
Inserting Child-Initiated Play into an American Urban School District after a Decade of Scripted Curricula

Complexities and Progress



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The authors discuss an urban public school district's efforts to reinsert play after its mandated disappearance for fourteen years under a scripted curriculum imposed to meet the goals of the No Child Left Behind law. The authors analyze field notes, teacher and administrator interviews, coaching records, and surveys to chart the impact on teachers of the efforts to revive play in their classrooms. The study suggests that these attempts increased the teachers' understandings of child development and the connections between play and social-emotional development. The authors note the role of teachers in arranging play-friendly classrooms and the problems teachers faced including the lack of any district curriculum; the complexities of public-private partnerships; the lack of understanding about play by parents, principals, and administrators; and children's challenging behavior and violent play themes. Finally, the authors consider the sociopolitical factors influencing the sustainability of play in large urban classrooms. **Key words:** Common Core State Standards; No Child Left Behind; Open Court; play-based learning; social-emotional development; transitional kindergarten; trauma-informed instruction

Introduction

THE IMPLEMENTATION of the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act imposed a number of new procedures on public school districts throughout the country: the introduction of "teacher-proof," scripted curricula; continuous monitoring of student performance; high-stakes testing; and the punishment of teachers, administrators, and students if they did not meet external standards.¹

Because of these new practices, many school districts were rated “low performing” in the implementation of rigorous academic curriculum at earlier ages. This caused kindergarten and early elementary public school administrators throughout the country to reduce the amount of time students were allowed to play and to resist any attempts to integrate play into their curricula.² In the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study analyzed by researchers Jill Bowdon and Laura Desimone, data from 1998–1999 and 2010–2011 documented the disappearance of play, showing that NCLB led to more work and less play time for children in kindergarten.³ In fact, by comparing teaching and learning activities in kindergarten classrooms before the implementation of NCLB and after, Bowdon and Desimone showed that, over the last fifteen years, kindergarten classrooms steadily became more academically focused. The study concluded that the implementation of NCLB led to children having fewer opportunities to choose their activities for at least one hour each day and more students experiencing three or more hours of teacher-directed, large-group instruction. Further, the study found a reduction in the number of kindergarten classrooms that maintained water or sand tables or areas specifically dedicated to pretend play.⁴

The use of scripted curricula like SRA/McGraw-Hill's *Open Court Reading* program, introduced by many districts under pressure from NCLB to improve students' academic achievement, resulted in a reduction in play and child-selected activities. Districts believed that by increasing instructional uniformity in all classrooms and by attaching high stakes to teachers' compliance and fidelity to mandated scripts and pacing guides, they would see students' test scores improve. Administrators monitored teachers continuously to ensure fidelity to the scripted curricula and often punished teachers for deviations. Kohl describes the surveillance teachers faced as the “Open Court police,” who “wander the halls of schools checking that teachers are on exactly the mandated page, asking set questions rather than discussing ideas or texts, and accepting only the answers provided by the teacher's booklet. Though those monitors obviously can't check all the classes at all the times, they induce a state of anxiety since they can enter any classroom at any time without even knocking.”⁵ No wonder critics decry that scripted curricula shifted and deprofessionalized teaching, creating a “shrinking space” for teachers' decision making and “depersonaliz[ing] the human connections nurtured by more student-centered curriculum and pedagogy.”⁶ Further, the use of scripted curricula—with its emphasis on fidelity, uniformity, control, and monitoring—produced a reduction in classroom play. This kind of scripted teaching and learning is incongruous with the fundamental

tenets of child-initiated play such as allowing children to make their own play choices—to experiment, explore, and interact with others—in an environment responsive to their developmental interests and preferences.⁷

Contemporary policy no longer discusses fidelity to scripts or invariable lesson planning. Instead, more recent educational discourse presents the merits of aligning classroom teaching with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS),⁸ of preparing students academically for college and careers, and of providing children with the real-world, twenty-first-century skills needed to succeed in a competitive, knowledge-based, global economy.⁹ These new priorities in public education have led many school districts to do a pedagogical turnabout—to reject the highly prescriptive, teacher-directed, excessively monitored methods of teaching and learning in the NCLB era. In place of these practices, districts have focused on instruction that emphasizes critical thinking, culturally responsive oral and written communication, creativity, collaboration, problem solving, and an integration of digital literacy. This toggling of priorities has created a critical leverage point for some stakeholders who see that play naturally aligns well with such twenty-first-century learning goals.

In this article, we present findings from a two-year, mixed-methods study documenting the process that unfolded in one large California urban school district. After fourteen years of mandating the use of a scripted curriculum and eliminating play in its early-childhood classrooms, the district in 2011 wrote a new strategic plan that emphasized the Common Core State Standards and a commitment to reinsert child-directed play into its curriculum. For many teachers and administrators, shifting from a scripted curriculum emphasizing discrete skill development to a classroom that encouraged teachers to support children's open-ended play required substantial adjustments. In this study, we document the range of successes, challenges, and complexities that emerged as teachers and administrators implemented the reappearance of play in the district's early-childhood classrooms.

Literature Review

The Loss of Play in Public Education

Decades of research have highlighted the positive relationship between play, development, learning, and children's academic achievement in school.¹⁰ We have ample evidence showing that play supports a child's develop-

ment of many skills necessary for success in school including social competence and school adjustment,¹¹ perspective taking,¹² English-language learning,¹³ literacy,¹⁴ complex narrative development,¹⁵ self-regulation,¹⁶ mathematical knowledge,¹⁷ general problem solving,¹⁸ and motor control.¹⁹ Despite significant evidence of the relationship between play and children's learning, play all but disappeared from public education under NCLB.²⁰ Miller and Almon brought national attention to this issue in *Crisis in the Kindergarten*. They reported the results of nine studies completed between 2007 and 2009 in 254 New York City and Los Angeles kindergarten classrooms, finding that “play in all its forms but especially open-ended child-initiated play [was] a minor activity, if not completely eliminated” from the curriculum.²¹ Lynch documented the same reality in a study of message-board discussions involving seventy-eight kindergarten teachers and the pressures they faced from other teachers, principals, and school policies to focus on academic goals and limit play in their classrooms.²²

One of the more significant reasons for this precipitous decline in play in early-childhood classrooms was pressure to improve achievement test scores of poor-performing students. This loss was particularly evident in under-provisioned, urban public school districts where high test scores were very important to teachers and administrators. Many stakeholders had expressed alarm about the absence of play in public school classrooms, a concern reported by Miller and Almon: “Play is rapidly disappearing from kindergarten and early education as a whole. We believe that the stifling of play has dire consequences—not only for children but for the future of our nation. . . . To create effective and healthy kindergartens, we call on policymakers, educators, health professionals, researchers, and parents to take action. . . . *Restore child-initiated play and experiential learning* with the active support of teachers to their rightful place at the heart of kindergarten education.”²³ The pattern described by Miller and Almon reflects conditions in the district we studied. Intense pressure from NCLB to improve test scores, especially in reading, drove the implementation of Open Court scripted curriculum—which led to the disappearance of play in kindergarten classrooms.

