacy.

To see that link, we must again consider literacy practices in a way that is much more expansive than by standardized accounts of literacy focused on skill development. Let us focus on reading as an example. As James Paul Gee argues, rather than seeing reading as mere textual decoding, it “*is understanding a particular type of text in a certain way*. All of us can read certain texts in *certain* ways and not others. Reading is thus a *plural* notion: *readings*, rather than *reading*” (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996, 3). It is important to this expansive definition of literacy practices to focus on the argument that the reading of texts cannot be disaggregated from the social contexts from which they emerge. Reading is connected to our daily experiences, part of our larger existential systems and practices:

Texts are parts of *lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief-laden* practices carried out in specific places and at specific times. Think of legal texts, comic books, recipes, Dick-and-Jane readers, basal readers, graffiti, traffic tickets, lab notebooks, journal articles, notes to family members, and so forth. You feel your mind run through quite different practices, quite different configurations of people, actions, and settings, quite different ‘ways of being in the world’ at a time and place. (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996, 3)

Different texts are situated within distinct socio-cultural practices, and as such, they demand different tasks and sensibilities of their readers. Thus, reading a text is never an isolated activity. Instead, the seemingly individual act of reading can be seen as a community-joining experience in that readers join the specific audience intended to interact with the text. In that fashion, readers can either actively or passively engage in such literacy events, responding in a variety of ways to texts and the rules they draw upon to sustain their participation in the specific socio-cultural practices the texts enact. As I have been arguing throughout this article, one of the aims of critical literacy is to make those rules and practices visible and to help students engage with them in creative ways. It is here that we find an important parallel between reading and play; it has a rich potential for critical exploration.

Recall that play is also a variable activity, one that depends upon specific socio-cultural practices to support its emergence. Different play spaces contain different rules, and those rules influence how those who play within them subsequently interpret, reinforce, or alter the rules as play-enabling structures. Like the different literacy practices Gee lists, the different practices of play give rise to different *ways of playing* in the world at the individual and collective levels. To engage actively within the boundaries of play spaces, then, players need to be able to “read” the text of the play, and they need to be guided by the spirit of playfulness—the ability to alter play rules to support the larger aims of play itself. Thus, to analyze the “text” of the playground and the play activities contained there-in, students have to analyze the rules as well as the ultimate goal of play itself, both tasks associated with critically examining variations and goals in literacy practices. It is here that we see the connection between critical literacy and play. Defined in the more expansive way as we have done here, literacy skills are not confined to the details of textual decoding in classroom textual analysis. Instead, they are meta-skills that can be brought to bear on a variety of practices, including ones associated with student play. Again, rather than having a domain-specific educational practice where students complete discrete analytical skills

associated with test-items on “high stakes” examinations, making links and analogous analyses between reading texts and reading the playground may lead to richer and more profound analyses in both contexts.

While it does not illustrate all the parts of what I am advocating, Vivian Gussin Paley’s work is particularly helpful to the potentially dynamic interplay between actual student social play and critical literacy. In the fascinating *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (1993), Paley recounts her simultaneous explorations of morality, reading, and schoolyard play with her kindergarten students. Paley explores the nature of social exclusion with her students, analyzing whether or not they could accept the requirement that they not be allowed to refuse another student’s request to join in a play activity. She does so through several weeks of conversations about specific problems that arise in the classroom’s social life as well as the validity of the rules that govern their relatively unregulated schoolyard play. She also does so through the use of a fantasy story that she writes for and with her students. What we see is a critical examination of the rules that govern social relationships, and the context of that examination is the playground. The analysis is further supported by the classroom use of textual reading and creation. Paley supports her students’ initial development towards becoming world travelers by asking them to think critically about their own play and the moral structures that guide their actions (Paley 1993).

It is important here to remember Sutton-Smith’s warning to avoid associating play with simple originality and freedom from the socio-cultural contexts in which it emerges. The research supports the alternative view; rather than being places marked by innocence, a lack of rules, and freedom from the adult world, child play spaces have routine structures that are influenced by the larger socio-cultural contexts in which they emerge. While we may imagine that child play marks space free from adult concerns and thus the complexities of moral concerns, play and play spaces are not innocent; they are morally neutral and carry no guarantee of happiness and virtuousness. Thus, play can be a site of pleasure and pain; play spaces contain the *same* issues that we may ask students to engage with in our critical literacy analyses. That is, students are actively exploring the intersection of their identities and socio-cultural issues like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, etc. Thus, we can ask students to world travel by undertaking examinations of the rules that govern the play they engage in together each day. Furthermore, we can also help them analyze how the socio-cultural contexts of play and the play rules that govern those contexts intersect with the narrative self-constructions that they craft for themselves and each other. Bringing the playful world traveling of critical literacy to students’ play lives may help further the aims of critical literacy by ensuring that the issues that we examine with them are ones that are grounded in students’ lived experiences. Furthermore, because the rules of the classroom and students’ home communities are largely out of their scope of direct control, play provides students with a tangible space in which to practice the creative playfulness of altering rules to sustain some larger play purpose.

