CHAPTER ONE

Play as a Literacy

November sunshine streams through the large window of the kindergarten classroom. The room is filled with light and the steadily rising chatter of children at play in small groups scattered around the room. Near the window, Lubna and Mei Yu periodically check each other’s work as they copy from the alphabet above the chalkboard and decorate their whiteboards with colorful letters, stars, and moons.

Amy bounces past the girls and nestles under the small wooden kitchen table in the housekeeping corner. She tucks her legs up under her chin and pulls a crocheted blanket over herself, tousled clumps of her dark blond hair poking through the yarn. She whimper loudly.

Colin, a tall boy with straight white-blond hair, instantly recognizes Amy as a sick child in his pretend family. He cradles the red plastic toy phone in one arm as he talks solemnly to an imaginary receptionist. “Hello, I'm calling for Amanda. (pause) Yes. (pause) Is there a check-in for that? (pause) Oh, there is? There is? (surprised) Well, could I just wait a while?” After a few seconds “on hold,” Colin leaves a message for the doctor on voicemail. “I really don’t know what’s going to happen and I wanted to know if you could come over here, Dr. Barton, ’cause Amy, she has ammonia and she has the flu, and so yeah, if you could call back here—. My number is 555-3861. And my cell phone number is 555-555-888S—oops, 880, I’m sorry. Thank you.”

In this book, vignettes like this one show how children at play skilfully produce texts, muster classroom resources, and perform literate identities in pretend spaces, in ways that affect their literacy learning and classroom status. Many teachers of young children will readily appreciate the early literacy in Lubna’s and Mei Yu’s self-imposed copying task: how they referred to the alphabet chart for models, worked to carefully form letter strokes, and drew personally meaningful texts with markers and whiteboards. What may not be as evident is how Colin’s and Allyssa’s dramatic play mattered for their developing literacy. After all, there were no pencils, papers, markers, no reading or writing of print; instead, Colin and Amy collaborated to create a storyline with credible characters in an improvised play scenario. In order to appreciate the unwritten meanings of their play actions, materials, and identities in this episode, we need new ways of thinking about texts, play, and literacy.

RETHINKING PLAY AND LITERACY

The definition of literacy is evolving to include multiple ways of interacting with, transmitting on, and navigating across screens and other media (Kress, 2003a), including films, video games, and smart phone applications. We don’t just read and write printed words on a page of paper; we now blog, podcast, text message, video-record, photo-edit, and otherwise manage complex combinations of print, sound, image, and animation as we send texts across vast social networks.
These digital texts are not individually authored manuscripts, rather they are multimedia co-productions shared with an interactive and collaborative audience (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Luke & Grieshaber, 2004; Millard, 2003).

In this redefinition, literacy is multiplied. The notion of literacies reflects the diverse ways we make meaning, in cooperation with others, often coordinating multifunctional tools, across networks and global sites. Moreover, the move from literacy to literacies expands the ways we think about familiar nondigital events such as play enactments, drawings, commercial toys, classroom layouts, and so on. These changes present an opportunity to rethink play as a new literacy and, at the same time, revive it as a staple of early childhood curricula. We can now recognize play as a literacy for creating and coordinating a live-action text among multiple players that invests materials with pretended meanings and slips the constraints of here-and-now realities. The embodied nature of play makes it a particularly relevant literacy at a time when the textual landscape (Carrington, 2005) is increasingly furnished with gestured texts written with Wii wands or fingers swept across screens and filmed texts captured on cell phones and uploaded to mobile screens of all kinds.

Although few early childhood classrooms provide advanced technologies that enable children to produce multimedia or engage social networks, the examples in this book show that young children can and do use play to produce and sustain collaborative and meaningful texts. (See Appendix A for a description of the methodology in the study that grounds this book, including the adapted activity model research design that coordinated ethnographic methods and three types of critical discourse analysis [Rogers, 2011].) Play allows children to draw upon their imaginations and their lived experiences and to tap into their passions and expertise. Close examination of the opening vignette shows how Colin 1) engages social practices, 2) uses available materials, 3) enacts literate identities, and 4) maintains a collaborative play space through a pretend phone call to an imaginary physician.

