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Teachers' Reconceptualization of Young Children's Identities and Abilities Through Research-Based Drama Professional Development

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Abstract

This study examines how the Early Years Educators at Play (EYEPlay) professional development (PD) program transformed preschool teachers' reconceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities. The EYEPlay PD model was a yearlong program, which integrated drama strategies into literacy practices within classroom contexts. Cultural-historical activity theory and Holland's (1998) identity theory were used to understand how EYEPlay PD practices mediated teachers' conceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities. Twelve semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 19 preschool teachers. The data were analyzed via constant-comparative and interpretive methods. The study findings show that the EYEPlay PD activities mediated the teachers' reconceptualization of the children's learning identities and abilities in relation to developmental age and dis/ability status.

Teachers' Reconceptualization of Young Children's Identities and Abilities Through Research-Based Drama Professional Development

Teachers and other educational stakeholders construction of children's identities and abilities/disabilities are constructed relationally in social contexts that privilege certain ways of being and behaving over others. This research investigates how drama-enhanced practices in early childhood classrooms disrupt teachers previous conceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities by altering the traditional literacy setting to create more opportunities for participation and learning.

Teachers' Deficit Constructions of Children and Students

It is well documented that a number of teachers hold deficit views about culturally and linguistically diverse children and students with dis/abilities[1] (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Marx, 2008). Deficit ideologies are narrated in larger macro-systems (e.g., social and political systems) and diffuse or leak into smaller micro-systems like classrooms. For instance, one of the larger deficit narratives of Latin@s[2] is the belief that they do not value education and have inadequate linguistic resources (Franquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolo, 2011; Marx, 2008). This narrative is reflected in the classroom as children being seen as lacking English proficiency, interest in learning, or educational support from their families (Cairney, 2000; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

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[1]"Dis/ability" refers to social construction and foregrounds the social model as opposed to the medical model of "disability".

[2] "Latin@" refers to people that are identified as Latina and/or Latino.

Deficit views are also noticeable for other groups such as children with dis/abilities, who are often perceived as incapable of being part of the learning community (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Additionally, a number of teachers hold a medical model perspective, which aims to "cure" individuals by considering problems within them rather than from social contexts (Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005). Therefore, children with dis/abilities are at times not included in general education classes, which use engaging curricular materials, and instead are presented with low-level, inappropriate curriculum and instruction (Kluth, Biklen, English-Sand, & Smuker, 2007). Furthermore, a number of studies indicate that there is lack of support and resource services for culturally and linguistically diverse children (Artiles et al., 2010). This constrains their opportunities to learn, which results in higher dropout rates, low-engagement, or misbehaviors (Suárez-Orozco, Roos, & Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

Sadly, some teachers hold low-expectations of children, creating barriers to learning that limit the perception of children as capable learners who are able to participate in rigorous curricula (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Unfortunately, some children also internalize these deficit views and therefore, do not identify themselves as intelligent or as capable as their peers (Franquiz et al., 2011; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). In this study, we propose that drama-enhanced practices in early childhood classrooms disrupt teachers previous conceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities by changing the traditional literacy setting to create more opportunities for child participation and learning.

Construction of Identity

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) argue that identities are constructed two ways, culturally and socially, through participation in activities. Identities are formed through cultural narratives and practices of particular groups. For instance, Holland et al. (1998) use Skinner's (1990) description of the life of a "good woman" in Nepalese culture as being an obedient daughter in her natal home and later to be a respectful wife to her husband and in-laws, which includes dying before her husband does. It is noticeable that narrativized identities are formed within the culture and history of a society. The being a "good woman" storyline reflects that women hold less power and authority than men in the Nepalese culture. The example above led us to consider how students' identities are constructed in the classroom and how narratives of the "good student" or "lazy student" are formed. Thus, we wanted to look at how identities are dynamically formed through social interactions and in relation to individuals' power, authority, and status.

On the other hand, individuals have agency to accept, negotiate, or resist their inscribed identities (Holland et al., 1998). For example, in a recent study, Hatt (2012) examined the cultural construction of smartness in kindergarten classrooms, in which children developed

their identities in regard to smartness. Classroom artifacts mediated who was smart or not. For instance, students were instructed to move a car from the position of the "green light" to the "yellow light" (a sign of warning) and then to the "red light" when they perceived their behavior to be inappropriate. Children's smartness was defined as "not having to move your car" (Hatt, 2012, p. 488) by the children. Disparities were noted; low-income children of color were more likely than their middle-class White counterparts to move their cars to the "red light" and be perceived as not smart in the classroom context. In addition, children who identified as smart had social power in regards to being a desired friend or someone with whom others wanted to sit. This study provides an example of how children's identities are formed relationally within preconceived notions of smartness, which privileges certain behaviors and actions within classroom contexts. Also, larger power structures leak into classroom systems, such as privileging certain groups of children, specifically historically dominant cultures, and consistently positioning African-American and low-income children as not smart.

