PLAY AND CREATIVITY AT THE CENTER OF CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT: A NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL'S JOURNEY TO RE-THINK CURRICULAR PEDAGOGY

El juego y la creatividad en el centro del currículo y de la evaluación: viaje a una escuela de la ciudad de Nueva York para repensar la pedagogía curricular

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The learning experiences of young children cannot be conveniently separated into the areas of cognitive, social/emotional and physical development. They are integrated and interdependent. This balance can be achieved through creative, interactive play that supports and scaffolds all developmental and content areas of the curriculum. Despite the strength of supportive theory and research, we are experiencing the gradual elimination of play and creative experiences from early childhood classrooms in the USA. The 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation in the USA emphasizes an academic orientation and focuses early childhood curricula upon academic skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy. However, the problem is not simply pedagogical strategy or philosophical stance. The way in which a curriculum is implemented is also influenced by teachers' perceptions of play and creativity.

In 2009 I began a longitudinal study that follows the pilot class of a new Independent elementary school in New York City as it adds a grade level each year and whose curricular framework is based upon play and creativity. This paper identifies the values, mission and model of the school. It also explores and documents how the curriculum is being developed to support and scaffold increased academic expectations, the role of teachers and children in the implementation of the curriculum and the changing perspectives, perceptions and expectations of parents and teachers.

Key words: *Play, Creativity, Curriculum, Childhood education, Teachers' attitudes.*

Value of Play

According to Froebel (1893), play is the highest stage of child and human development. He stated that play was the purest, most spiritual activity of man and typical of human life as a whole. He felt that play was not trivial but highly serious and of deep significance. «Cultivate and foster it — the plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of later life» (Froebel, 1893: 55). We give Froebel the credit for having found the true nature and function of play. Vygotsky (1978) stated that play itself mediated the learning of children. While children play they are free to risk doing things they are not yet confident they can do well. However, today we appear to view early childhood education from a very different perspective to that of Frederick Froebel (1893), who created the first kindergarten and introduced the idea that play was a young child's natural way of learning and self-expression and that of Vygotsky (1978) who viewed play as a developmental activity and an adaptive mechanism that promotes cognitive growth.

The case for early academics is probably one of the most controversial and sensitive topics in the field of early childhood education today (Bodrova and Leong, 2005).

There is a strong and growing body of knowledge that identifies the link between play and the development of those cognitive and social skills that are prerequisites for learning more complex concepts as the children get older and as we identify the need for creative and innovative thinkers (Bergen, 2002, 2009). Play is linked to growth in self-regulation, memory, oral language, an increase in literacy skills, recognition of symbols and other areas of academic learning (Bodrova and Leong, 2005). It is the core of developmentally based practice. An inclusive play-based curriculum addresses issues of diversity and special needs as being integral to the emergent curriculum and not simply as add-ons. (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales,

and Alward, 2007). Saracho (2011) stated that play provides young children with the opportunity to express their ideas, symbolize and test their knowledge of the world. Through play children become more active learners.

Payley (2004) stated that children demonstrated the power of play as a learning tool. She made a significant correlation between play and other measures of learning seen as being important in a school setting. During play children make choices, solve problems, plan, converse and negotiate. They create make-believe events and practice physical, social, and cognitive skills. As they play they are able to engage in leading and following, express and work out emotional aspects of everyday experiences and events, and practice self-regulation. Children are motivated to regulate their own behavior because they know that in order to continue in their play activities they need to follow its rules. Play offers a safe place for young children to work their way through conflicts, search for and experiment with alternative solutions to problems and to develop and practice the ability to see things from another person's point of view (Paley, 2004; Denham and Brown, 2010).

Creativity

Before we can support, scaffold, measure or embed creativity within the curriculum we need to define creativity itself. This is a challenge when teachers, parents, administrators, children, in fact all members of the school community, have different perceptions of what creativity «is». Creativity is often perceived as a specific way of thinking. Initial conversations with teachers at the school identified that many view creativity as a topic to be taught within the curriculum just like mathematics or literacy. After reflection and multiple conversations the school arrived at a shared specific definition of creativity drawn from the work of Sir Ken Robinson.

He stated, «Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value» (Robinson, 200: 2).

