

¹ “It’s a Combination of the Bible and What’s in Your Heart”

Unresolvable Tensions and Contested Narratives in a Southern Child Care Center

ALLISON HENWARD
University of Hawaii, Manoa

LAURIE MACGILLIVRAY
University of Memphis

A 72-FOOT UNCLE SAM, clutching a golden cross and flanked by three other crosses marks the southern border of our city. Belonging to a 12,000-member megachurch, it emphasizes the church’s belief that the United States is a Christian Nation. The role of religion in the Bible belt permeates life in the Southern United States. As Barton (2010) attests “In the Bible Belt, Christianity is not confined to Sunday worship. Christian crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news, and attitudes permeate everyday settings” (p. 465). One researcher, Laurie, upon moving to the South as a teenager was slow in realizing her peers really did have Bibles in their lockers. Prior to this inquiry both Laurie and Allison had resided on the West coast for more than a decade and had only recently relocated to the South. We, two white middle class professors with no conservative Christian roots, often found ourselves lacking understanding of the traditions in homes, churches, schools, and businesses rooted in Southern cultures and traditions. We questioned our assumptions about learning and teaching, and more broadly living, as we inquired into the contradictions. We found ourselves, in many cases, foreigners in a native land.

This unease followed us as we entered a new research site. A desire to gain a better understanding of children’s lives who were precariously housed and homeless (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 6-04) lead us to Small Fries, a poor and working class preschool in Phillips, an urbanized suburb of a major city in the Southern United States. Many of the children

¹ We wish to thank the children and teachers of Small Fries Child Care for sharing their insights and their days with us.

were residents of a shelter for homeless families; Laurie had established a relationship with the families. As the majority of the children's days were spent in preschool, Allison was brought in as her research is concerned with preschools.

Practices Reconsidered

Upon entering the preschool, we were immediately struck by the contrasts of practices in the preschool and with those deemed "official" or preferred in the field of early childhood education, especially since we were both teaching theory and pedagogy courses of preschool education. Children in Small Fries preschool were taught exclusively in a whole group. The teachers spoke to them in a direct manner (sometimes in what we perceived to be sharp tones) and were expected, in all cases, to defer to adult authority. Children rarely deviated from teacher direction. They did not misbehave in the manner we were accustomed to seeing and considered "typical." These practices, in addition to others we will discuss in the article, were remarkably different than those found in many child-centered programs, which are typically seen in the United States as "appropriate" ways of teaching children.

At the same time we were observing in the preschool, Allison had her own children in the university lab preschool which, she believed, exemplified progressive practices. Inspired by a Reggio Emilia approach, teachers encouraged children to make their own choices, express their interests, and often work independently or in small group activities. An emphasis on creativity and arts-based inquiry is evident in the discourse of the school's webpage, which reads, "Here children engage in creative questioning and problem-solving. They learn to understand and share with each other. They form interpersonal communication skills. They discover and expand their world through a truly interactive environment" (website omitted for confidentiality). Although culturally and racially diverse, the population consists of children of faculty members and middle/ upper-middle class families from the surrounding communities. Parents are artists, attorneys, physicians, professors, IT and business management staff, and graduate students. Tuition charged is twice the cost of Small Fries, and in contrast, no student qualified for state childcare certificates for free tuition. Both preschools include children of each sex although traditional gender roles are discouraged in the Lab school.

Multiple times a week Allison was reminded of the contrast between the preschools. As a College of Education faculty member and a parent, she was immersed in the Lab preschool community. She would regularly enter the lab school to talk with graduate students, read storybooks with her kids, and discuss pedagogy with the teachers. Allison would then leave and drive the seven miles to Small Fries with the images of her children's progressive preschool fresh in her mind. She would arrive to find children sitting quietly waiting for all their fellow classmates to arrive, lining up to move five feet, and participating exclusively in teacher led, whole group instruction. The striking contrasts between preschools, along with perspectives grounded in sociocultural approaches, allow us to examine preschool practices as culturally informed; it emphasizes the role socioeconomic, race, and religion play in teachers' approaches.

In this paper, we argue traditional understandings and "quality" practice frameworks mark the parameters of what knowledge is official and who can speak in regards to practices in early childhood classrooms. With a shared epistemological belief of social constructionism and postmodernism, we question whose truth is appropriate, valid, or valued. Our very interest in how these cultural interpretations are shaped by structural and oppressive forces brought us

together to investigate the social practices occurring within one preschool. We are interested in emic knowledge and interpretations. The terms were coined by a Linguist, Kenneth Pike (1967) and further developed by cultural anthropologists, Ward Goodenough (1970) and Marvin Harris (1976). It is believed that emic knowledge and interpretations exist within a culture and are “determined by local custom, meaning, and belief and best described by a native of the culture” (Ager & Loughry, 2004). With an emphasis on emic knowledge and interpretations, as teacher educators we often speak of families as possessing “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge essential for household or individual functioning” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzales, 1992, p. 133) and deferring to the community. As outsiders to Phillips, a poor, working class and largely Black area in the South where religion is an essential component of everyday life, we focus on the parents and teachers perspective. In this paper we strive to offer a nuanced understanding of the practices of this community by drawing on the emic understandings of marginalized voices in early childhood programs.