**Literacy as Social Practice**

To make this instance of pretend play startlingly real, Colin engaged in social practices associated with middle-class concerned parenting, health-care consumerism, and telecommunications. We engage in social practices to carry out our individual purposes but these purposes and practices also bind us, shaped by our beliefs about who we are and what is possible or proper for us to do in a particular place (Bourdieu, 1990). The notion of a literacy practice (Street, 1995) recognizes that literacy functions as a social practice in a specific cultural context, that is, we use literacy to create meaningful messages but also to get things done. The purpose of Colin’s phone call was to credibly enact a voicemail. He enacted the conversational ebb and flow of a phone call, followed the proper telephone conventions for leaving a voicemail message, gave the necessary medical information that a doctor might require, while using a few strategies for avoiding the waiting room of a busy clinic during flu season (“Is there a check-in for that?”).

Every instance of here-and-now activity is made up of multiple social practices, and how we combine these practices matters. When particular combinations of practices come to be the expected ways of doing things, a certain combination is necessary to “pull off” (Gee, 1999) a convincing identity performance—as in the combination of calling a physician, talking to a receptionist, giving patient information, and leaving a voicemail in Colin’s enactment of a medically savvy parent (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Further, each of these social practices is made of multiple physical actions. As Colin invented dialogue on a plastic phone in the housekeeping corner, he pretended simultaneous actions necessary for placing a telephone call: handling a
phone, punching in numbers, pausing for an imagined listener, repeating a phone number sequence (albeit with a missing digit), pronouncing questions with particular intonation, using appropriate conventions for politeness, and so on. These physical actions were key elements of (a simulation of) a literacy practice that creates an audio text, recorded now and accessed later via voicemail or email.

**Material Resources as Modes**

Colin’s enacted phone conversation involved more than audio aspects of speaking on a telephone. He also made use of other *modes*, that is, the physical or sensory aspects of the material environment that are useful for making meanings. “Modes are broadly understood to be the effect of the work of culture in shaping material into resources for representation” (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 1). Colin’s use of modes included raising his eyebrows while repeating a question to emphasize his surprise (the mode *facial expression*), looking down at Amy briefly to assess her symptoms and then looking up while talking to a distant listener (gaze), quickly shaking his head and hand to indicate a mistake in his phone number (gesture), all while standing close enough (proximity) to Amy so that she could hear his conversation and the play cues for her character as sick daughter. Colin emphasized or combined these modes to best convey his intended meanings and to make his play performance more credible. Play provides plentiful opportunities for children to use modes to alter the meanings of classroom materials. For example, children in Colin’s class used the physical arrangement of furniture (layout) in the housekeeping corner to signal “door” by knocking on air while standing in the gap between the wooden refrigerator and the sink cabinet.

**Literate Identities in Discourses**

The ways that Colin pulled together multiple social practices and modes marked him as a literate member, a pretend adult in this suburban community. Through play, children take up identities as literacy users in imagined communities, “communities to which they hope to belong” (Kendrick, 2005, p. 9). Every community values some practices and modes more than others, according to the dominant discourses. Discourses (Gee, 1996) are global scripts, beliefs, and power relations that influence who takes up a particular literacy identity (“independent writer”, “struggling reader”), what counts as literacy, and which ways of talking, acting, and being are deemed appropriate for each identity. For example, the shaping effects of discourse are apparent in Colin’s phone call. Colin followed expectations for politeness that uphold differential positioning in patient/physician identities justified by discourses in private practice medicine (e.g., addressing a physician by the formal title “Dr.” but not addressing the receptionist at all, giving a patient’s given name “Amanda” rather than nickname “Amy,” hedging and distancing his request to make it politely indirect “I wanted to know,” and requesting additional time rather than demanding immediate assistance: “Well, could I just wait a while?”). Colin’s ability to successfully pull off this discourse as an appropriate “who-doing-what” (Gee, 1999, p. 23) was affected by gender, class, ethnicity, and other markers of social difference. He was able to combine literacy practices with suburban models of consumerism and parenting—practices and models that were not equally familiar to all children in the class. Like the majority of students in this classroom, Colin was White, spoke English only, and felt no need to claim a particular ethnicity or talk about his probable Euro-American heritage. Most of the 21 children (12 boys and 9 girls) lived in the surrounding affluent suburban neighborhoods. About a
third of the children lived in subsidized public housing, including eight children whose families were bilingual with transnational histories in China, Sudan, Mexico, the Philippines, or Russia. It’s important to remember that although play offered an important means for children to access their cultural resources, it could just as easily amplify cultural differences, exploit inequitable access, and reproduce dominant discourses.