Imagination is often linked synonymously with creativity but is not, in fact, the same as creativity. Creativity takes the process of imagination to another level. According to Robinson (2001) you can be imaginative all day long without anyone identifying it but in order to identify that someone is creative that person has to be «seen to be creative». In other words to «be creative» you actually have to do something. Creativity involves putting your imagination to work to develop something new, to identify new solutions to problems, or to think of new problems or questions. Robinson (2001) views creativity as applied imagination. It is at the heart of daily communications and helps children as they navigate the complexity of language and explore the unexpected

According to Dietrich (2004) creativity is a fundamental activity of human information processing. Creative cognition has become an integral part of cognitive science and therefore neuroscience. It has been expressed that any theory on creativity must be consistent and integrated with contemporary understanding of brain function. We all have creativity. It is the experiences we are exposed to that will determine whether we are creative or not. The neuroplasticity of the brain in childhood offers the opportunity to wire it in ways that maximize the ways to think laterally. We do not always relate this directly to academic achievement.

Creativity and academic achievement are often seen as mutually exclusive. However, while it can be found in the obvious places of the curriculum such as art, play and music it is also present in science, math and other 'academic» areas. The arts, visual arts, drama, music and dance, allow us to differentiate between symbolic languages identifying whether they are visual, dramatic or musical. Learning these languages helps with a

variety of different subjects and with high-level decision- making later in life. If creative thinking can be applied to any subject to support, scaffold and strengthen integration across the curriculum then a whole school approach is the next logical step. Creative experiential teaching and learning develops young learners into thinkers who can explore their interests using their own strengths creatively. When children feel free to explore and experiment they will also feel free to invent, create and find new ways to do things. Teachers who respect children's ideas help them learn to think critically and problem solve for themselves (Saracho, 2012). Teachers often unintentionally interfere with creative development. Just the way that a question is phrased can encourage or inhibit creativity. Children need to be able to think outside of the box. They are, and will continue to be, presented with challenges and we need to help them to look at something old and familiar in a different way.

State of Play in the USA

In the USA early childhood teachers are increasingly being called upon to justify the value of play to parents and administrators. As Paley (2004) stated, we are experiencing revisions of priorities in our nation's early childhood curricula. An increased focus on testing of children under the age of 8 has lead to an emphasis upon the acquisition of academic content and skills in the early childhood classroom (Bodrova and Leong, 2005). Teacher education programs and professional organizations continue to stress the value of play, but pre-service, novice, and experienced teachers alike, find themselves facing daily dilemmas between their choice of play as a teaching strategy and the growing demand for teacher accountability and measurable outcomes at pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels. With increased demands for accountability and standardized testing due to the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001), academic exercises are replacing

play-based activities in more and more early childhood classrooms. Teachers claim that they no longer have time to include play in their schedules, and in more and more preschool and kindergarten classrooms play is being pushed out of the curriculum. Sandburg and Heden, (2011) stated that kindergarten teachers felt the pressure to emphasis academic time in the curriculum at the expense of play, art, gym, music, and recess time, even though their educational beliefs may be otherwise.

School in the early childhood years used to be filled with opportunities to play. Short attention spans were not considered to be a deficit because they quickly disappeared when the children engaged in play activities that deepened their concentration skills (Paley, 2004). It was assumed that some children would benefit from extra time to grow into academic areas and this was referred to as maturation (Bodrova and Leong, 2005). Now we are more inclined to look for faults in the children rather than in the curriculum. We have reversed the order of events and we now look for problems and search for ways to solve them rather than recognize that each child is an individual with unique personality, background, and past experiences (Reiber, Smith, and Noah, 1998).

Quality early childhood experiences have long-term academic benefits for children and lay the foundation for lifelong learning (Bergen, 2002, 2009). Young children learn best when they are active as opposed to passive, when their social skills are being utilized, and when opportunities for learning are presented in playful and meaningful ways (Walsh and Gardner, 2005).

Several factors account for the increased pressure to introduce children to academics as early as the preschool and kindergarten years. Katz (1999) and Stipek (2006) outlined the fact that the increased demands and widening expectations for preschool and kindergarten programs to ensure children's readiness for the next grade or level was accompanied by a tendency to pushdown expectations from older to younger children in the early childhood classroom. The traditional importance given to play as young children's natural way to learn has become less important today.

The current climate in early childhood education has become one of standardization and accountability. This has forced early childhood administrators, teachers, and parents to become focused on academic learning and school readiness (Miller and Almond, 2009). The 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) provided direct federal support for this standardization and accountability movement and was closely followed by the release of the *Good Start, Grow Smart* (GSGS, 2001) initiative. This initiative calls for improved performance and increased accountability in early childhood programs. The aim of GSGS is to ensure that every child begins school «with an equal chance at achievement» so that «no child is left behind. A study conducted by Grossman (2002) stated that in many kindergarten classrooms children spend their time on worksheets and paper and pencil activities. Teachers felt that the best way to demonstrate learning was through the use of worksheets that typically called for the «right» answer. However, this strategy eliminates risk taking in learning. Conversely play-based curricula encourage children to take risks and change opportunities to learn through meaningful, real situations.