Holland and Lave (2001) explain that when individuals are constantly being identified under certain categories, over time these categories are used to recognize individuals, which they call "thickening." For instance, when teachers interpret children's cultural, linguistic or ability differences in deficit ways (Artiles, 2003; Harry & Klingner, 2006), children's identities become thickened as being incompetent. Due to power disparities among teachers and young children, children are more likely to accept and less likely to challenge their inscribed identities (Edmiston, 2007; Jones, 2006). However, drama opens up an imagined space where children are able to form new identities. As Holland et al., (1998) stated "through play, imagination becomes embodied . . . our fancied selves become material" (p.236). Thus, through drama, teachers' deficit views of children may be disrupted which would allow students to be positioned and position themselves as capable learners.

The Role of Drama in Education

Creative drama, unlike theatre, is "an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect on human experience" (Davis & Behm, 1987, p. 262). It encourages children to form imagined worlds (Edmiston, 2003; Holland et al., 1998) where they take on the role of various characters (e.g., astronauts or animals) for different purposes, such as making sense of the world, engaging in critical discussions about equity or social justice issues (Edmiston, 2003), and solving problems (Szecsi, 2008). Within their imagined worlds, children construct imagined communities where they work with a shared objective in a collaborative manner (Edmiston, 2003) by utilizing their cultural tools or their funds of knowledge (Edmiston, 2007; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Integrating creative drama into classroom contexts as a tool has been shown to enhance children's learning, engagement, and social skills, as well as assist them in understanding differences and diversity, promote self-advocacy, increase self-esteem, and explore feelings and emotions (Band, Lindsay, Neelands, & Freakley, 2011; Edmiston, 2007; Szecsi, 2008; Kempe & Tissot, 2012; Kim, 2009; Mages, 2008). For instance, Edmiston (2007) examined the use of drama in self-contained classrooms where children with visual impairments had opportunities to meaningfully participate in literacy activities. Children acting as astronaut characters visited Mars, then wrote a letter to the President about their exploration of Mars and developed a speech to give to the public upon their return to Earth.

According to Barab, Zuiker, Warren, Hickey, Ingram-Goble, and Kwon (2007), situationally-embodied learning "involves more than seeing a concept or even a context of use; it involves being in the context and recognizing the value of concepts as tools useful for understanding and solving problems central to the context in which one is embodied" (p.2). Thus, the situationally-embodied learning features of this drama embraced the children's social, cultural and linguistic strengths and abilities rather than their perceived weaknesses, which supported children in building competent identities in literacy practices within a shared drama context. Through participation in drama activities, children can develop language and literacy skills in organic ways (Podlozny, 2000). Drama also creates educational opportunities for critical inquiry for children while engaging with a text. For instance, children unpacked silenced voices of indigenous people in a Thanksgiving story and discussed that although they cannot change the past, they have the power to change the future (Edmiston, 2010).

Furthermore, Kim (2009) researched the influences of a theatre-in-education project, *A Big Blue Whale*, on general education children, teachers, and parents' perceptions and awareness of children with disabilities. Through theatrical presentation, the children critically engaged in discussions with their peers about the experiences of Chain, a character that was a child with a disability. The children enhanced their awareness of Chain's disability by interpreting his emotions through drama. The teachers and parents also reported that their feelings about children with disabilities changed after the program with regard to enhanced empathy, equity of human rights, and respecting individual differences. In a recent study, Kempe and Tissot (2012) found that drama created a "safe space" for social interactions and participation for the children with autism. Specifically noted were improvements in the rate and levels of participation as well as attention to details in their spoken and written words. Antonelli et al. (2014) also reported that children with dyslexia felt empowered and motivated to participate in drama. The drama practices encouraged them to build feelings of self-worth and self-esteem and increased their self-determination of success. Rieg and Paquette (2009) also discussed that drama increased the motivation of English Language Learners (ELLs) and enhanced their literacy abilities, such as vocabulary, writing, and listening.