Open Court: Scripting Curricula in Response to No Child Left Behind

Approved for use under the federal NCLB act, the Open Court program appealed to districts as the most effective reading program for improving literacy skills among economically disadvantaged students with the lowest standardized

test scores.²⁴ Many districts adopted Open Court to improve Adequate Yearly Progress in students' annual test scores mandated by NCLB in low-performing schools. Open Court used direct instruction, a method characterized by its emphasis on academics, strong teacher direction and control, time management, and expectations of improved student achievement.²⁵ In addition to prescribed and sequenced lessons, Open Court also required fidelity to a prescribed arrangement of classrooms including bulletin-board content and furniture and desk layout.

Research about perceptions of Open Court reveals that new teachers rate it more positively and that "the more experience the teacher has, whether it is overall teaching experience or experience using Open Court, the less likely he/she is to view Open Court to be effective for his/her students."²⁶ The predetermined timing and sequencing of lessons requires less planning, which may appeal to novice teachers overwhelmed by the challenges of learning complex jobs.²⁷ However, Open Court's predictability becomes problematic to teachers who gain experience, find their professional identities, seek professional growth, and prefer to adapt the curriculum to their students' individual needs and interests. As MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, and Palma describe, "the experiences of accomplished teachers who have earned graduate degrees, national board certifications, and teacher awards" are not rewarded by scripted curricula. Instead, "experienced teachers' specialized knowledge is ignored, and they are equated with novice and emergency credentialed teachers. . . . Teachers' craft is stagnated."²⁸ Lee, Ajayi, and Richards conclude that the scripted format of Open Court denies teachers their agency and decision making, depriving them of their fundamental role as professionals.²⁹ They describe Open Court as "out sourcing" teachers' professionalism to program designers and reducing teachers' function to mere "technicians."³⁰ Although many teachers accepted the reduction of their agency in implementing Open Court, others chose to subvert the program by critiquing, tweaking, risk taking, and calling for collective resistance.³¹

Several studies dispute Open Court's effectiveness.³² In fact, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) of the U.S. Department of Education's Institution of Education Sciences identifies only two valid and reliable studies from among 185 that examine the effects of the Open Court program on reading skills of beginning readers.³³ Combined, these two studies included 1,113 beginning readers in six states enrolled in first through third grades. The results of these two studies suggest the program "was found to have *potentially*" [emphasis added] positive effects on general reading achievement and comprehension for

beginning readers.” Even then, only one of the two studies met the institution’s methodological standards without reservations. As a result, despite Open Court’s widespread adoption, very little empirical evidence of its effectiveness exists.

Common Core State Standards: Shifting Tides

The Common Core State Standards initiative grew out of increasing pressure to align our nation’s historically diverse state curriculum systems with common standards that prepare students to compete in a global economy. The National Governors Association and the Chief State School Officers sponsored the development of CCSS in literacy and mathematics. CCSS authors designed guidelines for each grade, kindergarten through twelfth grade, to make all students who graduate high school academically qualified to enroll in college or enter the workforce. To date, forty-six states, the District of Columbia, four U.S. territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA, which operates schools on military bases), have adopted the standards. Minnesota, however, adopted only the English Language Arts standards. Four states—Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia—have not adopted Common Core. And, three states—Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina—withdraw after initially adopting the standards.

CCSS changed the focus of teaching by emphasizing skills like student collaboration, fluency with multimedia and technology, complex reasoning, problem solving, and communication. CCSS led to revisions in states’ systems of professional development, curriculum, assessment, and measures of accountability.³⁴ As a result, many states, including California, are working to transform their curricula, instruction, and assessment practices to align with CCSS. However, as we noted, four states³⁵ repealed the implementation of the standards for a variety of reasons. Critics listed a fear that CCSS reduced state sovereignty in favor of the federal government or of private, corporate, or philanthropic interests. Some states voiced concern about the way CCSS measured students’ achievements. Others were frustrated that they were not sufficiently involved in the design and implementation process. Many other critics worried about the increasingly partisan politics associated with CCSS use.

A section of the CCSS web site entitled “What is not covered by the standards” mentions play briefly: “The standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach. For instance, the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expecta-

tions in this document.”³⁶ Because the mention of play seemed so cursory, many educators and advocacy professionals concerned with early childhood worried about the implementation of the CCSS, which spawned passionate debates among experts across the field.³⁷ Those opposed to CCSS feared that imposing the standards would further decouple developmentally appropriate and play-based instruction from early learning experiences for young children (those in prekindergarten—PreK—through third grade). William Crain’s “Common Core Pushes Abstract Topics Too Early,” addresses this very concern.³⁸ The Alliance for Childhood and Defending the Early Years are two of the more prominent national organizations voicing concerns that the CCSS will increase the stress associated with high-stakes testing. These groups also spotlight the pressure early-childhood educators feel to emphasize mastery of discrete skills instead of children’s social-emotional development or children’s engagement in learning.³⁹

During the two years of our study, the district developed a new strategic plan placing the CCSS at the center of its instructional reform efforts. The district’s 0–8 coordinator responsible for the teachers we studied strongly advocated for developmentally appropriate environments for early-childhood students and urged that they be given at least two hours of child-directed free play daily. Committed as she was to the CCSS, the coordinator did not consider students’ play time to conflict with best practices in early childhood. Instead, she believed that the goals of the CCSS—problem solving, communication, flexible thinking—mirrored the skills and dispositions children learn through self-initiated play. It was her convictions about play and its place in the implementation of the CCSS that informed the teacher training program described in this article.

Research Questions

We designed the study for a large and diverse urban public school system that had used Open Court scripted curricula for more than a decade before changing to a curriculum that included child-initiated play. Three questions guided our research: What do Transitional Kindergarten (TK) teachers in a large urban school district who have spent so much time using a scripted, teacher-directed curriculum learn in the process of implementing child-initiated play in their classrooms? What challenges do they experience throughout this process? And how do they respond to these challenges?