We recognize the field of early childhood education has long been dominated by a singular narrative, one steeped in developmental psychology (Burman, 2007). Based on this developmental framework universal “recommendations,” such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice are positioned as, problematically, the right and the only way to consider pedagogy. Partially influenced by European Programs (i.e. Montessori and Reggio Emilia) in the United States, the field of early childhood has largely adopted a child-centered pedagogy in which children are given choice and “voice”, and encouraged to express interests (Tobin, 1995). So prevalent and widespread are these beliefs, entire courses are devoted to these perspectives including those in our own universities. Fueling this narrow approach is the scarcity of diversity in educational textbooks, which reinforces progressive European discourses. Lee, Oh and Sun (2011) examine how “books for introductory early childhood education courses contribute to constructing and maintaining the field’s prevalent discourses” (p. 1). Furthermore, they assert the role early childhood textbooks and courses serve to reproduce “middle-class European American Values and Practices” (p.11) including to “justify middle-class European American cultural beliefs and practices which focus on individual choice, autonomy, individual uniqueness and differences, and self-esteem” (p.12). Johnson (1999) suggests these approaches (Reggio Emilia in particular), colonialist in nature, have become unquestioned in the field of early childhood. Using a Foucaultian lens, he illustrates the extent to which “power reaches into the very grain of individuals ... inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (as cited in Johnson, 1999 p. 61)

Child-directed pedagogy is so pervasively reflected in national guidelines. Teachers in many teacher education programs including our own must align their practices to those of national guidelines in Washington DC, rather than locally developed guidelines. This child-centered perspective has been heightened in recent years partially in opposition to NCLB and standards movements. In comparison, teacher-directed classrooms, in which teachers exert a large degree of control, lead activities, and instruct children in large groups are discouraged; they are seen as procedural in nature and are perceived as stifling children’s creativity.

But as many have argued, these grand narratives have been called into question for promoting and naturalizing middle class European norms and values at the cost of non-dominant communities (Bhavengari & Gonzalez-Mena, 1997; Jipson, 1991; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; New, 1994). A formidable body of research (Delpit, 1996; Heath, 1983; Lubeck, 1984, O’ Brien, 2000 and Rogers, 2003) suggests appropriate practices in the communities of children with limited financial means may look drastically different from those in the communities of children

from middle class backgrounds.

By defining and describing the practices of marginalized groups there is always a possibility of othering, particularly when comparing non-dominant groups to dominant groups. There has long been a history of abuse by academics studying others. Nowhere is this more of a concern than those including ourselves who have structural privileges in the South, both by class and race. In this paper, we hope to address bell hooks' query, "how... cultural studies can avoid simply reproducing a more sophisticated group of people who are interpreting the experience of the "other" under the guise of identifying themselves as comrades and allies" (West, 1992, p.698).

Theoretical Tensions

In the South, as in other areas, there are long-standing traditions that conceptualize non-dominant groups as inferior and without voice. Ways of knowing and considering have been subject to power relations. It has been the gaze of others (Mani, 1991), particularly those with greater power, which has served to marginalize those already positioned on the periphery of power. We argue that preschool teachers are often silenced and their approaches are often discounted.. They are subalterns. According to Spivak (1988), teachers are represented not in their own subjectivity but by the gaze of others and their considerations. These traditional approaches are not an "objective scientific truth but a product of wider social conditions and the unequal power relations that have characterized the white supremacist discourse and practice" (Mama, 1995, p.1). Drawing upon Crenshaw's (1989) notion of intersectionality of race, gender, class, and power, we recognize that curricular approaches of working class Black women in the Southern United States have been ignored.

In her discussion of historically oppressed communities, Kaomea (2003) discusses the need for a theoretical bricolage, which transcends a singular or traditional understanding. Drawing on her work and Kincheloe's discussions on bricolage (2004), we argue for an analysis and a consideration that moves beyond traditional understandings of child care practices. This bricolage or assemblage transcends theoretical traditions drawing from critical race theory, post structuralism, and feminist post structuralism. In combining these elements we recognize the tensions..As Kaomea suggests, these discourses are sometimes less than complementary. Still we recognize the need to draw from different, sometimes competing, theoretical traditions to describe the approaches of preschool teachers as they attempt to meet the needs of their children in their community. We construct this bricolage to suggest a new manner of considering communities outside of the dominant paradigm and traditional understanding which have long served to marginalize individuals.