Drama has the potential to alter predefined power, authority, and the expertise of teachers and children. Edmiston (2003) indicated that a teacher could position his or her authority (i.e., higher than students, lower than students, and equal with students) for different purposes. A teacher positions his or her authority higher than children when s/he gives information, shifts the focus of content, or stops an activity. Furthermore, a teacher can position himself or herself with equal authority by valuing the contribution of everyone in order to solve or explore an issue. This power dynamic creates opportunities for children to construct new identities regardless of their perceived abilities or disabilities in social contexts. Children likely share the power and authority with teachers through collaboration in imagined worlds, in which an egalitarian community can be established (Edmiston, 2003; 2008). The section that follows highlights an innovative early childhood professional development (PD) model designed to engage preschool-aged children in drama-enhanced situationally-embodied learning experiences. This model is known as the Early Years Educators at Play (EYEPlay) PD Program.

An Overview of the EYEPlay PD Program

The EYEPlay PD model is a yearlong program, in which drama strategies are integrated into literacy practices within classroom contexts. EYEPlay is designed as an apprenticeship model (Rogoff, 1995; 2003) in which professional theater teaching artists (TAs) pair with preschool teachers to scaffold or provide a structure for the teachers' learning and practices of integrating creative drama strategies into literacy (Kilinc, Kelley, Millinger, & Adams, 2016). It includes six units in a year. Each unit focuses on one drama frame, which pairs a specific drama strategy (pantomime, character development, and group storybuilding) with a curricular objective (vocabulary development, speaking and communicating, and story comprehension). Each unit is completed in a month, which includes a model lesson taught by TAs, an in-service where the teachers experience a lesson and learn that months' drama strategies, a team lesson that is co-taught by TAs and the teachers, a planning session to design the teachers' solo lesson, a solo lesson that is implemented by the teachers, and lesson reflections in which TAs and the teachers discuss their overall unit (Kilinc et al., 2016).

A creative drama lesson starts with "preparing students for drama," which requires the implementation of an "anticipatory set" through imagination and stimulation. New concepts, key vocabulary, and characters are introduced by using rich multi-sensory elements (i.e., puppets, pictures, or word cards) with children. After that, teachers read the beginning of the story using consistent vocal variety, pacing, emotional quality, energy, and deep characterizations. The story plots include problems and conflicts that are explored and solved by the children and teacher together as a community. Within each drama activity, different drama tools are used for similar or various purposes. For instance, a magic portal (i.e., bag, magic dust, or an invisible door) is a tool used to set up possible imagined worlds through

narration. Additionally, the teachers facilitate inquiry by empowering children's suggestions and using open-ended questions. At the end of the drama, reflections sticks (i.e., a picture of a heart, or a globe) are used to recall the story features and to connect the story to the personal lives of the children.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural-historical activity theory was used to understand how the EYEPlay PD mediated teachers' conceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities. Cultural-historical activity theory argues that human actions are object-oriented and mediated by tools, division of labor, and rules within a community (Engeström, 1998) and components of the theory, at times, allow or constrain the abilities of children and their learning. For instance, a traditional literacy activity, in which a teacher reads a book to children who are expected to sit silently in a circle, privileges certain abilities over others and may exclude some children with diverse needs from the learning opportunities. In this activity, tools (e.g., books), division of labor (e.g., teacher transfers the knowledge to children), and rules (e.g., silence; sitting) constrain learning opportunities for some children. Traditional literacy activities create a power disparity among teachers and children, which may discourage children from developing their own goals and enhancing their abilities. Changing constricted activity systems open up new opportunities for learning and participation.

The EYEPlay PD activities were conceptualized as situationally-embodied activity systems in which the tools, division of labor, and rules facilitate the enhancement of children's motivation to participate and learn in diverse ways. Thus, these features assist in making activities meaningful for children and facilitate learning (see Figure 1), which supports children in constructing their own goals for the activity. Empowering contexts support children in forming new learning identities and enhancing their abilities, but also triggers changes in teachers' conceptualization of children's identities and abilities.