Method

Research Design

We designed this project as a holistic case study conducted in a large, urban public school district that offered instruction in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade.⁴⁰ We defined the population of the study as teachers of Transitional Kindergarten (TK) in the district who participated in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) dedicated to the study of play (Play PLC). The time period of the case study encompassed two academic years, beginning August 2012 and concluding June 2014.

Setting

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT. Lincoln Unified School District,⁴¹ where the study took place, is a very large urban school district in northern California, situated in one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. During the 2013–2014 school year, 71.4 percent of the students qualified for free and reduced lunches, and 49 percent spoke a language other than English in their homes. The school district sits in a city consistently listed as one of the most violent in California and in the nation. Many students, therefore, witness violence first hand in their neighborhoods, and almost all know the impact of high crime rates in the community.

Shortly after NCLB became law, the state placed the district in receivership because of financial difficulties caused by declining enrollment and students transferring to charter schools. The district identified many schools for restructuring under NCLB and emphasized three strategies for improving the lowest-performing schools: using data to adjust instruction to the needs of students and to state standards; identifying accountability goals for schools; and implementing Open Court (first piloted during the 1999–2000 school year as part of a federal Reading First grant). The district adopted a pacing guide for Open Court that required all teachers within each grade to teach the same lesson on the same day, a practice described as “increasing accountability” because principals could observe teachers and evaluate their level of fidelity to the prescribed curriculum.

A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN. In 2011 the district began implementing a new strategic plan that brought sweeping changes to the curricula and teacher instruction. Inspired by the district’s commitment to CCSS and to prepare teachers and students for CCSS assessments, schools began shifting away from Open Court and scripted curricula. Instead, the new strategic plan emphasized

PreK–12 core curriculum skills aligned to college- and career-ready standards and a balanced approach to literacy. Further, the district worked to become a full-service system with schools that served the whole child and emphasized social-emotional and physical health, family support and engagement, and community efforts to address health and social inequities. Discussions about serving the whole child also led several district administrators, including the 0–8 coordinator, to implement more developmentally appropriate practices, including the reinsertion of child-initiated play into the early-childhood classrooms.

TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN. Adding to the complexities of the district's transition to CCSS, balanced literacy, full-community schools, and the reintroduction of play into the curriculum, California's Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010,⁴² created a new grade in the state's public schools called Transitional Kindergarten (TK).⁴³ Under the law, the kindergarten entry date shifted from December 2 to September 1, mandating that all children had to be five years of age to enter a California kindergarten classroom. The state created TK for children with birthdays between September and December who were no longer eligible to enter kindergarten under the new legislation. California law required TK teachers to have multiple-subject credentials, which made most, if not all, preschool teachers ineligible to teach TK. The state envisioned TK as a bridge between high-quality, early-childhood (preschool) practices and kindergarten-level CCSS standards. Although many private TK programs have existed in California for decades, this was the first time the state public school system dedicated a grade to the youngest kindergarten children. In most other states, this age group enrolls in state PreKs. The district examined in our study opened its first TK classrooms in August 2012 ($n=11$) and by fall 2014, the number of TKs had more than doubled ($n=26$). District administrators made the decision to integrate play as a central component of the curriculum and instruction in all TK classrooms requiring two hours each day for open-ended, child-initiated play—one hour in the morning and another in the afternoon.

A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY DEDICATED TO PLAY. District administrators realized that many of the credentialed teachers teaching TK in the school system would not have formal training in child development, in the role of play in children's learning and development, or in the role of a teacher in a play-based classroom. Two reasons account for these circumstances: First, the mandated use of scripted curricula for over a decade had eliminated play from the district's classrooms for its youngest students; In addition, the required coursework for California's multiple-subjects, K–6 credential and the Adminis-

trative Services credential for school and district administrators does not include early-childhood and child-development content.⁴⁴ As a result, the district created professional development opportunities to help TK teachers hone the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to create their new classrooms. Specifically, the district offered teachers observation days at a well-established, play-based child-care center, at a professional learning community focused specifically on incorporating play in the curriculum, and at coaching sessions that took place in the teachers' own classrooms.

The district's first Professional Learning Community focusing on play began in 2012 when a public-private partnership developed between the district and Sunnybrook Center, a local, private, child-care center accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The codirectors of the center are widely recognized early-childhood experts and devoted play advocates. They independently raised private funds to support the district's Play PLC. These funds paid for release time for the TK teachers to attend monthly PLC meetings and to support two play coaches who helped TK teachers redesign their classrooms and strengthen their skills in supporting child-initiated play. TK teachers visited Sunnybrook Center twice a year to observe the type of play-based environment they would create in their own classrooms. During these meetings, TK teachers observed the children, infant to late preschool, and reflected with the Play PLC facilitators on what they noticed and how their observations could inform their own classrooms and instruction.

The Play PLC met one afternoon each month for three hours. During Year 1, the PLC met at Sunnybrook Center and various TK teachers' classrooms. During Year 2, the meetings convened at district administration buildings. Over time, the PLC format shifted, but generally it began with a brief checking-in for the teachers about their successes and challenges in the classroom. Additional elements included lectures on topics related to play and child development, discussions from *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play* (2011), watching short DVD clips related to children's play, discussing various handouts, and time for teachers to discuss curriculum together.⁴⁵

Two individuals facilitated the PLC—Madeleine, a director from Sunnybrook Center, and Laura, a former preschool and elementary school teacher—who in addition to facilitating the PLC also worked as a TK play coach. The district 0–8 coordinator and early-childhood education (ECE) director often participated in monthly PLC planning meetings. They and other district administrators also attended many of the Play PLC meetings. However, staff turnover

and role reassignments within the district altered the participants over the course of the two-year study.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS. During Year 1 (2012–2013), eleven TK teacher participated in the Play PLC. During Year 2 (2013–2014), the number of participants expanded to include Pre-Kindergarten (PreK), Special Education (SPED) PreK, and TK teachers. In the beginning of Year 2, attendance was strong ($n=38$, PreK=15, SPED PreK=5, TK=16, K=1, First=1). However, by the end of Year 2, participation decreased significantly to 8 (PreK=2, SPED PreK=2, TK=4). The decline resulted from several factors, including some principals' lack of support for teachers' participation, teachers' confidence that they had already learned the content in Year 1 (with nothing new added in Year 2), and teachers' desire to participate in another district PLC emphasizing balanced literacy. Additional study participants included the 0–8 coordinator, a district TK manager, a district director of ECE, one teacher on special assignment in ECE, two Play PLC facilitators, and the two TK play coaches.