Bodrova and Leong (2005) stated that optimal educational opportunities for a young child under the age of 8 to reach his or her potential are not created by the accelerated early instruction that is so evident in today's increasingly academic early childhood environment. Preschool and kindergarten teachers report that, for the first time, they are witnessing a generation of children, many of whom literally do not know how to «make believe» and who have to be taught how to play (Lowman, 2005).

The challenge for teachers is to find the appropriate balance between academic engagement and academic challenge, while providing a learning environment that encourages and supports exploration and discovery without the stress of competition, standardization, and testing. This balance, where assessment is authentic and aligned with the objectives of the program and student needs, helps equip both teacher and child with the tools to foster individual interests and skills (Kangas, Randolph, Rukokamo, and Hyvonen, 2010).

On any given day, it is possible to enter a classroom in New York City and be unable to recognize whether you are in a kindergarten or a first grade classroom. I have experienced classroom environments where 5-year-old children are sitting in rows completing worksheets while their teacher models very specific handwriting skills on an overhead projector. There is no sign of a rug or dramatic play area, both of which were staples of the kindergarten classroom. In contemporary scripted classrooms, children must follow a highly regimented routine where lessons are linked to standardized tests designed to measure children's progress in learning discrete facts and skills.

The School

One New York City private school, founded by an internationally recognized entertainment group, is rethinking the role of play, creativity and social/emotional learning at the center of curriculum and assessment. Since the founding of the school in 2006, a team of educators, in collaboration with the founders, has worked together to develop an educational environment where these concepts and values are core elements of the curriculum. Co-constructivist theory and the Reggio Emilia Approach inspire the school's curriculum. The school identifies that Co-constructivists view learning as an active process in which learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the

world through action and reflection. Therefore at the school children learn by doing rather than by absorbing information. Consequently, they bring prior knowledge to the learning situation. This philosophical stance is reflected in developmentally appropriate benchmarks, scope and sequence, and assessment tools aligned with the mission and values of the school. The teachers value the intellectual and philosophical freedom to assess curriculum and learning as it unfolds in each classroom. This provides them with opportunities to design (and redesign) curriculum in response to the individual needs of their students, supporting their desire to avoid the pressures associated with «teaching to the test» and allowing them to use and align theory associated with the value of play and creativity with their practice. The curriculum encourages complex forms of play which research shows helps children develop academic skills, language skills as well as empathy. Play, though not the sole pedagogical strategy, is viewed as being essential to the balancing of children's development and readiness for school and life experiences.

At the school, play it is used to encourage and support the use of imagination, creativity, and planning skills while generating opportunities for intellectual development. By practicing skills or trying out ideas within a play situation, children become better able to handle real situations (Russo, 2009). The curriculum encourages complex forms of play. The belief is that the opportunities for problem solving, reasoning, conversing, exploring language, using numeracy skills, predicting, and observing are endless within play episodes.

The school's policies and practices aim to provide a strong social-emotional foundation for learning, encourage process over just product, and allow children to be free to be themselves while exploring and connecting with subject matter in a way that motivates them, enhances their creativity and utilizes their own learning styles. The educational framework developed

by the school illustrates its educational approach and the interrelationship between and among the following four components: 1) *The Inquirers* is a triad made up of the child, teacher and parent, who engage in the inquiry process that forms the core of the curriculum. 2) *The Cyclical Process* is the recursive model used by the teachers to facilitate learning. These include planning, differentiated instruction, inquiry, observation, assessment, and reflection. 3) *The Environment* is considered to be the «other» teacher in the classroom and is identified as being an integral component of the learning process. 4) *The Lenses* are distinct mindsets that are assumed by the inquirers within the learning environment. These lenses are used to explore academic content areas and materials from a variety of perspectives. 5) And, finally, the *Academic Content Areas* (or *Integrated Curriculum Strands*) are the seven areas explored to help children achieve developmental benchmarks: language arts, mathematical investigation, scientific inquiry, expressive arts, social/emotional learning, physical awareness, health and play, and human values/global citizenship.