Cultural-historical activity theory also helps us to understand how teachers become key agents for change by critically examining their previous literacy activities through reflective dialogs between TAs and themselves. Teachers, as subjects of an EYEPlay activity system, reflected upon their experiences to help us understand how changing contexts mediated repositioning the identity of all children as competent learners.
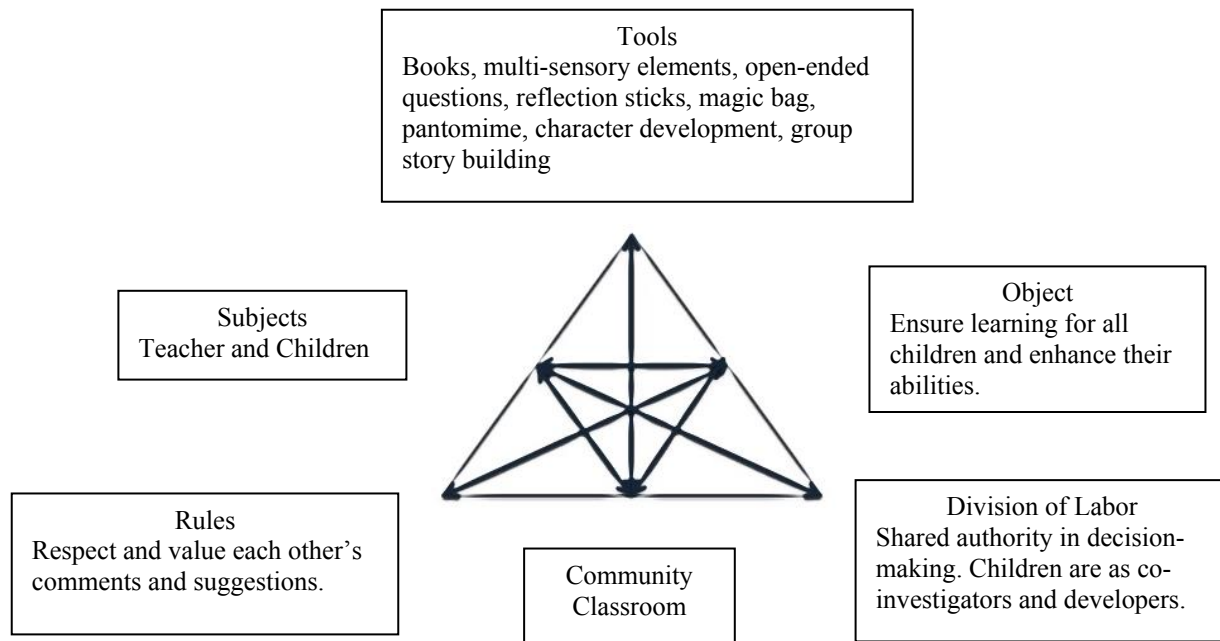
Tools
Books, multi-sensory elements, open-ended questions, reflection sticks, magic bag, pantomime, character development, group story building

Subjects
Teacher and Children

Object
Ensure learning for all children and enhance their abilities.

Rules
Respect and value each other's comments and suggestions.

Community
Classroom

Division of Labor
Shared authority in decision-making. Children are as co-investigators and developers.

Figure 1. EYEPlay PD activity

Method

Setting and Participants

The participants included 32 preschool teachers over the time frame of two years. Sixteen teachers committed to participate in the 2012-2013 academic year and the other half of the teachers participated in the 2013-2014 academic year. After the teachers completed the yearlong program, one-third of the teachers continued to participate in the program for one more semester as part of a sophomore group. For this qualitative paper, we analyzed data from three sophomore teachers from year one and 16 freshman teachers from year two. Therefore, the total of 19 teachers' reflections and experiences were analyzed. Eighteen teachers were female, and one teacher was male. The teachers identified themselves as African-American (n: 2), Caucasian/White (n: 12), Latina (n: 3), and multiracial (n: 2).

In the classrooms that were taught by these 19 teachers, 23% of the children were three- year-olds, 62% were four-year-olds, and 15% were five-years-old. Forty-eight percent of the children were Caucasian/White, 43% were Hispanic/Latin@, 6% were African American, and 3% were Indian American, Asian American or Multiracial. Fifty-eight percent of the children were identified as typically developing, 11% as having learning challenges or delays, and 28% were identified as English language learners. Finally, three-quarters of the children resided in

low-income households per the United States federal poverty guidelines.

Data Collection and Analysis

Twelve focus group interviews (six mid-year and six end-of-year) were conducted at the end of the each semester by the first and third authors of this study using semi-structured questions. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the authors. Each focus group contained three to seven participants and lasted approximately one hour.