**Imagined Spaces in Classroom Cultures**

Colin’s phone call was constructed as “not real” because it occurred inside a play frame (Bateson, 1955/1972; Goffman, 1974), the imaginary space bounded by children’s rules for pretense while situated within the everyday reality of the classroom. We can easily recognize Colin’s performance on a plastic phone as an imitation of adult conversation within a play frame in the housekeeping corner. However, just because his pretense is “not real” does not mean that it is not valid or that it ceases to have importance outside the play frame (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). The physical actions and material objects clustered in this set of actions-and-language-with-technologies also approximate a literacy practice with technology (i.e., managing voicemail). In voicemail, a caller is expected to leave pertinent and accurate information including both land line and cell phone numbers and to correct mistakes such as an erroneous letter “S” in a cell phone number. Colin’s credible playing of adult conversation allowed him not only to direct collaborative pretense in housekeeping corner play scenarios but also to confidently assume leadership roles during classroom literacy activities. He also used a pretend authority to advise other children when he played teacher during writing workshop or to assist peers in following step-by-step directions to copy a boat during a boat-building pretend learning center he invented.

Colin’s example shows that young children play to navigate two classroom cultures, described in Dyson’s extensive ethnographic studies of young children’s composing (1989, 1993, 1997, 2003):

- **School culture** fills the official classroom space with activities, materials, and instruction provided by the teacher to support institutional curricular goals, classroom rules, and student learning.
- **Peer culture** is the child-ordered social organization of the unofficial space that operates according to “activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 197). Making and protecting child-governed space are among the primary concerns of peer culture, which also include constructing a gendered identity, resisting adult culture, protecting interactive space by bonding through inclusion, and exercising power over others through exclusion (Kyritzis, 2004).

Where peer culture and school culture intersect, as often happened in this kindergarten, a potentially transformative space is formed where teachers and children can mediate school and perhaps expand opportunities to participate (Fernie, Kantor, & Madrid, in press).
The play-based approach to literacy in this kindergarten was unique within this school. Play was not often the focus of classroom activity in the school at large—or even in other kindergartens just down the hallway. In this school (and in other schools where I observed and taught), there was an overwhelming emphasis on skills mastery (e.g., letter sounds, word recognition) that left little room for traditional play periods in kindergarten. In the last decade, U.S. newspaper articles (Brandon, 2002; Hemphill, 2006; Stewart, 2005; Weil, 2007) have regularly reported moves to replace playtime in kindergarten with “more academics,” often in the form of increased literacy skills practice through worksheets, workbooks, flashcards, and computerized drills. School district policies, federal grants, and state standards drive teacher accountability programs aimed at raising student achievement, measured through standardized tests. Faced with high-stakes testing in which low student scores result in school closings and job loss, many teachers and administrators opt for the most defensible approach and focus on discrete skills instruction that closely matches test content (Ravitch, 2010; Stipek, 2006). Where literacy is equated with discrete skill tasks, play is often characterized as nice but too trivial for the serious business of schooling, an expendable frill with little potential for improving literacy achievement. Preschools and kindergartens, no longer safe havens from the pressures of teaching to the test, focus on teacher-directed instruction and practice (Adler, 2008; Brandon, 2002; Daniel, 2007; Magee, 2003; Stewart, 2005; Stipek, 2005).

However, the central argument of this book—the recognition of literate value and cultural power in play—challenges this widespread trend toward scripted instruction and constricted literacy in early childhood education. The examples in the following chapters show that children used play to access literate identities as readers, writers, and designers, allowing them to become more proficient and critical text-users of print, image, and action. Importantly, their play also multiplied pathways into school literacy: All the children in the class met the district’s end-of-year literacy benchmarks for kindergarten.

The kindergarten featured here was unusual, providing a rich case that illustrates this reconceptualization of play as an embodied literacy. The classroom was located in a public elementary school that primarily serves families in suburban neighborhoods in a Midwestern university community. The kindergarten teacher, Abbie Howard, was an experienced teacher with a learner-centered inquiry-based approach to preschool and kindergarten teaching that drew upon children’s interests and cultural resources; the following vignette provides a glimpse of a typical day in this playful kindergarten.