Culture Based Practice: Concerns of a Southern Community

In this article, we examine two practices in the daily lives of preschool teachers in a poor and working class urbanized area in the "Bible Belt," a part of the country recognized for the public influence of a literal interpretation of the Bible (Tweedie, 1978). Although these practices are typically not seen as favorable by progressive educators and do not fit into the paradigm of Developmentally Appropriate Practice as outlined by groups such as NAEYC (National

Association for the Education of Young Children), we argue they may be culturally appropriate and valued by the local community. The following field note and interaction reflect key aspects of these practices with particular attention to gender:

Ms. Jackson, one of the preschool teachers, when cleaning up after an activity or getting ready for lunch asks children to “sit on the rugs.” There are two rugs. The boys walk over to one rug surrounded by blocks while the girls move towards another rug near a rack of books.

We followed up on this observation by asking the teacher to help us understand:

Allison: “You have two rugs. So the boys usually go to one rug and the girls usually go to another?”

Ms. Jackson: “Yeah, we keep the boys and girls separated”

Allison: “Why do you do that?”

Ms. Jackson: “They like to wrestle and then I don’t want the boys touching on the girls or the girls touching on the boys. So, I keep them separated.”

Location is central to this story (Kincheloe, Pinar & Slattery, 1994). As we immerse ourselves in the research situations, we feel that practices need to be understood in culturally relativistic terms. Community practices and tacit understandings are translated into preschool practices shaped by factors including race, religion, and socioeconomic conditions. As addressed above, in the “Bible Belt”, religion plays an essential role in the community (Archer, Brunn, & Webster, 2011) and influences conceptions of children, approaches of education, and expectations for children even in “non-religious” preschools. Although discourse surrounding the South can easily suggest a shared experience, an unproblematized history, it can also simultaneously draw to mind intergenerational inequities (Archer, Brunn, & Webster, 2011). This is particularly salient in the case of Small Fries preschool located in Phillips, a close knit community which, in part due to structural inequities, has become known as a low income and violent area with a skyrocketing teen pregnancy rate.

Sociohistorical Ethnographic Contexts: Blurring the Past and the Present

“When researchers fail to discern the unique ways that historical and social context make for special circumstances, they perpetuate a reductionist form of knowledge that impoverishes our understanding of everything connected to it, the process of research included” (Kincheloe, 2005, pg.4). Employing Kincheloe’s understanding, we consider the context and influences, both social and historical, in shaping the cultural practices of preschool teachers. Small Fries is a privately owned child care center, serving children six weeks to twelve years old located in Phillips. Similar to Orfield’s conception, Phillips can be classified as an “urbanized” financially distressed suburb (as cited in Anyon, 2005) in the Southern United States. In comparison to other areas of the city, Phillips reports some of the lowest housing prices. In 2010, the median home price for the Phillips area was just over \$23,000. Although only five miles from the center of the city, it is a rather isolated community. The area is surrounded on three sides by bodies of water and railroad tracks on the fourth that create a peninsula-like feeling. There is limited access to

this community from other areas of the town by walking, although public buses offer access to the nearby downtown community.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) identifies the “fallacy of the ethnographic present” which typically conceptualizes cultures as ahistorical. But when considering historical understandings and occurrences, particularly those steeped in racial tensions and discrimination, current practices and beliefs can be clarified. Acknowledging this, we consider both historical and contemporary perspectives of the greater urban area. Phillips specifically, has seen significant change in recent years that have, in turn, shaped curricular and pedagogical practices in the preschool. Kincheloe, Pinar and Slattery (1994), drawing on Faulkner (1936/1972), remark that in culture and curriculum “the past never really recedes; it is the present” (p. 409).

Historically a working class area centered on manufacturing jobs at local plants, Phillips was populated mainly by Anglo residents, particularly before desegregating busing practices of the early 1970's. In recent years, the large factories, which expanded and helped sustain the area, have now closed. The area that was once a working class suburb is now a working class area. Many of the residents reside in public-assistance residential subdivisions and apartments and the population has shifted to approximately 70% African American and 30% Anglo (site omitted for confidentiality). However the population of the Small Fries childcare center, which is the focus of this study, reflects a more homogeneous population than the surrounding area. All teachers and students in the preschool are African American and with one exception all the teachers are female.

Each child attending the center qualifies for a Department of Health Services certificate, meaning they have an income below the federal poverty line (\$22,050 for a family of four in 2011) and can receive child care subsidies with some stipulations. There are many hoops to jump through. The majority of the children in the center are precariously housed and homeless. A number of children at Small Fries reside in a long-term homeless shelter for children with their mothers recovering from substance abuse.

The community of Phillips has a public pool, a city library, a municipal golf course and community centers including tennis courts and a playground. Ms. Williams, a Small Fries teacher, describes the significant changes in recent years, which she attributes to decreased public services. She shares:

Phillips used to be vibrant, a whole lot to do, it used to have stuff. But after they had to cut the budget ... children don't have nowhere to go but the center and that's it. It used to be vibrant area until the economy; with people losing their homes and losing their jobs and people got to move away.