Data Collection

PLAY PLC FIELD NOTES. Two members of the research team, including author Julie Nicholson, completed comprehensive ethnographic field notes of each of the Play PLC meetings over the course of the two-year study. The notes included information about the arrangement of the environment and use of space, organization of time, exchanges of dialogue, and such nonverbal communication as gesturing, making faces, and passing notes. We also collected artifacts introduced by teachers, facilitators, and administrators including handouts, resource books, and posters. We compared both sets of field notes and discussed them after each meeting. We directed any questions or requests for clarifications to the PLC facilitators and district administrators.

TEACHER EVALUATIONS AND FEEDBACK. PLC facilitators asked teachers to complete written reflections at the end of each meeting. In these notations, teachers described ideas the meeting inspired, questions the meeting content raised, and any changes they considered implementing in their classroom over the next month suggested by PLC discussions. We analyzed teacher evaluation data collected in the months of October, January, and May over the course of two years.

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS (N=15). We completed semistructured interviews with teachers and district administrators participating in the Play

PLC. We asked eight teachers (PreK, SPED PreK, and TK) to discuss their ideas about the role of play in their classrooms and their experiences participating in the PLC. We interviewed three administrators (0–8 coordinator, TK manager, teacher on special assignment in ECE), both PLC facilitators, and two coaches about the specific skills and knowledge they wanted teachers to gain and what they actually observed about the teachers. That is, where did they see progress and challenges.

COACHING DOCUMENTATION FORMS. TK teachers (2012–2013, $n=11$; and 2013–2014, $n=16$) and PreK teachers (2013–2014, $n=9$) worked individually with a play coach over the course of one year to strengthen their skills and knowledge related to implementing a play-based curriculum. The play coach observed teachers in their classrooms once a month for approximately two hours during children's free choice or play time. We followed classroom observations with time for the coach and teacher to meet together so teachers could reflect on their teaching and set goals for future learning and professional growth. At the end of each coaching session, the coach completed a form documenting the key topics of the discussions, challenges and questions from the teacher, suggestions from the play coach, and the goals both teachers and play coaches set together to work on before the next coaching session. Coaches assigned each teacher a number, and to maintain confidentiality and trust in the teacher-coach relationship, the researchers knew only the numbers and never the names associated with the coaching records. Data analyzed included coaching forms for monthly coaching sessions for the first year of the study.

TEACHER SURVEYS. We distributed a survey to all teachers participating in the Play PLC to gather information about their attitudes and experiences and the impact and sustainability of classroom instructional practices related to their PLC participation. We designed the survey questions to be closed ended using a four-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree). Items about play included "Play helps children to express their feelings," "I do not think that children learn important skills by playing," "Play can help children develop better thinking abilities," and "Families in my classroom think that children learn important skills by playing." Although we initially planned on having fall and spring comparative data, logistical complexities permitted only one survey, which took place at the January 2014 PLC meeting. A total of eighteen teachers ($n=7$ PreK, $n=9$ TK, and $n=2$ PreK/TK combined) completed the survey.

Data Analysis

We entered the data into ALTASti, a qualitative data analysis program. We completed a multistep process of coding the data similar to the interactive first and second method described by Saldaña⁴⁶ using both inductive and deductive approaches.⁴⁷ We analyzed the data initially using an in vivo coding strategy to capture the participants' voices and perspectives. Next, we used descriptive coding to surface the main topics represented in the data. During our second-cycle coding process, we used a variety of strategies to refine our understandings of the patterns emerging throughout the first-cycle coding process: Pattern coding allowed us to group our first-cycle codes into larger categories with associated subtopics; Focused coding helped us determine the most salient or frequent codes within and across data sets; Elaborative coding allowed us to deductively code using a priori concepts drawn from the research literature (e.g., teachers' roles, and barriers in system reform); And structural coding allowed us to use our two research questions to guide data analysis directly.⁴⁸

Throughout the first- and second-cycle coding process for our qualitative data analysis, four research team members met weekly to discuss the data, construct and compare the codes emerging in our analysis, and discuss discrepancies we found in our analytical codes and categories. Analysis of our data began immediately after data collection and continued throughout the project. We worked as a group to discuss and analyze the data until we all agreed on at least 60 percent of the data (all of Year 1 data and the first month of Year 2). At this point, we had confidence that we had alignment in our understanding of the definitions for each code listed in our coding manual and our analytical procedures. For the remainder of the data collected in Year 2, two research assistants coded data independently and met biweekly to verify their coding and complete formal reliability checks. We consistently achieved interrater reliability at 90 percent for all of the checks completed throughout their data analysis process. Julie Nicholson provided the final validation of the data analysis when she randomly selected 10 percent of the Year 2 data to code at the end of the project. This served to audit the reliability of data independently coded by the two research assistants. The 90 percent agreement further confirmed the results from previous reliability checks. We completed analytic memos throughout the analytical process to examine more closely the patterns of evidence that emerged over the course of the study. We analyzed quantitative data collected in the PLC surveys

using SPSS and Excel to compute descriptive statistics for survey items and participants' demographic information.

Several methods strengthened the internal validity and reliability of the study. These included the use of data triangulation (extensive field notes, interviews, surveys, PLC evaluation forms, and coaching forms), researcher triangulation (two researchers gathered ethnographic field notes, and we compared and contrasted these notes each month), the extended two-year period in which the data collection took place, and the systematic coding process we have described. Further, we allowed field notes and interview transcripts to be available to all participants as a form of "member checking" with an open invitation to provide feedback and requests for revisions for any information they determined to be misrepresented or inaccurate. Additionally, we made a midproject presentation to district administrators and the Sunnybrook codirectors with a summary of our emerging findings. We invited their input about our interpretation of the data at the conclusion of the presentation.

Findings

Answering the Research Questions

Although the evidence collected over a two-year period reveals a wide range of information regarding teachers' learning about children's play and their own roles in a play-based classroom, four main themes emerged from our analysis of the data: Teachers strengthened their understanding of child development; They realized that arranging the classrooms intentionally to support children's play was essential; They discovered that children need social skills to play skillfully; And they learned that supporting children's play in the classroom over time was commensurate with learning to guide and scaffold students' social-emotional health and the development of social-emotional skills. These themes represent the findings for both years of teachers' participation in the PLC. However, to provide a more comprehensive and contextualized description of teachers' learning to incorporate child-initiated play in their classrooms, we have chosen to focus on reporting findings from only Year 1. Reporting on three time periods during the course of the 2012–2013 academic year (fall, winter, spring), we describe highlights from what teachers learned and talked about as they worked to transition from the use of Open Court to supporting children's play in their TK classrooms.