Focus group interviews were analyzed using constant-comparative (Glaser, 1965) and interpretive methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The data analysis occurred in multiple phases through a recursive cycle of discovery to identify emergent themes and to deepen our understanding of the data. First we conducted an open coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used in-vivo, process, and descriptive coding structures (Saldaña, 2013) to make sense of teachers' reflective experiences. NVivo 10 computer software was used for organizing the possible codes and themes. During the open coding process, some codes were coded under multiple related categories. Following that process, we reorganized and recoded the data, and identified categories under a theme. During each cycle of analysis, we also wrote analytical and theoretical memos for reflection purposes. In our weekly data analysis meetings, we discussed the codes and the possible themes until reaching consensus agreement of the codes. Since six of the teachers from year two participated in the sophomore experience, we conducted brief member checks with them to confirm our findings of the constructs and concepts. There was wide spread confirmation that our analyses accurately reflected their experiences and perceptions of the EYEPlay program.

Results

Reconfiguring children's learning identities and abilities

This research identified two significant ways teachers' understanding of children's learning identities and abilities were reconfigured. Drama practices encouraged teachers to critically question: 1) their previous positioning of children in relation to developmental age, and 2) their constructed identities of children with dis/abilities. As they recognized the unique abilities of children within each drama experience, it also allowed children to form competent learning identities and perform their abilities within drama practices.

Children's abilities in relation to developmental age

At the beginning of the EYEPlay PD program, many of the teachers associated the young children's abilities with their developmental age. Traditional preconceived notions of young children's abilities were related to their limitation of focusing no more than 10 to 15 minutes on any activity, engaging in challenging literacy practices (e.g., tapping out syllables, tier two

or three vocabulary), or levels of participation. These beliefs about what children can do were embedded in the institutional culture and also connected to classroom contextual factors (i.e., limited cultural resources, few tools available, frequent didactic instruction), which constrained the possibilities of expanding children's abilities. The teachers' reconceptualization of young children's abilities began with their surprise about an unexpected action or comment of the children, which triggered their transformative thinking. For instance, a teacher stated her changing perspective on three-years-olds' abilities.

> When you guys presented, tap out the syllables, I am like 'REALLY' by three-year-olds? I'll do it, but I don't think that they are really going to know what we were doing, so I tried to scaffold it—how many pieces do we see in the word or whatever, and I noticed now that some of them are really proficient in telling me how many parts are in words. So I really would never have expected them, especially with three-year-olds to be able to grasp that and never would I have thought to teach it to a three-year-old.

In this excerpt, the teacher's initial reaction of practicing syllables with three-year-olds was deemed an unrealistic expectation. Although she did not believe that this practice would work in her classroom, she was scaffolding it in the "anticipatory set" within the drama context. During the anticipatory set (i.e., at the beginning of the drama event), children practiced tapping out syllables of a new word by using their bodies. Anticipatory set practices were not only dependent on the story context, but also set the foundations for further story-related drama practices. This teacher, as well as the other teachers, came to realize that young children were capable of tapping out the syllables and comprehending the structure of the words. The teachers' construction of age as an indicator of certain abilities was disrupted as they observed their children participating in drama-enhanced literacy practices. The teacher's last statement revealed the strong relationship between teachers' expectations and children's abilities. It reflected that when the teachers held low expectations of what young children could do, they did not usually organize challenging activities, which constrained the development of children's abilities and their opportunities to learn.

Another common traditional view among the teachers was related to children's lack of ability to focus any longer than 10 to 15 minutes on literacy practices. A typical drama-enhanced literacy event took approximately 45 minutes to one hour depending on the book and the participants' interest and story elaborations. At the beginning of the EYEPlay PD program, the teachers were concerned about conducting a one-hour drama practice with young children due to the length of time and story complexity. However, a number of the teachers expressed their surprise in regard to the children's intense level of attention and interest. For instance, one teacher shared,

> My kids will do that [group story building] for an hour. Before I would read a book
> and it was like "15 minutes, Ok we are done." Because there was one always rolling
> off the floor, or you know somebody pulls somebody's hair. But now my story
> times, I have to take a chunk of time of the day for that, because they become these
> elaborate…and they want to keep going. The last time we did it, it was I think we
> were like 45 minutes into it. I was like ok… I think it is time for us to go outside,
> and let's read, let's finish the story. And I read the story, and then one little boy
> said, "Can we go back to the garden now? And he said, can we go back to our
> play?" I was like your 'play!' "Yes the garden that we are building. Can we go back
> to it? I was like, we have to go outside, don't you guys want to go outside and play
> there? He is like, "no no, I think we need to go back to the play." So I had to like,
> do an extension of it. I mean it was into an hour of it and they were still totally
> engaged.