Reflective of its location within the Bible Belt, crosses saturate Phillips' landscape (Archer, Brunn, & Webster, 2011). There are 21 houses of worship in a two-mile radius surrounding Small Fries. The majority of the churches self identify as Southern Baptist but also include other evangelical, conservative Christian faiths (Roof and McKinney, 1987). Most of the teachers attend churches in the area. Although Small Fries promotes a non-religious curriculum, the religiousness of the surrounding community influences pedagogical and curricular approaches in the preschool to a substantial degree.

Outside of the community in the greater metropolitan area, Phillips has a reputation for being a dangerous and isolated area, riddled with crime. Many of Small Fries' teachers, although residents of the neighborhood, are hesitant to stay late. Ms. Jackson explained, “We like to be gone [from Small Fries] before dark. As soon as it gets dark, we outta here.” Due to the ever present fear of violence, many of the teachers avoided certain areas of Phillips and did not

venture out of their nearby homes after dark. Teachers specifically attributed the violence to “children raising children”. Phillips had recently been widely publicized; the area was parodied on a national television series and reported on local and national news channels in regards to their high pregnancy rates. Thus, the teachers’ association of violence in Phillips with high rates of teen pregnancy is reinforced through billboards and community outreach programs warning against the epidemic of teen pregnancy. The teachers referred to the center as their “safe haven” in what they considered an otherwise very dangerous area.

Toward New Methodological Considerations

This article draws from an ethnographically informed study in which we attempted to become part of a classroom community. In order to learn the context of the lives of the children at Small Fries, we attempted to insert ourselves into their world and learn practices and beliefs from the perspective of the local community. As this community is very tightly knit, introduction to the center could only be done by another community member with high status “vouching.” As Wax (1986) reminds us, each situation we approach must be negotiated and navigated due to power structures and implicit/explicit rules regarding access. Acknowledging this, we were introduced to the director of Small Fries by a caseworker from a homeless shelter. The caseworker was a long-time friend of the preschool director and held a revered and privileged position in the community.

As two white, middle class researchers who worked for a University approaching a poor and working class African American preschool, we recognized the complications tied to race and status when attempting access into a community (Lareau, 2003). We felt a sense of alienation and a distinct power differential that needed to be addressed in methodological discussions, which we attempted to minimize through a variety of methods. Although we acknowledged in our introductions to the teachers and the parents that we were university researchers, we intentionally attempted to downplay our status-laden role as “professors.” Informed by Thorne (1993), our outsider position meant that we needed to earn the community’s trust and be accepted in the school’s culture in order for the teachers, parents, and children to disclose information. We emphasized our practical role in the community, identifying our role as former elementary and preschool teachers and openly discussing our “day job,” describing how we taught future teachers.

Visits to the preschool classroom serving four- and five- year-olds were conducted two to three times a week. Typical visits lasted three to four hours over a period of seven months. Field notes were kept in spiral notebooks after which time we transcribed the observations in greater detail onto our computers. We read through and discussed field notes and interviews holistically. Then we developed codes and employed a constant comparison method (Glazner and Strauss, 1967) to analyze and formulate a preliminary coding framework. Interviews were conducted with children, parents, teachers, and the director at the preschool, the homeless shelter, and surrounding restaurants selected by the interviewees. All formal interviews were taped and transcribed by a professional.

For this paper we use vignettes describing two practices of the childcare center to explore the intersection of race, class, gender, and religion. We attempt to explain how Small Fries’ teachers explained practices which may be seen as authoritarian, teacher-directed, and from a dominant middle class perspective inappropriate (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). In examining

“sitting time” and “rug time” our intent is to destabilize overarching and naturalized narratives in the field of early childhood education. We argue instead that practices at Small Fries are inherently culturally informed and reflective of the circumstances of living in a high poverty, evangelical Christian area.

Considering Sitting Time

Children begin arriving at the center as early as six am; some parents drop off their children on their way to work but the majority are picked up on the bus owned by the center director and driven by her brother. All of the children attending the preschool live in the Phillips area with the exception of the children residing in the homeless shelter.

When the children arrive, they enter the North building, where children of two years and older are kept together before the formal school day begins. Children are expected to stay in their seats; sometimes the television is tuned to cartoons such as Scooby Doo and SpongeBob Squarepants. They are allowed to speak to each other softly. The spacing of the chairs is orderly; the children sit down in the metal and plastic chairs in rows, almost as though they are waiting for a performance. On this day, a smaller group of children are sitting at rectangular tables eating breakfast. As there are more children than table space, the children are called to the table and fed in shifts; today they are eating Cheerios with milk and fresh peaches, on white Styrofoam plates.

Around the children are many bins and brightly colored educational materials. On the wall facing the large group area are pictures of notable African American figures, both historical and contemporary. The children have well stocked centers surrounding them, all of which have been labeled with names and identifiers such as “dramatic play”, “blocks” and “fine motor materials.” Although there are many bright, inviting educational materials the children in the morning are not allowed to touch them and are reprimanded if they leave their seats.