The morning begins with Settling In. Children enter the classroom to the soothing strains of Yanni or Enya, or other instrumental slow-paced music that plays softly in the background. As children arrive, they check the Morning Jobs chart. These routine tasks involve “signing” various charts by moving tokens, wooden popsicle sticks, or clothespins labeled with children’s names. Children sign up for lunch by placing their name tokens in miniature hot or cold lunch pails, choose a literacy center by clipping a clothespin on the chart, or read the question of the day and respond by clipping a
clothespin on the yes or no column. After signing in, children fan out across the room as they take out puppets, flannelboard sets, puzzles, taped books, writing folders, and journals.

“I have something to tell you, so listen carefully.” Litting snippets of invented song like this float around the room all through the morning, as Abbie catches children’s attention for a minute and then relinquishes it just as quickly so that they can resume their projects. From the moment the children enter the classroom, they continually select from a range of choices to map out a unique learning path for themselves each day. Abbie, a tall woman with short brown hair, sympathetic eyes, and a calming voice, pauses occasionally in her rounds, kneeling to listen seriously to excited discoveries about hornworm caterpillars or bitter disputes over the ownership of a prized pencil.

After all the children arrive—about 15 minutes or so—Abbie invites the children to gather in the center of the room with a sing-song welcome that she improvises on the spot. Abbie assembles the group into the Family Circle whole-class meeting area for sharing and planning time. Next, she explains her planned activities and adjusts the day’s agenda displayed on a large pocket chart to include the activities that children suggest. Once the plan for the day is settled, Abbie perches on the edge of an oversized oak rocker for shared reading of poems, songs, and a featured big book on the adjacent story easel.

Fifteen minutes of outdoor recess provides a break between shared reading and the rest of the morning. Kindergartners have three recess periods on the playground each day: 15 minutes at midmorning and midafternoon, and 25 minutes at lunch. When the class returns to the classroom, Abbie briefly introduces Literacy Centers, a 30-minute period of adult-supported activity at the reading table, art table, writing table, listening center (books and tapes), and the Family Circle area (big books, story easel, song and poem charts, and classroom library). During Literacy Centers, children work on literacy and inquiry activities in four small groups led by an adult, either a teaching paraprofessional, a visiting pre-service teacher, a parent volunteer, or Abbie. An additional group usually works independently in the Family Circle in the center of the room: reading picture books or big books, retelling flannelboard stories, playing audiotapes as they read song charts, or listening to taped books at the listening station.

After Literacy Centers, the class regroups on the circle rug in front of the rocker for a second Family Circle meeting. Abbie recapcs discoveries from different groups and a few children share work samples as they transition into Writers’ Workshop. Abbie reads a picture book and connects the book to a writing mini-lesson and demonstration at the easel. She usually invites one or two children to participate in a quick shared writing, encouraging comments and connections by everyone. “Put your finger on your chin if you know what you want to write about.” Abbie asks the children individually about their plans for Writers’ Workshop as they trickle off to work on projects collected in their writing folders or stories in their journals. During Writers’ Workshop, Abbie circulates and conferences with children individually or in small groups. Author’s Chair provides a chance for two or three more children to share their writing as children gather once more in Family Circle.

Abbie next introduces activities for Choice Time, the final period of the morning. Choice Time includes most of Literacy Center areas and others as well: blocks, math, snacks, housekeeping corner, and the dollhouse. Abbie circulates during this center
period as well, teaching as she facilitates children’s activities. Literacy Center and Choice Time activities usually blend literacy, play, and design through inquiry explorations such as staining and washing fabric, weaving, and paper-making. Although the school district has implemented a basal series for language arts instruction, Abbie selectively chooses from the commercial curriculum to allow more learner-directed activity and to make time for Writers’ Workshop, Literacy Centers, and play periods. She worries whether policies at the national, district, or school level will continue to allow her the freedom to integrate the inquiry activities that she feels are vital to an engaging curriculum.

The official and unofficial spaces in this kindergarten classroom privileged different literacies, materials, and modes. The school culture valued reading and writing with print, evident through the prominence of literacy in teachers’ classroom schedules and curriculum standards set by the community school district and federal educational policy (NCLB, 2002; Schmidt, 2005). Reading and writing practices with books were the focus of almost all of Abbie’s planned curricular activity during the mornings. In peer culture, play practices with toys and dolls and design practices with paper, markers, and tape were highly valued by children.