Fall 2012

TK TEACHERS RESPOND TO CRITICISM. Throughout the fall, the TK teachers discussed how their colleagues marginalized them because of the integration of play into the TK curricula. They described having to endure comments from colleagues that diminished their professionalism and signified their teaching as easier than working with students in other grades. Because the TK teachers had been former grade-level colleagues with some of the same teachers making these comments, they were surprised and upset about having to defend the integrity of their work in TK. For example, early in the fall, Heather, a PLC facilitator, commented during a meeting, “Play-based learning is deep intellectual work. People think it’s just little kids.” This prompted a passionate response from Cassie, a TK teacher. She shared a story about a sixth-grade teacher who mocked her work, “Oh you have it so easy.” Cassie explained that she learned to reply, “Come down to my room. Come on down. See how easy it is. I might make it look easy, but you know, you’ll see.”

LEARNING TO MANAGE LARGE CLASS SIZES. In the first months, teachers expressed their concern with the large class sizes they had to manage. They did not have aides, and very few had any parent or adult volunteers to help. They voiced tensions between the district’s mandate for classrooms arranged like play-based preschools and its consigning them to the adult-child ratios of elementary-grade classrooms.

MARJORIE: When we talked about this TK thing and I agreed to do it, we were told class size would be twenty-two. I got my twenty-fifth student today. I’m beat and I’m exhausted. Twenty-two, twenty-three I didn’t complain. Twenty-four, twenty-five, I’m stretched. I went home and cried last night. I don’t have desks or tables.

Cassie: I think the hardest thing is that these students who are coming in so late haven’t even been to preschool which is really difficult for me.

ALEX: My principal said I will probably get twenty-seven next year. If you can relay that message to the principals, [they] need to hear from us as a collective that we are stressed.

FRANCESCA: It seems like the district is treating TK like it’s PreK, but they aren’t giving us the support to be successful. . . . They want us to teach in a style of PreK. . . . There are a lot of issues [with TK], and it seems like they are not taking it seriously.⁴⁹

FOSTERING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT. In the fall, teachers emphasized the importance of supporting children's social and emotional development. Many of the teachers had students with challenging behaviors that left them frustrated during play time when these children continuously disrupted the play of their peers (e.g., knocking their blocks down and taking away their dress-up clothes). Tasha articulated the stress of teaching her children with challenging behavior and how this improved when she focused on their social emotional needs. She shared what she learned in a PLC meeting: "I do a lot of social-emotional work with my kids. . . . I do a lot of sentence frames with them, 'Today I am feeling blank, because blank.' I have started giving him [a boy with challenging behavior] really positive feedback for anything and everything, 'I like your smiling.' It's baby steps every day. For the most part, I'm not thinking about running away and screaming any longer."⁵⁰

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS. In the fall, the TK teachers also learned the importance of arranging their classrooms to facilitate children's learning through play. Jalynn reported that her coach helped her make changes to the organization of her blocks and dramatic-play areas, which markedly increased the quality of the children's play experiences. Talking to her play coach at a PLC meeting, she said, "After your visit last week, the blocks and the dress-up are more appropriate. We all sat down and had a family dinner. It was so productive, I almost cried."⁵¹ The TK teachers also learned to analyze and select toys for their classrooms. Laura, the play coach, focused on this topic during her initial coaching for TK teachers.

Teachers [had] so much stuff out in their classroom that the children really couldn't play, and the stuff that was out was sort of inappropriate. So the play was wild or chaotic, because the teachers didn't understand how the toys stimulated the play. [We worked to] take it up to a little more sophisticated level. . . . "I am going to put these kind of toys out because I want children to have this kind of a learning experience" and "I am teaching social skills, so I am not going to put toys that [encourage] fights in my block area because I am trying to keep the fighting down."⁵²

TEACHING WITHOUT A CURRICULUM. When California enacted the Kindergarten Readiness Act, it created TK as a new grade, but the law included no mandates for TK curriculum, standards, or assessments. Nor did it provide

funding for the professional development of teachers. This left each school district in the state very little time to marshal resources and make decisions about the way TK classrooms would be run. The district in our study focused its attention and energy on the implementation of multiple new initiatives in the first year of TK, including a balanced approach to literacy, the integration of social-emotional learning, support for dual-language learners, and creating better strategies for engaging families. District administrators did, however, decide not to select one of the typical play-based curricula used in preschools (e.g., Creative Curriculum, Tools of the Mind, HighScope, Project Approach) or the academic curricula being used in their kindergartens. Choosing a curriculum for TK, instead, became a challenging political decision that the district did not resolve until spring 2015. Thus, as the TK teachers worked to learn about children's play and their roles in supporting play in their classrooms, they found themselves with few curricular anchors to guide them. District administrators encouraged teachers to "follow the children's lead" and become "bridges between preschool and kindergarten" when the teachers asked them for direction and guidance. As Cassie, a TK teacher, described it: "TK is the gap, you know, between. There is a whole bunch of stuff written on preschool, there is a whole bunch of stuff written on kindergarten and first grade. But there is nothing for the gap, so we have to figure it out ourselves. So we have to look at the preschool foundations and the kindergarten standards. . . . We are kind of left to figure that out on our own."⁵³

Maria, the site administrator for SPED PreK teachers in the district, described this gap as a problem for teachers. She explained, "The focus that we really need to be heading in is finding a good curriculum for us to purchase, that would be accommodating for all students. . . . Because right now, Open Court was kind of taken away, and we are kind of in this limbo."⁵⁴ Marjorie, reflecting back on her first year of teaching TK, remembers entering into the new grade level with no curricular roadmap to guide her: "Last year was really hard, because it was inventing a new grade level, and we had no idea what it would look like. Like, what is this TK thing? . . . You had PD [professional development] and oh, 'Here is play' and 'Here is what you are supposed to do,' and a coach coming in your room, and it was so much. But this year it was just like, 'Okay, I got this, I totally got this.'"⁵⁵ The PLC facilitators said teachers found the uncertainty stressful and found it difficult to concentrate on the planned agenda at the first few PLC meetings. As private contractors, the facilitators had no input into district decision making about curriculum selection. Laura described the impact:

At our very first PLC . . . the teachers were stressed out because they had not received very adequate summer training, and their materials hadn't come yet, their furniture hadn't come. They were stressed about a lot of things and didn't know what they were supposed to be doing because they just were kind of thrown in and they were like, "I don't have an aide" and "I have too many four-year-olds running around. I don't know what to do." And I am up there trying to teach them stuff, and they are like, "I don't want that, I want some help."⁵⁶