When asked about the sitting practices, the teachers first highlighted the pragmatic purpose. As the center was open twelve hours each day, many of the teachers had staggered schedules to allow for adequate staffing all day. Similar to other centers we have observed, the director designed the practice of combining children of different ages in one large room to “comply with ratios.” The teachers displayed a collective approach to teaching (Lubeck, 1984) and would watch children from other classes. However this preschool was distinct in the practice of expecting the young children sit during this time. As opposed to free play practices, which were common in other preschools when few staff members were present (Henward, 2010), children at Small Fries often sat in chairs for 30-60 minutes.

The response of the teachers explaining the practice was used to “comply with ratios” reflected a miscommunication; we did not ask the question to determine why the children were together but rather why the children were asked to sit in chairs. When we clarified our question, the teachers offered an explanation, which demonstrated their sensitivity and caring to what they felt were the needs of the kids in the morning. In many houses, Ms. Williams elaborated, children may not have had a full nights sleep:

Sometimes they might be up all night and they (teachers) get in there and they sing to them and let them look at TV for a little while. It's just like when you're going out exercising in the morning. Get your brain to working and just get ready for the day because some children's parents keep them up all night. You come in the morning and see children yawning and stuff because they up all night.

In another interview, one mother reiterated the point, saying sitting allows for the children to gently wake up.

An additional explanation was that the practice of sitting in chairs and the ability to wait was seen as a valuable habit or skill that would allow children to be successful in and out of school. As Ms. Williams explained, “And it’s really getting them ready too, because when they go to school they’ve got to go to their classroom.” Ms. Lantern, the head teacher at the school echoed this sentiment. She understood this as a practice to prepare students for elementary school. The teachers and parents in the community understood elementary classroom to include much time spent in their seats. Ms. Lantern, when asked if the practice was intended to prepare students, “That’s what a lot of people think, that’s what I used to think too’ ...I think she (Ms. Bell, director of the preschool) thinks it.” She explained, “I was just reading, in this book (showing Allison an early childhood curriculum book) it’s just not true. It’s not a good thing to group them together [in chairs] like that.” Ms. Lantern’s comments revealed a common cultural belief that translated into a practice at Small Fries. They illuminated the conflicted nature she felt between cultural knowledge central to her location and the knowledge imparted in more mainstream early childhood curriculum. It also revealed a collective belief and how practices in the preschool can be influenced by exterior factors, such as early childhood texts, that emphasize child-centered approaches to early childhood education.

The practice of sitting also has implications in pedagogical approaches of the preschool. Small Fries advocated a teacher-directed approach, which required that children were able to sit in order to participate in the activities. This speaks to Delpit’s (1996) assertion that the beliefs and practices of working class African American teachers include teacher-directed approaches because these approaches are an effective way to teach skills. The teachers at Small Fries may have believed that teacher-directed practices would more adequately equip working class black children to fit into “a white dominated world.” This practice also reflects the authoritarian tone of the South, which drawing on Kincheloe et al. (1994) suggests knowledge is regarded as literal and requires memorization of facts (and not child-directed experiences). We argue that this understanding also speaks to the concerns of parents in high stakes areas and also matches skills and expectations for the children outside of the school. During our interviews with parents, it became clear that in many cases the children needed to be able to sit quietly, sometimes for extended periods of time. For example, mothers residing in the shelter, as well as others in the Phillips area, relied on public transportation. They would sit on the side of a busy street waiting for the bus and rode on the bus to complete errands.

While we don’t suggest this was a conscious choice of the teachers, they didn’t design sitting time to prepare kids for sitting on the side of the road waiting for the bus. It was an expectation of behavior among the children and was seen as a positive attribute. Parents discussed the need for children to sit still while they are out “doing business.” One mother connected this to the financial reality of her life. She explained the stakes are high when you are trying to rent an apartment, if children are running around, it can make it more difficult to find housing. In comparison to middle class parents who might have greater resources in securing child care for important errands, for mothers of poverty, the ability of the child to sit still might mean the difference in securing affordable housing.

We argue the expectations that children sit quietly for extended periods of time was class based. Our argument is supported in the following statement by Corsaro (2011), “Working and lower class parents generally more authoritative with their children, relying on directives and threats to keep them in line. They did not tolerate disrespect, whining or bad manners as many of the middle class parents did” (p. 98). Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (2010) suggest this difference in child-rearing is because of issues of safety. They ask: “How do you celebrate a child’s

growing sense of curiosity and self-confidence when you cannot let him leave the apartment unescorted?" (Bowles & Gintis, 2010, p. 94). This lack of children's movement was evident in many different occasions in the preschool. For example, when Javonte, one of the youngest three-year-olds, saw his father, who owns a yard business, working in the outside play area, he did not move to greet him. Although they smiled and waved at each other, there appeared to be a shared understanding by all involved the teacher of the expectation that children should be attentive to their teacher.