- Play: Practices included *enacting* performances in the housekeeping corner, *animating* toys in the dollhouse, or *exploring* tools and materials at the art table.
- Reading: Practices included *approximated reading* of print and image in familiar books, big books, and charts in the Family Circle classroom meeting area.
- Design: Practices included *drawing* images and *constructing* artifacts at the art table.
- Writing: Practices included *approximated writing* of print and *authoring books* with print and speech at the writing table.

Figure 1.1 shows relationships between school and peer culture, places in the classroom, and the four kinds of literacies: play, reading, design, and writing. Each literacy operates as its own activity system and supporting materials: reading through the district balanced reading curriculum, writing through the kindergarten version of a writing workshop, play through children’s popular media, and design through several boys’ shared interest in competitive sports. The triangles within each system represent an activity model (discussed in the next chapter).
Children participated in socially organizing classroom worlds by forming friendships and play groups in peer culture. Play groups were fluid, with children joining and leaving throughout the morning as they followed their interests. However, three groups were more stable and became affinity groups (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995) as children chose to play together regularly based on their common interests and shared play themes. Within these groups, children helped each other learn to read, to draw, and to write as they played together:

*Abbie Wannabes* enacted the role of teacher as they read and played school together. *Just Guys* explored materials and design tools, in their words, by “just playin’ around” as they drew pictures and constructed paper toys about the local university football games.
Princess Players animated small dolls as they acted out stories and authored books about Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and other Disney Princess heroines.

The three play groups were situated in a shared social history of children’s friendships in the classroom. The sociogram in Figure 1.2 maps social relationships among play groups and the intersections of peer and school cultures. In the figure, arrow patterns indicate children’s relationships according to their reported play companions. A child’s placement within a play group (ovals on the figure) indicates that child’s observed involvement with that group’s shared practices and play themes. For example, Garrett is placed near but not in Just Guys. Although he indicated several of the children in the Just Guys group as preferred playmates, my observations showed that he often chose to read alone or to draw about animals from Madagascar rather than sit with other Just Guys to draw about sports, SpongeBob Squarepants, or Star Wars themes. Further, children like Garret who are placed on the periphery of the sociogram were less popular than those in the center. On the other hand, children like Emma or Zoe who easily bridged groups are placed in the center (inside dashed line circle). These children had a wider range of play opportunities, were chosen more often as preferred playmates, and were more likely to change activities frequently and move across play groups.
Figure 1.2. Sociogram: Relationships between Three Play Groups and Children’s Preferred Playmates

Note: Gray one-way arrows point to a child’s preferred playmates. Black two-way arrows indicate children who mutually selected each other as preferred playmates. Children were asked to name three children that they usually play with at Choice Time. Children with no outgoing arrows indicated “by myself” or “with anyone,” and those with no incoming arrows were not selected by another child.

THEORIZING PLAY AS A LITERACY

Children learn to read, write, and design by collaborating with others who help them to interpret and represent meanings in a specific cultural context, in this case, a kindergarten classroom. Scollon’s (2001b) notion of nexus of practice—a community’s intricate web of insider practices, expectations, and dispositions—explains how play operates as a literacy for making meaning and

**Mediation and Literacy Practices**

Mediation involves physical manipulation of objects: turning the pages of a book, moving a pencil to make marks on a paper, or handing a folded paper to someone. Clusters of these physical actions become literacy practices (Street, 1995) when they are categorized as social practices (e.g., book-handling, copying a word, giving a friend a birthday card) that communicate meanings and carry out mediating functions (e.g., sharing ideas, influencing others, and participating in the sociocultural environment) (Scollon, 2001b; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Literacy develops as children take up more and more complex literacy practices, sometimes facilitated by peers or teachers (Rowe, 2008, 2010). In this way, a kindergarten operates as a *community of practice*, an apprenticeship into literacy and schooling in which learning is marked by an increasing participation in core practices that allows learners to take up a progression of identities from newcomer to expert (Lave & Wenger, 2001). Through play, children can mediate print texts for themselves (Vygotsky, 1935/1978) and others by pretending to be more experienced readers who use more complex literacy practices, allowing them to play the expert within the classroom community.