While I have been using the language of play here in the interest of keeping the discussion as clear as possible, I do not mean to imply that this critical examination of play should be confined to early elementary school. Conceiving of play in an expansive way, we can see that students in all grades “play” together, although the forms, rules, and practices associated with more mature adolescent play will vary greatly from those found in elementary schoolyards. But hallways, lunchtimes, clubs, and athletic events are all spaces for adolescent play and are all candidates for critical “reading.” Furthermore, I agree with Singer and Singer who argue that teachers can engage students in examinations of play throughout the school year in such a way that does not

overly regulate student space by intruding on their many social interactions (Singer and Singer 2005).

Conclusion

Those who fear playful schooling because of their concern with the pernicious persistence of achievement gaps may be left unmoved by this call for schooling infused with both play and playfulness within the context of critical analysis. To do so means accepting that schooling entails ambiguity, an ambiguity that cannot be brought under control through prescription and rigidity. The economic rationality that seeks outcomes and measurable growth at the expense of playful exploration denies students the important help we can provide them as world travelers. For world travel they do. As we have repeatedly heard, students enter our school worlds and come to understand themselves as certain types of people, people who either successfully or woefully unsuccessfully embody the ideals and attributes of students that schools value. Reducing schooling and school practices like reading to discretely measurable skills ignores the important contradictions and ambiguities associated with students exploring, developing, using and rejecting the skills we teach them as they world travel with us. Restricting the so-called wasteful time spent on non-instrumentally focused schooling may produce reportable gains on limited measures of student growth, but the cost is that we fail to help students inquire deeply into the intersection of academics, their social worlds, and their self-understandings.

While adding play back into schooling alone is inadequate to the task of helping students to world travel in a *critical* way, it may be an important first step, and one upon which critical literacy teachers can build. Rather than “losing” themselves in schooling, playful critical literacy seeks to help students approach their world traveling marked by a sense of playfulness, with a spirit of possibility grounded in an appreciation for how the rules governing our many ways of “playing” in social contexts themselves help us become certain types of “players” and not others. Such an understanding, such playful traveling, may indeed help students cross achievement gaps in ways that economically minded measures cannot hope to assess.

NOTES

1. Heath (1983) explores the socio-linguistic experiences of three cultural groups in two small communities and reveals significantly different home-literacy related skill training. For example, the working class black parents in her study raise their children in community-specific but language-rich experiences. As they listen to and participate in oral storytelling traditions the children develop skills as complex story tellers, skills that distinguish them as creative thinkers skillful in the art of weaving details into complex oral accounts. They do not emerge in school, though, as skillful in the sequential and “naming” sort of discourse the school values. While the specifics of the literacy practices associated with the study’s communities have certainly changed since the 1970s, Heath’s work remains an important and clear example.

2. We can usefully distinguish between the two uses of “critical” in critical literacy. Burbules and Berk (1999) argue that in the first sense, *critical* refers to the analysis of meaning and context, the sort of academic analysis that characterizes academics, the stuff of “critical thinking.” Critical literacy includes this sort of traditional decoding analysis, but also it adds an important focus on power relationships. Along that line, Aranowitz and Giroux (1986) argue that critical literacy seeks to “make clear the connection between knowledge and power” by helping students understand the relationship of knowledge to “very specific economic, political, and social interests. Moreover, critical literacy would function as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge” (132).

3. While set in England, the nature of the test and the influence on the student remains analogous to the U.S. testing context. Note that a “normal” score on this test was 4, and the student described here had hoped to score a 5, a score that her teachers emphasized was essential to secure future academic success.
4. See Morrell (2008) where Morrell presents a number of rich examples like the simultaneous reading of *The Odyssey* with a critical viewing of *The Godfather*, or his reading of Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* with urban teens and their subsequent research into the disparities in educational funding and resources across the schools in their city.

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