This excerpt revealed the impact of the context on children's abilities. The teacher compared
her previous story time activity with drama-enhanced literacy practices in regard to the
children's engagement, elaboration, and interest. Using a cultural-historical activity theory
perspective, there were two distinct literacy activities: traditional and drama-enhanced.
According to the teacher, the duration of the traditional literacy activity took approximately
15 minutes due to children's lack of interest in engagement that was observed by their actions
(e.g., rolling off the floor or pulling another child's hair). The teachers could interpret these
kinds of actions of children as their lack of abilities to concentrate on things for longer periods
of time. These misjudgments by the teachers of children's perceived abilities constrained the
possibilities of developing children's abilities. On the other hand, the teacher began to further
understand the children's abilities on focusing for longer periods of time with increased
motivation to engage. By changing the literacy activity, the teachers were encouraged to
rethink children's abilities in relation to the classroom context, resulting in enhanced interest
on the part of children.

Reconstructing the abilities of children with dis/abilities

The teachers also reconfigured children with dis/abilities learning identities through drama
practices. Given the fact that children with dis/abilities identities are traditionally constructed
through deficit-oriented ideologies (Artiles, et al., 2010), the teachers were amazed by the
abilities of these children to remember the stories weeks later, their desire to participate and
talk within the drama activities, and their problem solving skills. For instance, a teacher
stated,

> Special ed. kids, do they remember? Because I have certain kids that probably… I
> mean I would tell something, we do something in the morning, and by the time that
> they left when I asked them, "what did you guys do today? Do you guys remember

what we did this morning? What do you remember of it?" They wouldn't be able to tell me. But then a lot of my special ed. kids it is like these little activities that we are doing are just staying ingrained in their head. And they are still able to talk about it later. One of my other students, the tiptoe [scene] from *Muncha Muncha Muncha* [3] and he would tiptoe and he would pat and the bunny would come and eat. He's been doing that non-stop. He is walking. He doesn't talk. He is not very verbal. And he is going like this [showing tiptoeing-silently] and he does this [patting, silently] and I was like, I don't know what he is doing. Why are you walking, and he is like, "the bunny." I was like "Oh my gosh!" Oh bunny I was like "ok, ok. I am walking" and I took three steps and I am like *Muncha Muncha Muncha*! And he goes "Yes, pat, pat, pat" I was like "Oh my gosh." I cannot, I mean he doesn't remember, like his attention, it is so hard for him to concentrate on things that we did and even try to remember things, and this is like a week and a half later. And he is still tiptoeing and patting.

The teacher started with explaining how children with "special needs" appeared to have difficulty remembering what had been learned on a daily basis. Like this teacher, many of the teachers tended to generalize children's abilities across different contexts. Deficit-oriented generalizations are dangerous due to the fact that they may have blinded the teachers from recognizing what children could do in activities and having low expectations for children. Drama-enhanced literacy practices broke this cycle of thinking by surprising the teachers about their children's abilities. In this excerpt, the teacher was amazed by the child with "special needs" ability to remember and perform the actions of the character in the story weeks later. Drama-enabled situationally-embodied learning experiences wove body, mind, and context together. The fabric of these experiences afforded opportunities for the children to progress and enact their abilities. Therefore, this led teachers to critically question their previous positioning of children and to reconstruct their abilities.

As teachers compared children with "special needs" abilities before and after the EYEPlay PD program was enacted, another distinctive narrative of children's abilities stood out. It was related to children with "special needs" difficulty in participating and contributing to discussions. At the end of the yearlong PD program, the teachers repeatedly shared their astonishment with regard to children's growing desires to talk and participate in every part of the story. For instance, a sophomore teacher explained,

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[3] *Muncha! Muncha! Muncha!* is a children's book written by Candance Fleming. The Muncha sound is that of three hungry bunnies eating fruits and vegetables in Mr. McGreely's garden.

> Everybody wants to talk. I mean I can't get over my special ed. kids. When our Teaching Artist came last time she is like, "I can't tell which ones are the special ed. children" and half of my class is special ed. on IEPs [Individualized Educational Plans][4], and she is like, "I can't," and I was like "well the one who is jumping up and doing all that patting, all the jumping and everything, he is you know, he is developmentally delayed with a lot of areas," and she was like "I cannot believe... I would never have guessed it." They are just so involved and so eager to talk. My speech kids, they just want to participate in everything, and they will raise their hands to give answers. It is just unbelievable how eager they are to participate in this.