Mission and Values

The classrooms are identified as dynamic and engaging spaces that facilitate exploration, personal expression, creativity, group collaboration, open communication, wonder and active play. Children are encouraged to shape and transform their environment by experimenting with both familiar and unique materials. They learn from the world outside their classrooms and to take advantage of New York's cultural landscape. As a result of in-depth research and thoughtful, reflective practice, relevant resources such as the New York State Early Learning Standards, the Collaborative for Academics, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Arizona and Oklahoma State Early Learning Standards, and the International Baccalaureate (IB) model were identified to support the development and implementation of the integrated curriculum strands, benchmarks and scope and sequence that form the framework of the school's curriculum.

As stated, the school's approach is aligned with co-constructivist theory and based on the belief that children learn best by 'constructing' their own knowledge in a playful and intellectually rich social environment. Through the use of an inquiry-based teaching method, the school is committed to supporting the needs and learning style of the whole child. Students are taught to reflect upon their own experiences as well as those of others so that they can gain the combination of self-awareness and social insight that will empower them to engage in the world with confidence and compassion and meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Curriculum

The school's benchmarks are not used as curriculum in and of itself but, rather, as a framework for curricular planning. They are intentionally designed to guide and support the curriculum. The scope and sequence that grow out of the benchmarks is used to identify appropriate resources, and foster the reflective practices of teachers, administrators, and children. It also informs other areas of practice such as the learning environment, the schedule, and the level of family involvement. The objective is to make the identification of benchmarks more accurate and authentic while potentially supporting and expanding upon the educators' prior knowledge of child development. Here the purpose of assessment is not to identify deficiencies but to provide the tools to address and improve the quality of education by identifying the support is needed.

Historically, in the upper grades, the focus on product rather than process is even more pronounced. The school's belief that children will learn the necessary content when it is presented in a meaningful way becomes challenged by

the push for quantity over quality. Play and creativity in the upper grades takes on different identities. Their roles in learning are not diminished but simply changed. Play becomes group orientated and supportive of complex social skills such as sportsmanship, empathy and compassion. Academic learning still takes place within a «playful», creative environment where children role-play and engage in creative and imaginative activities scaffolded by the teacher to support these developmentally appropriate skill sets.

Assessment

When assessing young children, we need to take into consideration that development across domains is highly variable from child to child. If the assessment is to be trustworthy and valid, it needs to be authentic. Authenticity means reflective of the skill being assessed and occurring within a safe, nurturing environment where children interact with familiar adults within a familiar environment (Almy and Genishi, 1979). Authentic assessment must also be linked to social and emotional development, a domain that is especially variable in young children (Allen and Marotz, 2010). To obtain a complete picture of the child's learning, multiple methods of assessment need to be used. These include observations, anecdotal notes, running records, audiotapes, videotapes, photographs, work samples, check lists, grading scales, time and event sampling, and interviews.

Assessment is a core component of the school. The curriculum is developed within a cycle of reflection using multiple ways of assessing what children want to know and understand in conjunction with what they need to know as identified by appropriate benchmarks. This process of «inquiry through assessment» allows teachers to pose questions about the children's learning, and to collect and organize information. This information is then used to

support the identification of new threads of inquiry and clarify the next steps involved in the development of curriculum.

Typically in the field of education, assessment is culturally driven with the view that adults have something to transmit to children. The co-constructivist approach taken by the school examines the mechanics of this perspective and develops processes so that the adult may be a facilitator, with both the adult and child also adopting the role of learner. The student assessments provide an illustration of a child's learning process as well as a perspective on the holistic learning of the child. Over time, these documents become a narrative of a child's learning history. Teachers collect information tracing the experiences and cycles of learning that occur over the course of the day, week, and year. The information gathered is the main form of assessment that the teachers use to inform curriculum development.

Teachers use authentic assessment to identify each child's developmental profile. These developmental profiles then drive curricular content, teaching strategies, and instruction. This is referred to as a recursive model of planning and assessment. They use these developmental profiles in conjunction with each grade's benchmarks, scope and sequence, and developmental expectations to engage in the authentic assessment that occurs within the moment. Teachers use observations, field notes, photographs, portfolios, and other appropriate forms of documentation to reflect upon student learning independently, with their colleagues, and with the children. This information is then linked with the curriculum model to individualize, design, and implement the curriculum that will support learning for all the children and meet both individual and grade level goals. This assessment is an on-going, everyday process. It begins with asking a question or exploring a thread of inquiry. Its purpose is to make visible and, therefore, evaluate the holistic learning process that takes

place every day in every classroom. Here assessment illustrates how a child and teacher co-construct learning and knowledge. The evidence collected informs pedagogy and curricular content.