This expectation also speaks to Anyon's (1980) findings in poor and working class areas in which teachers exercised control over children's movements in the classroom and held expectations for how belongings were to be handled and kept in the classroom. While classic works concerned with social class and curriculum are prevalent, missing from these works is the influence of religious beliefs. Although studies have certainly been conducted on the role of religion in curriculum, they are typically more concerned with overtly religious curriculum (Holloway, 1999). As conservative Christianity permeates the Southern culture ideologically to a substantial degree, it becomes *Doxic* (Bourdieu, 1972/1977) in nature. In Bourdieu's conception *Doxa*, functions as "unquestioned and unified cultural tradition" that is largely unrecognized, "It comes without saying as it goes without saying" (Berlinerblau, 2001 p. 346). In this particular area of the South, references are openly made to God, church and religion regularly.

Such was the case with Small Fries. Christian holidays such as Christmas were celebrated. Religious calendars depicting the Apostle Matthew were hung in the center. Teachers often thanked or referenced Jesus Christ in non-theological discussions. Gospel music was played in classrooms and children discussed theological ideas such as heaven, hell, and angels, with cautionary discussion of Satan. Interviews with teachers revealed, "God put me where I needed to be." As Holloway (1999) suggests the influences of religion, officially sanctioned or not can play a role in shaping curriculum and pedagogical practices. The permeation of religious ideology, interwoven into many aspects of the preschool was particularly evident to Allison who had moved to the area less than a year prior. As a person not immersed in the localized culture, it was easier to identify the practices and discourse as religiously informed. The difficulty of the teachers identifying practices as cultural is not surprising (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009) and aligns with Bourdieu's (1972/1977) understanding of *Doxa* as largely unidentifiable and only revealed by an alternate discourse.

Understanding the school as influenced by evangelical Conservative Christian theology helps make meaning of the teaching practices, which emphasized deference to adult direction. It is the belief that adults, particularly evangelical parents, serve an intersessionary role between hedonistic childlike behavior (Polakow, 1992) and more appropriate behavior. Ellison and Sherkat (1993) suggest that conservative Christians, adopting biblical literalism, display a belief that human nature, including children are prone to sin. They further outline that it is the adult's role to correct and prevent the sinful behavior. As Wilcox (1998) suggests, the protestant affiliation and the disciplinary style is largely "a product of the theological and cultural conservatism associated with this subculture" (pp.796-797). Other practices in the school, such as separation of gender during rug time, are also connected to deep community values.

Rug Time

At Small Fries boys and girls are often segregated by gender when not directly observed by the teachers. In the three and four-year-old room, two rugs flank each other, separated by bookcases, bright plastic storage bins and a blue vinyl child sized couch overflowing with plush

stuffed animals. The girls sit next to the bookcases, typically talking with each other or looking at books when offered by the teacher. The boys sit by plastic “tool benches” and large foam rubber blocks with which they frequently play. Occasionally the blocks are shared with the girls (and books with the boys), but more often than not, the children play with separate “gender appropriate” materials. This clearly emphasizes a separation strictly on biological terms; the girls are regarded in one manner and the boys in another. Drawing on Walkerdine (1990) and Thorne (1992), we argue this practice can create a division in labor, i.e. a framework, in which boys and girls must work and play separately.

Observations and interviews surrounding gender segregated “rug time” revealed teachers’ concerns were not centered on the blurring of gender roles, although this was certainly a concern, but on sexuality. When asked about the segregation, Ms. Williams responded:

Because they love touching.... It keeps them from touching each other [and saying] ‘So and so’s touching me.’ So they [the teachers] just sit boys on one side and girls on the other. Nowadays you got children that want to touch and hug and we try not to do that because a parent might come in and they say “well why are they hugging my child? Or why are they touching? So we keep that down. Boys on one side and girls on the other...so if they [parents] do walk in sometimes there’s nothing wrong but sometimes somebody might see something wrong. But we just tell them boys on this side and girls on this side.

When we asked about the rationale for the gender separation, we were surprised when the teachers mentioned a concern with sexual practices of the local high school students and felt the need to intervene at the preschool level. Sexuality and desire of children are often absent from the discourse of early childhood education (Johnson, 2000; Tobin, 1997).

As many have argued (e.g., Cross, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), past explanatory models of childhood, which conceptualize children as innocent and without sexuality, have dominated the field. Yet we argue that in Small Fries, teachers recognize sexuality as a youthful concern, largely due to the perceived hypersexuality among the youth in Phillips. As mentioned earlier, the community reports one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation and teachers are well aware of the reputation this creates. The rates captured national media’s attention; they were discussed on national news shows and prime time dramas, reinforcing this pejorative reputation. This reputation, however, is in part ill deserved. The pregnancy statistics, while high, were artificially inflated as the high school in Phillips serves as a magnet school for teen mothers. It draws pregnant students from all over the district to a popular program for pregnant girls. In contrast, public schools in more affluent areas had optional programs that were geared towards college preparation. Consequently, the area high school became notorious for a teen pregnancy problem that did not accurately reflect the surrounding community.