In this excerpt, the teacher shared her conversation with the TA who could not identify the children with "special needs" due to their tremendous interest and activity in participation. From the conversation, the desires of the children with "special needs" to participate and engage in discussions within the drama were unexpected outcomes noted by the teacher and TA. These expectations were related to associating certain identities with certain abilities. For instance, the teachers could expect a typically developing child to raise his/her hand to participate in classroom activities more than children with "special needs." On the other hand, as the drama-enhanced literacy activity setting afforded multiple ways of being and acting for children, the children enhanced their own motivational goals. Motivation to participate and the teacher's acknowledgement of their abilities encouraged children to construct their identities as capable contributors of drama and learning.

Drama as an imagined space allowed possibilities for the children to form new identities regardless of their perceived identity in social contexts. As the children constructed capable learning identities within imagined spaces, they could transfer their newly formed identities across different contexts. Therefore, the children's own positioning of themselves as capable contributors led the teachers to critically question their previous positioning of children in terms of who can do what. For instance, another teacher explained her uneasy thoughts about referring a child to special education. She said,

> This is a little child in my class that I am still trying to figure out whether she needs

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[4] The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) is a plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the federal law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.

to be referred to Child Find[5] for being developmentally delayed, and her speech is so poor. So she came up to me today after lunch and said, and it took some figuring out what she was saying, but she was saying, "teacher can I read to you?" She wasn't saying, "Will you read to me?" She said, "Can I read to you?" It took me a second to grasp it so she had me sit on the carpet and she sat in the chair. She had a book and first she is holding it with the front of the book and then she turned it around to the back of the book and she said, "is this the front?"…-But this was the book, *The Night Before Christmas* and so she is showing me and she is making me do what is in the picture though, because they are going to bed and they are going to sleep and, "now you are going to sleep teacher." I was like she was incorporating some of, she wasn't just looking at the book with me. I didn't even realize it until just now. She was doing the drama with me. She was making me, pretty soon she had a whole group of us, because the other kids said, we want to do it. She's in the chair being the teacher. She didn't know the story at all but she totally got the meaning from the pictures, and was leading us and acting out what she saw happening in the story…And this is the little one that I said I am still waffling on should I be referring her for special ed., because she has been so slow to pick up on things… I hadn't even realized until just now, oh my gosh, she was doing drama with us. I didn't even realize it at the time. I was just thinking this is pretty cool that she's being the teacher.

In this excerpt, the young girl improvised a performance identity of the teacher character after asking the teacher if she could read to her. The teacher misinterpreted her question, thinking that the young girl would ask the teacher, "will you read to me?" The young girl's question of "can I read to you?" did not align with the teacher's expectation of her abilities. Organically, the young girl set the drama context by sitting on the teacher's chair and had the teacher sit on the carpet. The whole class's participation in her drama activity empowered her performance identity as a teacher leading the drama activity. The young girl's confidence to improvise and lead an unknown story by interpreting the pictures disturbed the teacher's initial thinking about referring the young girl to special education. This excerpt also revealed the importance of providing opportunities for children to construct competent learning identities, which challenged the teachers' conceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities. Moreover, the teachers indicated that the EYEPlay PD activities afforded opportunities for the children to develop their language abilities, which encouraged the children to be valuable

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[5] The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act includes the Child Find mandate. Child Find requires all school districts to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities regardless of the severity of their disabilities.

members of the group. In another example, a teacher described how drama activities influenced a child with "special needs" and helped her develop her language skills. She said,

> For us, we had one child who was on an IEP for speech, and she is not anymore, and I think that EYEPlay has helped with that. She is a little bit shy and reserved and I gave her the opportunity to experience and participate in the story and the conversation without being put on the spot. Now at story recall, when it is her turn, she has an idea. It may not always be in English, but she has something to say. She went from no English to now she uses full sentences. "Can I help you?" "Can I go play now?" instead of just like, "play?" or "help?" She went right from nothing to a sentence. We hear a lot about how much more she is talking, and she used to stutter a lot, but not as much now.