Mediation is multidirectional so that every aspect (e.g., beginning readers, teachers, books, pencils, hand and eye movements, strategies, and so on) of a literacy practice is simultaneously mediating and mediated (Engeström, 1987; Leont’ev, 1977). Texts are mediated by literacy practices in ways that make their meanings accessible; for example, we make sense of a printed page in a book through the literacy practice of reading. When literacy practices are used to mediate the world, the practices in turn are mediated as new ways of reading and writing emerge. For many of us, the practice of reading now involves scrolling and sweeping a finger across a touchscreen and we ourselves are mediated when new literacy practices become our accustomed ways of thinking and making sense of the world (e.g., “Is there an app for that?”). Play has unique facility for mediating collaborative texts as well as classroom identities and social relationships.

**Habitus and Nexus of Practice**

Literacy practices—and expectations for when, where, how, why, and by whom they should be used—are learned through participation in families, schools, and communities during early childhood, gradually becoming engrained and absorbed as familiar embodied and automatic patterns of daily life. We engage in everyday activities without noticing the ways in which our actions signal *habitus*, the histories of practices and dispositions shared among a group of people (Bourdieu, 1977). Nexus of practice refers to this network of backgrounded, valued practices. Nexus of practice marks membership when the combinations we expect—the things we “just know” how to do (e.g., passing someone on a sidewalk, making eye contact, a slight nod, “How are you?”) elicit automatic reactions from others that signal co-recognition (e.g., an appropriately brief response “How are you?” rather than a longer response that misinterprets this perfunctory greeting as a request for information).

In communities of practice, key nexuses are explicitly demonstrated to novices to help them learn how to perform—and to want to perform—valued practices. For example,
Kindergartners are taught particular ways of handling books or behaving while reading or writing (e.g., printing neatly, sitting up straight, working quietly) that have little to do with literacy (Luke, 1992) but that serve as automatic, embodied markers of a good student identity. Moreover, the desire to be recognized as a good student produces further practices and aspirations that uphold school hierarchies and relational identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) such as teacher/student or proficient reader/struggling reader within the field of schooling.

**Modes and Sign-making**

Play, like other literacies, produces signs, material objects or actions that represent and communicate ideas (Kress, 1997; Siegel, 2006; Wohlwend, 2008). Children make signs by resourcefully and flexibly using whatever “comes to hand” and seems apt for the purpose (Kress, 2003b), that is, children are designers who strategically emphasize modes, the best-fitting sensory aspects of materials, to represent the crucial parts of the meanings they want to convey. At the same time, these purposive, economical representations can be temporary and fluid, shifting in meaning from moment to moment. In play, the symbolic meaning of a discarded cardboard box fluidly can shift from container to chair to dollhouse to stepping stool within the space of several minutes. “The real point about this voracious appetite for semiotic recycling is the child’s ever-searching eye, guided by a precise sense of design, both for material and for shape” (Kress, 1997, p. 104). These design decisions are shaped by children’s interest or the social purposes they want to accomplish.

Interest involves more than a child’s intended meaning or a social goal (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007); it also reflects the knowledges, identities, social practices, and dispositions learned at home and school. In other words, children’s products reflect their reflect nexus of practice. Kate Pahl found that making a bird from tissue paper layered one child’s knowledge of chickens on his family’s farm in rural Turkey, a pet name that his mother had for him, a teacher’s reading of The Ugly Duckling, and a prior birdmaking craft activity at school. This handmade artifact was as much a product of these histories as the immediate design practices and modes used to craft it. In this way, children’s drawings and other design products are layered with sedimented identities deposited through a child’s choices of materials and modes, practices valued by families, schools, or communities, and identities situated in prevailing discourses (Gee, 1999). “The text, then, becomes an artifact of identities as much informed by social practice, habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), and context as it is by the material choices made during its creation” (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007, p. 392).

**Discourses and Identities**

Children’s play links to overlapping global discourses about children’s agency, creative expression, developmentally appropriate teaching, and school accountability that sanction the dominant ways of doing school in kindergarten. For example, the play ethos (Smith, 1988) is a widespread and romanticized early childhood educational discourse that characterizes play as agentic and all good for all children (Roskos & Christie, 2001). However, play can just as easily constrain children by reinforcing existing social identities and power relations in classroom cultures.

A particular identity often resonates with other complementary or contradictory identities in other discourses, enabling a dynamic, multifaceted representation of self with meanings that
may be imposed, unintended, or strategic so that in this kindergarten classroom, different identities were available to a child drawing pictures during Writers’ Workshop, to a child playing with telephones in the housekeeping corner, and to a child animating a princess doll in a pink and lavender dollhouse.

**OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK**

My goal in this book is to reconceptualize play as a literacy; this reconceptualization is also a tactic that holds promise for convincing administrators and policymakers to make room for play in schools. Many advocates for play in early childhood education have depended upon the play ethos and its widely held assumption that children need play as part of a developmentally appropriate educational program (Roskos & Christie, 2001). The more expansive definition of literacy outlined in this book re-centers play in school curriculum as a valuable semiotic system in its own right and revalues play as an essential element in “new basics” (Dyson, 2006) that aim to prepare diverse learners to respond to rapid change in the 21st century.

Each of the three main chapters in the book examines play from one aspect of nexus of practice (i.e., practices, materials, or discourses). The chapters show how the messiness of play opens opportunities for accessing, mediating, and improvising texts with available resources within the constraints of school. Each chapter provides in-depth interpretation of meaning-making among one play group of children in a featured literacy play nexus: Chapter 2 analyzes the playing/reading nexus, Chapter 3 the playing/designing nexus, and Chapter 4 the playing/writing nexus. Classroom examples illustrate how the transformative power of play intensifies when merged with other literacies. The final chapter looks across nexuses to see how Abbie and the children used play as a space-making tactic that manipulated school power relations by producing alternative contexts and importing otherwise unavailable identities and discourses. Finally, a set of appendices provide methodological explanations and key examples for each critical discourse analysis approach.

Chapter 2 details how children learn to read as they play school. Using mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001a), I examine play as an action-oriented literacy in a kindergarten that operates as a literacy apprenticeship. By combining reading and play practices, Abbie Wannabes created a nexus that strengthened peer mediation and allowed them to teach each other and try out new strategies while pretending to be expert readers. Although an apprenticeship tends to reproduce existing power relations, the playing/reading nexus expanded what counted as reading and who could be recognized as readers, reconfigured children’s social status in this classroom, and proliferated ways for children to “do school.”

Chapter 3 shows how children competed and taught each other as they produced drawings and artifacts. Using multimodal analysis (Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Jewitt, 2006; Norris, 2004), I examine how a group of boys used the playing/designing nexus to produce sports logos, football drawings, SpongeBob puppets, and other art projects to pull off identities as talented designers. During the creation of these artifacts, Just Guys strategically appropriated available modes and materials for meaning-making. Their design practices sedimented into the artifacts they created so that a child-made paper airplane served as a toy, as evidence of design expertise, and as a badge of membership among group members who competed to be recognized as the best designer. In this way, artifacts represented the child designer’s intended meaning through the choice of materials but also produced cultural capital that helped them cordon off a boys-only social space for enacting dominant masculinities.
Chapter 4 shows how children’s doll play, authoring, and playwriting revised gendered identity texts in children’s popular media. Using critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) consistent with activity theory (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), I uncover the discourses layered into media toys and child-made artifacts along with meanings, materials, and design practices. The Princess Players, a group of boys and girls, used the playing/writing nexus to appropriate and rewrite popular culture identity texts by twisting and remixing Disney Princess storylines as they animated dolls and toys in the dollhouse and authored books, puppet shows, and plays. Children’s attempts to faithfully replay the familiar Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty roles conflicted with their desire to take up more empowered positions as self-rescuing princesses or as authors and directors. In the face of these tensions, the transformative power of play produced improvisations and escapes from confining hyper-feminine princess identity texts with requisite happily-ever-after endings.

In Chapter 5, I draw upon de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics to explain the tensions that children faced during play at school. As in other institutional places, strategies upheld school goals while tactics allowed individuals to “make do” and create space for their own purposes. For example, Abbie’s pedagogy was a tactic that fused (Millard, 2003) four literacies—playing, reading, writing, and design—producing an inclusive space where children could play with meanings and achieve school goals as they enacted literate identities in both peer and school cultures. Conceptualizing play as a tactic also acknowledges its unique facility for allowing diverse learners to try on more empowered identities, allowing them to experience—and perhaps invent ways out of—the constraints of dominant discourses in school. These play transformations produce critiques and escapes, open access to cultural resources, and reconfigure classroom power relations, making play a promising critical literacy in early childhood classrooms (Comber, 2003).