In comparison, standardized assessment focuses upon a single domain (Feldman, 2010, p. 2) and does not allow for the wide range of variability in the acquisition of those early learning skills observed in the classroom thus making them, to a great extent, inaccurate and inauthentic.

Research

Three years ago I began a longitudinal study that follows the pilot class at the school, documents the growth and development of curriculum and assessment practices as they are developed and the systems and processes as they are implemented. I am in a unique position since in addition to this work I have developed and written and developed the benchmarks and work with the teachers on professional development. I am also a member of the Curriculum Team that works closely with the Founders to develop and implement these processes while maintaining the integrity of the school's mission and values as the school grows and develops. My research explores and documents how a play/creativity-based curriculum is being developed to address increased academic expectations, the role of teachers in the implementation of the curriculum and the changing perspectives, perceptions and expectations of parents and teachers.

Research Questions

While I am exploring many different areas of research interest at the school I am identifying here those research questions with direct connections to the relationship of play, creativity, assessment, and academic learning to curriculum development:

1. How does the play-based, creativity curriculum model of a growing private school in a large city support the learning of its pilot class as they move from the 3 year old program through 5th grade?
2. In what ways is this learning academic?
3. How do the teachers interpret and perceive increased standardization and academically orientated demands in relation to this curriculum model?
4. What are the teachers beliefs regarding play and creativity?
5. In what ways do they use play and creativity to promote academically orientated learning?
6. What are the parents' perceptions of the role of play and creativity in the curriculum?
7. In what ways do these perceptions change over the course of the study?

Theoretical Framework

Qualitative research is richly descriptive and focuses on process, meaning, and understanding. I chose to address my research using longitudinal qualitative case studies as this framework allows me to identify what kind of contexts support children as they develop within a learning environment where play and creativity are intentional components of curriculum and assessment. These on-going qualitative longitudinal case studies are informed by Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory (1978) and Corsaro's (2009) social theory of interpretive reproduction. Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as a developmental activity that progressed from one stage to another and as an adaptive mechanism that promoted cognitive growth. He challenged any separation between development and learning. From a Vygotskian perspective they are interdependent. They shape, support, and influence each other.

Corsaro's social interpretive reproduction theory (2009) builds upon Vygotsky's linear model

of individualized cognitive development by identifying that children develop social skills collectively as active members of both peer and adult cultures. Corsaro (2003) claims that sociological theories of childhood must break free from individualistic doctrine that regards the child's social development solely as passive, private, internalization of skills and knowledge. Children are active, creative social agents who produce their own unique cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer cultures (Corsaro, 2005). These theories are interrelated and supportive of each other. Corsaro's social interpretive reproduction theory (2009) builds upon Vygotsky's linear model of individualized social development by identifying that children develop social skills collectively as active members of both peer and adult cultures.

Data Collection

I purposefully use a diverse range of data collection methodologies for this on-going study in order to maintain authenticity, validity and trustworthiness. These data sources take the form of observations, field notes, review of relevant documents, informal interviews and conversations with teachers, children, and parents, audiotapes, videotapes, a researcher journal and collection of work samples. Data collection began in 2009. I initially visited the site one or two days each week for 2-3 hours observing in the pilot classroom. The extent of my research has grown over the past 5 years and now, while continuing my own research that explores how play and creativity support all aspects of learning, I also work with individual teaching teams as they explore their own action research inquiry topics in their classrooms.

My entry into the classroom community is always in accordance with Corsaro's reactive entry strategy (2009). I make myself available for interactions but allow the children to initiate

any contact and aim to make these connections more valuable and child-centered. This is a gradual process and is achieved during an initial period of «casing the joint» (Dyson and Genishi, 2005). It is my objective to observe naturally occurring behavior. This is accomplished through participation in the daily routines of the setting, development of on-going relationships with the members of the community, observation of the initiation and development of play, the ways that creativity are embedded in the daily life of the school and identification of the academic learning of the participants. During this initial phase of my observations my field notes consisted of anecdotal notes and the event sampling of play episodes. Observations were made both inside and outside of the classroom and incorporated episodes of outdoor play whenever possible.