As a visual justification of their concerns of youth sexuality and the practice of “Rug Time,” the teachers cited the billboards, which were part of an abstinence campaign. Mr. Williams, one of the teachers, explained the “No Way” campaign, which blanketed the area of Phillips with billboards seeking to diminish the number of teen pregnancies. Mr. Williams observed, “When they started talking about it [the high number of teen pregnancies] that’s when they started putting it [billboards] up. Just that quick.” One billboard, which can be prominently seen from the parking lot of Small Fries, reads, “Please honey can’t we do just a little?” with “No Way,” in the corner (reworded to maintain anonymity of city). Mr. Williams supported the

campaign because he felt it identified the problem and educated the population, “They [boys and girls] need it. I like them [the billboards] in the sense of the young ladies need to learn that these young boys only want one thing and once they get it they’re done.”

Prefacing that he treated the children in his care “like they were his own,” he spoke about protecting his son from what he saw as the promiscuous atmosphere in Phillips. This was accomplished by extensive involvement in a Southern Baptist church and much time spent at home “I’m raising our son like he should with morals and values.” This practice attempts to shield his own son, but we argue that it can also shed light on the proper approaches to protecting children from the greater community of Phillips, which he conceptualized as “Hell” without strong parental intervention and moral direction. His approach is an illustration of the way sexuality (and teen pregnancy) is foregrounded as an inevitable problem in Phillips. We argue that the approach frames children’s sexuality as something which is dangerous and in need of containment. The creation of these billboards reflects the way national media contributes to the community’s construction of sexuality and gender. This construction, in turn, leads to curricular practices such as rug time to meet the concerns of the parents and teachers in the community.

Partially in response to these concerns about sexuality, the teachers enacted the practice of separating the children. It was considered a preventative strategy; intervention was necessary to protect the three to five-year-old girls from the boys. However no examples of any actual occurrence of sexual impropriety at the daycare or anywhere else with three to five-year-olds were cited by the teachers. Problematically, this action reifies gender roles and positions males as sexual predators and females as both helpless victims and ultimately responsible for promiscuity (and teen pregnancy) in the community (Collins, 2004; Staples, 2009).

Drawing on critical race theory and feminist post structural theory, we argue the teachers, male and female, conceptualize the young boys as having an inclination and ability toward “callous sexual behavior” (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2006) while girls as vulnerable and complacent. Michelle Fine (1988) identified this as a prominent discourse concerning with sexuality of youth. In her discussion of adolescent sex education, Fine (1988) examined how girls were conceptualized within a *Sexuality of victimization* (p. 31) in which girls “learn of their vulnerability to potential male predators”. Echoing Fine’s findings, the teachers at Small fries attempted to protect the girls from the perceived illicit intent of the boys in the classes. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) citing Wells Barnett’s work suggested that “this idea of gender difference—the seemingly passivity of women and the aggressiveness of men are in fact deeply racialized constructs” (p.221).

Partially attributable to the high pregnancy rate and the resulting abstinence campaign, we also argue the preschool’s assumptions surrounding hyper-sexuality in the very young can be understood as informed by religion. Gender roles, particularly in conservative Christian cultures are often “traditional”. In addition to the gender roles are socially constructed norms, which we argue enhance the idea of women as fragile, virtuous, and submissive (Peavey, Williams & Ellison, 1996). As Blee and Tickemyer (1995) suggest, this construction, however, can be tempered by race. We argue that the concerns of sexuality so prevalent in the Phillips area are increasingly heightened and continually reinforced by a conservative Christian culture. For teachers subscribing to a literal biblical interpretation, a binary of good and evil exists (Levi-Strauss, 1974), which requires proper guidance, sometimes authoritarian in nature, in order to steer children to the correct path.

Foregrounding religion, regional values and social class, we gained a more complex understanding of the teachers’ behaviors. The teachers saw their role as protecting the children.

In recognizing adverse conditions of Phillips, they sought to both shield and prepare children for their daily lives. The intersection and overlap of influences are in many cases complementary, multiplying the authoritarian approaches of teachers. While we do not suggest the teachers consciously make decisions to keep children away from theological evils, we do suggest the belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible combined with concerns of living in dangerous areas helps push teachers toward an authoritarian role. It is understood that leading students on the righteous path without direct adult intervention might enable them to figuratively and literally, in a religious context, become wayward souls.