Marjorie explained that shifting from a completely scripted curriculum that told teachers what and how to teach throughout the day, everyday, to a play-based classroom without a formal curriculum proved to be too dramatic a change for many teachers. Although Marjorie came to appreciate the openness that child-directed play allowed and found it emancipating to be free of a mandated curriculum, she felt that many of her TK colleagues wished for a return to the prescriptiveness of a curriculum like Open Court:

I think some teachers are, like, "We need a pacing guide" and "I need to know what lesson to teach on this day." And then there are the people on my side that are like, "Please don't give me anything, I am having so much fun doing what I am doing." So the district isn't saying, "This is what you are teaching this month, and here is your [curriculum]," which is great, but some people need that. So I am afraid that the district is going to start telling us, "Okay, here is your curriculum, here is what you need to be doing, here, here, here," which, for me, that takes all the fun out of it. Because, like, people want the Open Court days. "Here is your pacing guide. Here, teach this letter today, teach this, teach that." . . . My first four years of teaching using Open Court, the kids were never like, "Read to us, read that story again," because Open Court was like so culturally irrelevant and boring stories and not for their emotional, social-development level. I read now what I want to read, and the kids are like, "Read it again, read another story, read that one!" And that is creating a love of reading. So, I am afraid the district will all of a sudden be like, "But we need to know what you guys are doing in there." . . . A lot of TK teachers are totally freaked out not having a curriculum and not having them actually telling us, "This is what you need to teach."⁵⁷

FALL COACHING RECORDS. Coaching records from the fall reflected additional evidence of the new ideas and skills teachers learned to support their students' play. Some teachers, for example, asked children about their own ideas rather than making suggestions, removed battery-operated toys to eliminate the distractions they caused, taught procedures for play time and clean-up routines, simplified the play materials provided (especially not having everything on the tables at once and rotating toys to maintain novelty for children), found play partners for students with challenging behaviors, listened to children's ideas about what props to add to the dramatic-play area, and taught children how to play with blocks. The PLC facilitators provided teachers with strategies to encourage children's play even in their large classes—for example, restricting the number of play centers open at the same time and easing crowding in the block area by opening up another cars-and-blocks area on the opposite side of the room. Some teachers worked with the coach to identify differences between direct instruction, where the teacher uses a “teacher voice” to address the entire class at once, and individual conversations with children during self-initiated play, where the teacher speaks to an individual child using a “private voice.”

Winter 2013

NOT INTERRUPTING CHILDREN'S PLAY. By January, teachers became more aware of the need to protect children's opportunities to engage in child-initiated play. This brought with it an increased understanding of their responsibility to support, but not interrupt, children's play. Marjorie realized that her desire for order and cleanliness became a barrier to her students engaging in play. She explained, “I was interrupting my children's play by being psycho about how clean it was. ‘This doesn't go here, why are there blankets here?’ And I really thought about that and had to let the mess go until the end of the play. I was interrupting their play . . . [I don't] any more.” Cassie also learned to stop interrupting her students. “I had thought about how hollering from across the room can interrupt their play. Everyone looks over to the children I'm yelling at.”⁵⁸

EXTENDING CHILDREN'S PLAY. At a point in the first year, teachers regularly talked about what they did to extend children's play in their classrooms. They brought photos and other artifacts of their successes to share with their colleagues at the monthly meetings. For example, they discussed incorporating artifacts into the dramatic-play area that reflected children's interests, creating opportunities for their students to explore and experiment with science materi-

als, and adding pens and paper to the block area. Several teachers mentioned that introducing play materials at recess, such as bins of manipulatives, had transformed a stressful, chaotic time—one that left many students in trouble or in tears—into a more productive and safe experience.

Teachers improved their understanding of the connections between children's play and their social-emotional development. For example, Nela explained that her school experienced an influx of indigenous Mayan families who spoke Mam and wore traditional skirts and huipil blouses to school. She recounted that the Spanish-speaking students in her classroom marginalized the Mayan children in ways that mirrored the discriminatory treatment of indigenous people in Latin America. She asked her colleagues and the PLC facilitators what she could do to integrate the Mayan children's culture into her classroom play materials. She also wondered how she could strengthen the children's relationships through play and eliminate the discriminatory behavior she observed.

THE COMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS. In recent times, philanthropists, corporate businesses, and nonprofit organizations around the country have increased the donations they offer to public school systems.⁵⁹ Chronically underfunded urban schools need the funding and resources that these partners provide. We observed this phenomenon occurring within the school district we studied. For example, a private philanthropy funded the TK coordinator position, local service clubs provided classroom supplies, and Sunnybrook Center raised money to fund the monthly meetings, coaching sessions, and district substitutes so the TK teachers could spend the time to participate in the Play PLC.

The lack of experience the Sunnybrook Center directors and the PLC facilitators had working in the school district exposed a complication of the public-private partnership. Even though the district and the child-care center are both located in similar areas of the city, Sunnybrook served primarily middle-class families and had lower teacher-child ratios and smaller class sizes than the public school classrooms. Sunnybrook supplied one adult for eight children, while the district TK teachers worked in classrooms where one adult taught twenty-two to twenty-nine students. As a private facility, the child-care center had no legal mandates to follow state standards, although it worked to maintain its NAEYC accreditation. Further, Sunnybrook did not face relentless pressure to test its students and close achievement gaps that the TK teachers faced at all times. These differences led some of the TK teachers to worry about how they would implement the advice of the PLCs. Marjorie articulated her

concerns when a private partner became responsible for the district teacher's professional development.

Well, it would be nice if the Play PLC was put on by people who actually teach in [the district] and who teach kids who come to school hungry, dad in jail, mom got arrested the night before, ten lockdowns in a year, things like that. I just think that Sunnybrook has great things that we can take out of it, but for them to be telling us what to do, they have no idea what we do. They have three students for one adult at their school, so it is easy for them to sit there and say, "Oh, I am just observing." And for us, like, when our kids are playing, we are walking around, you know, putting out fires all over because we have twenty-two, twenty-five, twenty-nine kids. So I think a lot of us just feel that it is a very different environment and what they say, we can take things out of it, but they really don't know what it is like to teach in an urban school.⁶⁰

The teachers worried that the pedagogies the PLC advised might not work with the needs of their students. For example, PLC facilitators favored a developmental approach, allowing children to cultivate skills based on their individual timetables, whereas several TK teachers favored intervention and a more direct instruction to help compensate for lack of learning opportunities at home and in other venues.⁶¹ As Marjorie explained:

I think they see things a lot differently, they think "don't do any letter instruction" and all that, because the kids are just going to get it, and they are too young [for direct instruction]. But our kids aren't going to "just get it." Our kids aren't getting it at home, they are not getting all of the things that a lot of the kids who go to Sunnybrook will get at home when they are four. So that's why we are doing it. [The coach] walks in my room and she almost has a heart attack, [she thinks] it's too print rich, like they even made a point of writing on the board at one of the last PLCs, "No labels." I have labels on everything, so there are a lot of things that we really disagree about. . . . My beliefs are in having a very print rich environment. And so to be told, like, pretty much to my face, "You are doing it all wrong and you shouldn't have labels, and you need to cover up your library, and you need to do this

and that,” is just like, it didn’t work.⁶²

Just as Marjorie described tensions with her in-class coach, Vicki reported similar challenges in the PLC. Many times the PLC facilitators showed videos made at Sunnybrook that featured the center’s model play environments and that presented strategies for encouraging teacher-child interactions, strengthening literacy development through play, and arranging the classroom to support children’s play. These films are used in a wide range of professional-development settings as examples of early-childhood best practices. However, the TK teachers did not find them to be reflective of their realities and experiences. As a result, the TK teachers enjoyed the films but also felt guilty and sad after watching them. The following exchange took place after teachers watched a ten-minute clip in the PLC about the importance of relationships with children. Laura, as PLC facilitator and coach, asked a debriefing question.

LAURA: What are your reactions to the kind of things you are seeing?

MARJORIE: I think my classroom, if I had one-to-eight ratio would be a completely different place. I have twenty-six children, and I’m by myself. These are middle-class kids with support from home [She crosses her arms and looks angry.]

VICKI: Watching this makes me feel bad. We are by ourselves all day with children who do not have support and training at home. It’s great to get ideas at times and yet, there are other days that it is better to not get ideas. I got good things from it [the video]. I get it, but I also understand what Marjorie is saying. A lot of times we try to call someone, but nobody will be there to help us. We have to think on our feet, and what we do may not be developmentally appropriate, and it makes us feel guilty. That’s the slippery slope of public school.

KENDRA: I think we really do need to understand that we are giving our kids a foundation. While they may not get things at home, they are getting school training and by getting this, they are going to be better in the long run.⁶³

As Kendra worked to reframe the focus of the conversation, Vicki, feeling self-disparagement after watching the film, began a quiet moment of talking and affirmation which led to her colleagues chiming in with their own proclamations of support.

VICKI: I am not a failure, I am not a failure. We are really hard on ourselves.

KENDRA: In the beginning of September, I said, “Hell no!” [to teaching a play-based curriculum]. And when I look at the DVD, I can see, “Wow, I am doing that with twenty-two kids by myself.” I can see some of the things that I’ve gotten from Sunnybrook and examples . . . even with my twenty-two and not having assistants, I say, I am doing that! . . . I want to pat myself on the back. . . . We have to be some amazing teachers to be doing this. It’s amazing that you are still here [lots of laughter].

VICKI: If you expect yourself to be like Sunnybrook tomorrow, you are living in a dream world. [laughter] I have to remind myself that, it’s Ok if I don’t look like that.

JALYNN: I don’t mean to be the mother superior here. RELAX people. You are learning, I am learning. . . . Enjoy the children and enjoy what you are learning. . . . Be good to yourselves and realize that you are doing a good thing even for those kids who don’t get the home training. . . . You have to tell those kids that they are the most important thing to you. . . . I listen to them [PLC facilitators] and I say, “Breathe.” OK? [huge laughter]. . . . I’m enjoying watching the children have fun.⁶⁴

The supplies many local organizations purchased for the TK teachers to use in their classrooms also reflected complications that result from public-private partnerships in public education. Although the school district had sufficient facilities they could dedicate to TK classrooms, they had little to no funding to fill the classrooms with supplies like toys and play materials long disappeared from the district’s kindergarten classrooms. Many community organizations, eager to help, offered supplies, an action that was easy for them to mobilize and accomplish. However, their enthusiasm was not matched by any professional knowledge in selecting appropriate educational materials. Laura, one of the coaches, recounted this discovery and how it became an important teaching moment to discuss with the TK teachers.

And the donations they got were not helpful. [They gave] all the TK classrooms toys, but it was a group of men who just had a field day at

Toys R Us. So it was just a bunch of crazy stuff . . . inappropriate for school . . . G.I. Joe, action figures from cartoons, coloring books. . . . You could just see these folks, good-hearted folks, but it was like going to a Christmas drive, you know? . . . One TK teacher said “Oh, cool,” and she put the toys out for everybody. And when I went to observe, the kids were fighting with action figures. It was pretty sad, and so I had to talk to her. “You are the teacher and you decide what goes in this room, you don’t just put in random things,” I said. “You know, either give the [toys] to Goodwill, or send them home with kids you think need them, but these don’t belong in your classroom.”⁶⁵

The partnership between the district and Sunnybrook Center developed with sound reasoning from shared goals. The district had a desire to train its teachers in child development and play although it did not have the financial resources or personnel to do so. Sunnybrook Center had the requisite expertise and a desire to work with the teachers, and it independently secured the financial resources. The TK teachers learned a tremendous amount in the PLC. However, forming a partnership between a private early-childhood organization and a large public school district—governed and funded differently and with different regulatory structures and instructional goals—was challenging for all those involved. Bridging traditional early-childhood systems with public schooling creates complexities and roadblocks to overcome⁶⁶

WINTER COACHING RECORDS. By winter, the coaching records indicated that teachers felt more confident about their capacities to work effectively with TK students, to facilitate play-based curriculum, and to set up age-appropriate routines. Teachers organized their classrooms more clearly with fewer materials, they included spaces for small groups, and they could now see the entire classroom space while observing their students. They reported their need for more training in observational skills. They also wanted additional strategies for helping children resolve conflicts and for redirecting students who wandered off during play time. Finally, they requested ideas for redirecting children’s gun play and play fighting like monsters and aliens.

One teacher charted the play of each child during a week noting who they played with and what they chose to play. Another worked on “unteaching” a routine in which children raised their hands to ask permission to change play centers. A third teacher, struggling with too much play fighting, observed her students using the toys and removed several she determined to be problems.