Data collection is on going and dependent upon the needs of the study at specific moments in time. There is triangulation in terms of data sources and methods of data collection and also interdisciplinary triangulation through the use of sociological and creativity theories. Field notes are the central method of data collection and they are detailed, organized in chronological order and transcribed as soon as possible after each observation while fresh in my memory. Denzin, N., K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2006) suggest that thick description makes deep interpretation possible. I am interested in understanding behavior from the subject's own frame of reference and therefore collect data through sustained contact with the children, teachers, parents and administrators in naturalistic settings where subjects normally spend their time (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006). To support this I engage the teachers, children, parents and administrators in both formal and informal interviews that often take the form of conversations. These informal conversations range from one-on-one conversations with one or two participants to conversations with small or large groups of children, teachers, parents and administrators. I initiate, invite and accept

casual, spontaneous conversations whenever presented with an opportunity. I also engage in informal conversations with the teachers during lunch, prep-time and sometimes after school. I am also part of the Friday professional development meetings sometimes leading a workshop or supporting inquiry groups with their action research projects. I have found these conversations to be much more interesting and valuable than the informal interviews. The participants are more relaxed and willing to share their thoughts and reflections. However, while these informal interviews and conversations often take the form of an ethnographic interview or friendly conversation they do however have an explicit purpose and direction. The open-ended nature of this approach allows the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from one structured by prearranged questions.

I intend to continue to audiotape and videotape the children and their play-related activities on a regular schedule this academic year. Videotaping will be approximately 20 minutes bi-weekly. The videotapes will be shared with both the teachers and children included in the study. They will be asked to provide feedback adding another dimension to the data collection process and also addressing the trustworthiness of the data collected. The permanence of videotape allows me to review an event, interaction, or play scenario so that I have opportunities to observe things not identified at the time of taping. The informal interviews and conversations with both teachers and children are sometimes audiotaped. This method of data collection, as with videotaping, frees me up to observe and record field notes related to body language and physical interactions.

Keeping a researcher journal offers an effective way to reflect. It helps to scaffold and inform my participant observations and aides in data analysis by enabling me to begin the identification of categories. Within my journal I identify and record any observations that come to mind

that are not specifically addressed in my field notes. Work samples are also collected and will continue to be collected as necessary and appropriate for documentation of the children's development and learning.

I am also a part of the curriculum team that supports the development of the curriculum. In this context I have written the benchmarks, scope and sequence, assessment tools and teacher planning tools among other documents that support the mission and values of the school. These documents are an integral part of the implementation of the curriculum and the research that is conducted in the school.

Data Analysis

For this qualitative on-going study I use a recursive method of data analysis that involves data collection, analysis of the data, collection of more data based upon this analysis, analysis of the newly collected data, etc. The collection and analysis of data is ongoing and selective based upon the needs of the school and the direction of the research being conducted.

The process of data analysis begins with the transcription and documentation of field notes. I engage in three levels of reflection. The first reflection takes place as soon as possible after the data is collected or transcribed, the second within a couple of days and the third when other observations have been conducted, usually in a couple of weeks. This allows for reflection to take place within the context of a bigger picture. Categories are identified and recorded as they emerge. Finally I develop assertions about the observations and reflections in relation to the research questions.

The purpose of this analysis is to achieve direction, make possible analogies, and identify concepts. It is important to describe rather than label. As stated previously I use a recursive method and engage in three levels of reflections

upon my observations. The first level takes place at the time of the observation and influences what I include in the field notes and the second when my field notes were initially reviewed. This is where I began to code the data for developing themes or patterns. The third level is implemented when I return to my notes for further analysis several weeks later. At this time I revisit the data and generate further categories, identify possible overlapping themes and patterns, and test for emergent understanding. During this process it is important to acknowledge that any unit of data can be coded with more than one coding category and coding family. For example I use descriptive codes for the learning that is observed taking place in the interactions between the children and of the teachers throughout the day. This is an ongoing process that changes direction in order to meet the needs of the study as I move forward with my analyses.

The informal interviews and conversations are often audiotaped and, while I usually brainstorm a number of focal questions that address my goals, I allow the conversations to make their own directions within predetermined parameters. During my analyses thus far I have underlined important sections, searched through data for regularities and patterns, and for topics that the data covers. I then recorded words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. These became my coding categories.

After transcribing my field notes, videotapes, audiotapes, interviews, and reflecting upon my journal it was necessary to make decisions regarding what data to retain and what to exclude. Next after reviewing the material I made decisions based regarding those sections that I identified as being valuable for the study and also addressed my research questions. These sections were transcribed and analyzed but the remaining data were retained in case needed later on in the data analysis process. As a result of this process, I developed assertions

about what occurred in relation to my investigation and research question.