Through the drama participation, the young girl's developing language ability was acknowledged and contributed to the non-renewal of her IEP. The young girl began to recognize what was valued in classroom contexts (e.g. English-proficiency). Thus, in the beginning, the child's emerging English-skills led her to be perceived as "shy" and "reserved" by her teacher. The initial expectations and values within the classroom context constrained the young girl from being an active contributor within the drama activities. However, the teacher used drama as a tool to support her language skills naturally without causing her to be stressed. Her developing language skills allowed her to position herself and be positioned and acknowledged by the teacher as a capable English speaker. This was reflected in her statement, "we hear a lot about how much more she is talking." Thus, the teacher acknowledged the drama activities as mediators of improving this young girl's English-skills.

Discussion

In this paper we examined how the EYEPlay PD program mediated the preschool teachers' reconceptualization of children's learning identities and abilities. By integrating drama strategies into literacy practices, the EYEPlay PD program created a new literacy activity system, which pushed the teachers to critically question their previous literacy practices. This new drama-enhanced activity system used various tools (e.g., pantomime, magic portal, open-ended questioning strategies), changed the roles of children from being passive listeners into co-investigators and developers of the activity sharing decision-making with the teacher, and redefined the rules of the activity as valuing and respecting children's contribution. The new activity setting created "secondary contradictions" which occurred between the components of new drama-enhanced literacy activity system and the "psychological tools" (i.e., beliefs about children's abilities) of the teachers that were grounded in old literacy practices (Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Cole, 1996). These contradictions were necessary for transformation, allowing for expansive learning opportunities for the teachers by critically questioning their old literacy

activity settings (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Drama-based PD programs were praxis-oriented through continuous reflective practices between the educational researchers, drama practitioners and teachers. Additionally, integrating drama in the classroom context had power to change the classroom culture in a positive way (Cawthon & Dawson, 2011; Dawson, Cawthon & Baker, 2012).

Understanding teachers' construction of children's learning identities and abilities was important because it directly influenced their educational expectations and practices. Initially, the teachers associated the children's abilities with their developmental age, specifically their ability to engage in complex literacy practices such as breaking apart syllables and understanding tier two and three vocabulary terms as well as developing an attention span that would allow for an investigation of more complex ideas. Within the drama-enhanced literacy activity system, the teachers experienced that the three-year-old children were extensively involved in understanding and practicing vocabulary segmentation of syllables and could focus on the literacy activities for extended periods of time (i.e., 45-60 minutes in length). The teachers' realization of their children's abilities was important because, based on those initial perceptions of the children, they held low expectations and did not design challenging educational activities for children. As a result, the children had limited opportunities to develop and demonstrate their abilities. Dawson, Cawthon & Baker (2012) also found that students become co-creators of the knowledge within drama practices, which changed the teachers' perceptions about their engagement and motivation specifically students who usually disengaged in other instructional practices.

The drama-enhanced literacy practices empowered children to share power and authority with their teachers. Altering the power dynamics enhanced the children's motivation to develop their own goals and to take on ownership of the activity. Additionally, these experiences supported the children to form their own competent learning identities and demonstrate their abilities within drama. The teachers of the children that were English Language Learners (ELLs) and those with "special needs" specifically identified this concept. Given the fact that these learning identities of these children have been historically conceptualized in deficit ways and these deficit constructions of children have been generalized across various contexts, the teachers' reframed their previous positioning of children (e.g., child-referral decisions, the teacher's conceptions of children with special needs' difficulty in remembering what had been learned, and from being "shy" and reserved to being talkative). Antonelli et al. (2014) also reported that children with dyslexia felt empowered and motivated to participate within drama. Additionally the drama practices encouraged them to build the feelings of self-worth, self-esteem and increased their self-determination of success. Rieg and Paquette (2009) also discussed that drama increased the motivation of ELLs and enhanced their literacy abilities, such as vocabulary, writing, and listening.

Given that, drama-enhanced practices create opportunities for change in the classroom context by providing various learning tools, allowing new identity formations for both teachers and students, and creating safe spaces for collaboration. Knowing this, teacher education programs can offer drama courses for future educators to incorporate these art-based teaching practices into their repertoire of teaching. Specifically, teacher education programs should consider incorporating a research-based professional development program that employs an apprenticeship model so that teacher candidates can appropriate skillful drama implementation strategies (Kilinc et al., 2016). Additionally, through these art-based courses, future educators can engage in critical reflections about common assumptions about children's abilities, which can increase having high expectations for the children regardless of their differences.

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