When the teachers are already concerned with safety of the students, the rigidity of what is appropriate and beneficial to the students might overlap with the conservative religious doctrine. The teachers felt that in high stakes and violent areas, the need for strong adult intervention was evident. Parents and teachers fear surroundings because of violence and a stigma of promiscuous behavior. Consequently, teachers stepped in a response that emphasized deference to authority in the daily practices of the preschool. But their responses to problems were found outside the white progressive middle class paradigms upon which most teacher education programs are built. The teachers' beliefs, reinforced by multiple discourses, helped add to the authoritarian nature of the school, in which it was considered a teacher's proper (i.e., moral) responsibility to protect the children. This protection, that might seem to be inappropriate and overly harsh by some, was seen as responsible and appropriate by these teachers based on the local cultural context.

If children did not do what they were told, adverse effects such as teen pregnancy, single parenthood, and a violent lifestyle were seen as certain. The teachers felt they provided a structure that helped prepare children for a better life. Ms. William stressed the vital role Small Fries played in the community, "They [parents] need to find somewhere the child can go until they get home. They just don't have nothing to do. Put them in something so they can be raised right. Don't just throw them out to the wolves. But once they been going to the center they well structured." Ms. William's voice, like those of the other teachers, suggested care and attention of the children in their charge. By foregrounding emic interpretation, counternarratives emerge with understandings that shape and are shaped by structural forces that make seemingly unorthodox or abstract practices understandable.

Unanswerable Questions, Unresolvable Tensions, and Radical Possibilities

This study, in addressing the immediate needs of the community, left us with many tensions and unanswered questions. This "messiness" prompts us to examine our own positionality and the tensions we felt and continue to feel in attempting to represent voices that through issues of intersectionality have largely been silenced. In examining teaching practices and talking with parents and teachers in Phillips, we are continually reminded that these parents and children confronted daily struggles outside of the middle class "bubble" from which so much of Developmentally Appropriate Practices and, truthfully, much of our own frame of reference, stems from. We considered our inquiry successful as it became increasingly difficult to consider the practices as anything but appropriate for the situation.

We are interested in emic interpretations of marginalized groups. Children are marginalized groups, perhaps, the most marginalized of all (Boocock and Scott, 2005). As progressive educators, we believe in children's voice, agency, and children's rights. But how do

we rectify or settle the tensions we feel with the need to represent those marginalized? How could this representation in turn silence children? How do we represent both sides?

These tensions cannot be resolved. They must be lived with and they must be uncomfortable. These tensions remind us of the multiplicities and the non-fixed nature of identities which often conflict (Mama, 1995). These tensions run deep and despite teacher-driven authoritarian practices becoming very familiar by the end of fieldwork. We want to be okay with the strangeness and messiness. We see the value in recognizing the tensions between representing emic interpretations derived from “local custom, meaning, and belief” (Ager & Loughry, 2004) while disagreeing with the interpretations.

We envision this study as the beginning for discussions on actions to foster positive change. The counternarratives of marginalized women teachers and their knowledge of teaching need to be included in the discussions about the best early childhood practice. These counternarratives are particularly important in light of the dominant narrative about the best practice in the field of early childhood education. For our students this invites movement beyond questions of quality in early childhood education by creating a space to examine micro and macro structures and the profound impact they have on communities. These understandings are particularly crucial for teachers. These inquiries foster critical reflection; through acknowledging (and we view this as an on-going process) communities and families’ knowledge and practices, educators can explore what it means to be an ally and advocate for diverse students and families. We are working to bring some of these insights into our work with preservice teachers in our different contexts.

Laurie is currently working in a community near Phillips, in a place that might be considered the buckle of the Bible Belt. She currently has students in her courses who share the emic perspectives of the Small Fries teachers, largely because of similarities of religious affiliation and class. She also has students who identify with more mainstream practices. Rather than sharing her perspective and our “findings,” Laurie plans to present the data in the order we collected it so that the class can talk about their evolving judgments and assumptions. The multiple data sources will support nuanced, complex, and contradictory conversations. Laurie will encourage students to consider their own school, familial, and community experiences and how their perceptions influence approaches to education. Laurie plans to sit alongside the preservice teachers in her class, literally and figuratively, problematizing her own assumptions as a way to encourage them to engage in critical inquiries in their own classrooms. This we feel can help the field move away from grand narratives of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” behaviors to deeper, more critical, understandings of schools’ connection to social and cultural influences and structures.

Integral in moving towards new understandings, we share our own misunderstandings in the field. It is through sharing our continuing angst to see beyond our own framework that we can better engage in critical inquiries to continually seek alternate perspectives and new understandings. We invite our preservice teacher education students to keep asking the following question: “How can we better listen to rather than talk about or speak for those who are the margins of the culture of power” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1992, p. 6)? Our inquiry constantly reminds us that to listen to and look at emic interpretations through participants’ ears and eyes and to represent them in full fidelity are necessary struggles. We believe that educators will best serve children from historically oppressed communities if they keep critically examining their own assumptions and “truths” and if they can thrive upon unresolvable tensions and contested narratives they live by.

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