Findings

The findings are used in a number of ways. My immediate research supports the on-going development of curriculum, benchmarks, scope and sequence, teaching tools, strategies, systems and processes at the school. My on-going research is supportive of my work as researcher and teacher under the umbrella of my role as an assistant professor and advocate for play-based curricular and authentic assessment within the educational community at large.

The children develop strong problem solving, critical thinking skills within this learning environment and become active agents for their learning. They know who they are as learners and use this knowledge in multiple ways throughout their school experiences and daily lives. Their literacy skills are very diverse and, for some children, taking longer to acquire. Many children exhibit persistence, delayed gratification and are willing to take risks. Some teachers are finding this way of teaching more difficult and challenging than they thought and are, in some cases, returning, in varying extents, to more traditional styles of teaching and need additional support. As the school grows and accommodates upper grades parental expectations are changing. There is an increased tension between academic expectations, developmentally appropriate practices and the trust in hands-on, «play/creativity» based curriculum. How the school addresses this, develops curriculum and assessment to accommodate the shifting needs of older children and holds on to its mission and values in an increasingly global environment has yet to be seen.

Inquiry and experiential learning are adopted in order to meet the academic objectives identified in the mission of the school means that

parents and their children must be open to experimentation with these concepts within a lab school setting. Consequently, they have to work cooperatively with others who exhibit different points of view and perspectives. As the lead (or pilot) grade moves through the school, it is becoming apparent that, for a number of the parents, expectations are shifting. Because the school's model focuses upon development over chronological age, a great deal of trust and patience is required of parents. Therefore, a «wait and see» approach may be taken by the teachers and school as children move toward the expected goals identified by the relevant benchmarks. This somewhat more patient approach is sometimes at odds with parental expectations that devolve to a focus on content and memorization rather than higher order skills such as application.

Implications

A number of issues have arisen at the school as the curriculum alignment process moves into the higher grades. The questions are complex:

- How does the school move forward to meet the challenges of the Upper grades and the increased pressure for accountability and standardization that accompanies this transition?
- How does it address the expectations of parents within that culture?
- How does it address the increased emphasis on content while maintaining the focus on understanding, individualization, and creativity that are central components of the school's philosophy?
- How will these children cope when they leave the school after grade 5 and are introduced to SBA?

These are enormously challenging questions that the school community is meeting head on. The grades 3 through 5 benchmarks are designed to meet the needs of children's

increasingly complex intellectual and social development. It is problematic when early childhood educators are unable to articulate and implement the tenets of early childhood education. Teacher's perspectives are extremely relevant to their chosen pedagogy. This was highlighted earlier in relation to play and creativity and their inclusion in the curriculum. Through the use of formal and informal interviews, it was clear that teachers have definitive views on the use of standardized testing and standardization.

»We are supposed to be the specialists. We know how children learn and we need to have the courage and support to say 'Enough! Their bodies and their brains are tired. They need to rest and regroup, chat and internalize what they have learned by revisiting it through play and their interactions with each other'. Then I can assess what they have learned today-using my knowledge and understanding of them as individual learners, not a work sheet or a test sheet» (Second grade teacher at the school).

The Future

The educational approach of the school will remain focused on identifying core curriculum content that is initiated by the children's inquiries. The teachers will continue to implement strategies that take into account different learning styles and developmental profiles in order to build curriculum using the information that emerges from the recursive model of assessment. The lenses identified as part of the school's values represent various perspectives. Through their studies children and teachers are asked to look at the toolboxes of various disciplines and domains, to «try on» another perspective. Rather than looking only at what the child brings to the table, at his or her learning style, teachers ask that they step out of their comfort zones to experience another view. We know from studies of the brain that this flexibility is not only good for engaging with material,

it is a critical component of developing a well-rounded, resilient and flexible person. The lenses reflect the school's commitment to nurturing a new kind of learner. Skills such as collaboration, connection, cross-cultural competencies, creativity, and critical thinking are the groundwork for life and work. The teachers will be building upon their practice to continue to be conversant and reflective within each of these lenses, ensuring the children's communicative, reflective and risk-taking skills are built upon, and they are supported and scaffolded to become smart and flexible thinkers.

Building on the belief that creativity is a human need, the school's educational approach will aim to embed all projects and student experiences with creative opportunities, as well as to demystify the meaning of creativity. All children are creative thinkers and innovators, and seek to express themselves as learners in a myriad of ways, so the school needs to construct classrooms that provide the preconditions for creative thought. Beyond a co-curricular, integrated, expressive arts program that includes art studio, dramatic play, music, and movement, classroom teachers will need to be versed in a multiple intelligences approach and use a variety of artistic media to differentiate instruction within academic content areas.

The challenge for teachers is to find the appropriate balance between academic engagement and academic challenge, while providing a learning environment that encourages and supports exploration, discovery and creativity without the stress of competition, standardization, and testing. This balance, where assessment is authentic and aligned with the objectives of the program and student needs, helps equip both teacher and child with the tools to foster individual interests and skills.

This approach will provide the children with greater opportunities for further social/emotional learning, and learning through play, creativity and project work. These tenets are intended to build upon the foundation established in earlier years, deepening students' love of learning and encouraging them to branch out into new areas. As the children take on additional responsibility for integrating their personal interests and learning styles into the curriculum, their foundation of skills will allow them to benefit from more structured and rigorous assignments.

From my observations and research to date I would say that the school is poised and prepared to meet these challenges head on making a difference, not only for its students and families but as a ripple effect that will reach out into the immediate educational community and far beyond. My on-going research will identify and explore if, how and where this is occurring.

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Resumen

El juego y la creatividad en el centro del currículo y de la evaluación: viaje a una escuela de la ciudad de Nueva York para repensar la pedagogía curricular

Las experiencias de aprendizaje de los niños pequeños no pueden ser desgajadas de forma adecuada en áreas de desarrollo cognitivo, social/emocional y físico. Son integradas e interdependientes. Este equilibrio se puede lograr a través del juego creativo e interactivo, que soporta y proporciona andamiaje a todas las áreas de desarrollo y de contenido curricular. A pesar de la fuerza

de la teoría y de la investigación que lo sustentan, en los Estados Unidos estamos asistiendo a la eliminación gradual del juego y las experiencias creativas en las aulas para niños pequeños. La legislación estadounidense, de 2001, *No Child Left Behind*, hace hincapié en un perfil académico y centra el currículo de la primera infancia en habilidades académicas como la lectura, la escritura y la aritmética. Sin embargo, el problema no es simplemente de estrategia pedagógica o posición filosófica. La forma de trabajar el currículo se ve también afectada por las percepciones de los profesores sobre el juego y la creatividad.

En el año 2009 comencé un estudio longitudinal que va siguiendo la clase piloto de una nueva escuela elemental independiente de Nueva York, que añade un grado cada año, y cuyo marco curricular se basa en el juego y la creatividad. Este artículo identifica los valores, la misión y el modelo de escuela. También explora y documenta cómo el currículo se está desarrollando para apoyar y dar andamiaje al aumento de las expectativas académicas, el papel de los docentes y de los niños en la ejecución del currículo y las perspectivas, percepciones y expectativas cambiantes de los padres y los maestros.

Palabras clave: *Juego, Creatividad, Currículo, Educación infantil, Actitudes de los profesores.*

Résumé

Le jeu et la créativité au centre du programme et de l'évaluation: Le parcours d'une école de la ville de New York pour repenser la pédagogie du programme

Les expériences d'apprentissage des jeunes enfants ne peuvent être séparées comme par hasard en secteurs de développements cognitif, socio-émotionnel, et physique. Elles sont intégrées et interdépendantes. Cet équilibre peut être atteint par le jeu créatif et interactif qui soutient et superpose tous les secteurs du programme qui ont trait au développement et au contenu de celui-ci. En dépit de la force de la théorie à l'appui et de la recherche, nous constatons une élimination graduelle du jeu et des expériences créatives dans les classes de la petite enfance aux États-Unis. La loi américaine 2001 *No Child Left Behind* accentue une orientation académique et concentre les programmes de la petite enfance sur les habiletés académiques comme la lecture, l'écriture et les notions d'arithmétique. Toutefois, le problème n'est pas simplement la stratégie pédagogique ou la position philosophique. La manière dont le programme est mis en application est aussi influencée par la perception des enseignants au sujet du jeu et de la créativité.

En 2009, j'ai commencé une étude longitudinale qui suit la classe pilote d'une nouvelle école élémentaire indépendante de la ville de New York, alors qu'on ajoute chaque année un niveau de classe plus élevé et dont le cadre du programme est basé sur le jeu et la créativité. Cet article identifie les valeurs, la mission et le modèle de cette école. L'article explore également et documente comment le programme est développé pour soutenir et superposer les attentes académiques accrues, ainsi que le rôle des enseignants et des élèves dans la mise en œuvre du programme et les perspectives changeantes, les perceptions et attentes des parents et des enseignants.

Mot clés : *Jeu, Créativité, Programme, Éducation de l'enfance, Attitudes des enseignants.*

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