Spring 2013

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S INTERESTS THROUGH PLAY. By spring 2013, the TK teachers regularly used their observations to make immediate and responsive adjustments in their curricula. Kendra explained how she supported one student's interest in dinosaurs through play, "I have a child who loves dinosaurs. At lunch we found an iPad and looked at fossils. I got some Play-Doh and took a dinosaur's foot and made a print. I gave it to the little boy, and we just kept talking about dinosaurs."⁶⁷

RESPONDING TO TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN'S PLAY. In the springtime, teachers had a better understanding of the connections between children's play and their social-emotional health. Specifically, the teachers appreciated that children use play to organize and make sense of their experiences, especially those that overwhelm, frighten, or confuse them. For example, Cassie reported that 911 calls appeared more frequently in her students' pretend play, so she added police uniforms in her classroom's dramatic-play area. She observed the children pretending to make "a lot of 911 calls and the police were coming to take the children away." Knowing that one of her students had recently witnessed a similar incident at home, Cassie understood that this child used play to make sense of this unsettling experience. She explained to her colleagues, "So, I was like, ok, let's bring out the police uniform and let them play."⁶⁸

By April, the teachers reported in the PLC meetings that they had shared tools and strategies, including the use of play, with their colleagues who taught other grades to help them encourage social-emotional health in their own students. Marjorie described how upper-grade children came to her TK classroom when they felt dysregulated and angry. She used play to help them calm down, and she would send them back to their classrooms with notes that explained the role of play in social-emotional health to their teachers. She explained:

Two boys were having a fist fight in another classroom. One was taken out by a security guard. They came into my room. I put them together to put a puzzle together, then they went to play with the Play-Doh, and by the time they got to the LEGOs, they were having so much fun. I took a picture and gave it to their teacher and it said, "We can play together."⁶⁹

Because many of the students lived in neighborhoods with high levels of

poverty, crime, and violence, these themes regularly permeated the children's talk and play in the TK classrooms. The TK teachers appreciated the PLC where they could discuss their observations and ask for help in learning how to respond. Field notes from the beginning of the project document that violence, as a theme, emerged early and remained constant for the teachers as they learned how to support child-directed play in their classrooms. The November 2012 PLC field notes reflect that Penny asked her colleagues if she should allow guns and violence in the children's play. She explains: "OK, I have something for the group. I have a little boy who was in a gun fight when he was young. He has his anger problems, and during recess, he tries to play guns. We had a visitor from an African country with a lot of genocide, and she felt that the boys in her country were using gun play to process it. My question to all of you is, do you allow gun play or is it no-no?"⁷⁰

A few months later during the January 2013 PLC, several teachers shared stories about their students' exposure to violence and their concerns about how to respond. The PLC facilitator explained why these experiences arose in the children's play they observed and how they should respond. Leah, a TK teacher, told a story from her classroom: "I had someone pretending that she was dead [in the dramatic-play area]. So they carried her over to the doctors' area. . . . One of the students was telling me that her neighbor got killed. This is a five-year-old, and it was a family friend. This [other] little girl said, 'That's what happens sometimes when a boyfriend and girlfriend get tired with one another.'"

As a PLC facilitator, Laura encouraged the teachers to name the children's emotions and to show empathy to children who have experienced trauma. She reinforced the role of play in helping children to organize their life experiences, and she suggested that play can be a healing activity for children who are suffering.

LAURA: It's no coincidence that a dead person entered her play. One thing kids do is to use play to make sense of something that they don't understand. Or sometimes because they are trying to process a strong emotion that is attached to it and they don't know how to handle it.

PENNY: I have a child who had a major life trauma—her mother was shot and she saw it. . . . I read in the newspaper that she is the one that found her. She did bring it up in class one day, [but] it went over everyone's head. There was just one student who said "Did you know that her mother is dead?" I've told [the class] she's sad. They don't know what to do.

LAURA: They need those labels. The other children are feeling her sadness, and they don't know what to do with that sadness. And she doesn't know what to do either. She'll feel sad for a long time. You need to say to the class, "She is sad. When we're around [friends who are sad], we are kind to them, we make pictures for them, we let them rest. But we can also play hopscotch."

PENNY: She has trouble when things don't go her way.

LAURA: But that makes sense. It's mom who helps, and now mom is gone. You want to help the children put the words on it. So they can move forward.

ALEX: When a child is sad like that because of a trauma, is it okay to say, would you like to talk about what's making you sad?

LAURA: Yes, but be careful about what you say. Don't try to fix it or deny it. [You can say] "I'm so glad you told me. When you're at school we'll do everything to keep you safe."

MARJORIE: I think you should talk to her. You learn so much from your kids.

PENNY: You know what, I'm afraid of what she might say. She's happy often. But she's sad.

LAURA: It's probably going to be true all year. Just show up as your authentic self.⁷¹

As children use play as a context to organize and make sense of the experiences in their lives,⁷² the children in these TK classrooms used open-ended play as contexts to confront the experiences that frightened and traumatized them in their families, neighborhoods, and communities. The prescriptions of Open Court sanctioned fewer spaces for children to insert their life experiences into the formal curriculum of the classroom. Transitioning to the inclusion of daily open-ended play periods invited children's concerns, interests, and questions to become centrally located in the curriculum.

Creating contexts for play in early-childhood classrooms, where children often reveal a range of difficult experiences and emotions, requires specialized professional training for teachers in "trauma-informed" teaching.⁷³ Although this type of training has been reported as rare for teachers,⁷⁴ some innovative programs have succeeded in building trauma-informed classrooms and schools.⁷⁵

Adults, including teachers, play a critical role in a healing process for children exposed to trauma. Research suggests that "supportive, responsive rela-

tionships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress response” in children.⁷⁶ Providing trauma-informed training helps teachers be efficacious with students living in communities with high rates of child maltreatment and violence. Such instruction can also protect teachers from the consequences of working with traumatized children, including compassion fatigue and secondary traumatization.⁷⁷

MANAGING CHANGE WITHOUT ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT. Many teachers discussed challenges they faced because their principals lacked of knowledge about developmentally appropriate classrooms for four-year-olds. Traditional administrative training programs do not include coursework on child development or early-childhood education.⁷⁸ This knowledge gap prevented many principals from supporting their TK teachers adequately. As a result, some teachers reported being ignored by their principals during instructional rounds, while others experienced pressure to implement curriculum and instruction incongruent with the best practices of the PLC and coaching sessions. A small group of TK teachers took it upon themselves to educate their principals by providing them with the information they lacked on the importance of play for children’s learning and development. Cassie explained how she found herself making a case for the purposes, goals, and efficacy of her instructional choices to her principal:

The things that we learn in our PLC, we are taking back to our administrators and we are saying, “This is what I should be doing, and this is why I should be doing it.” . . . My principal is a little overwhelmed . . . [so I told her] “I know what I am doing for my kids is going to benefit them and make them a stronger student next year.” And maybe she [my principal] hasn’t got that yet. But I have been putting subtle hints into things like, “This is why we do the things that we do, when you come in, they are going to be playing, but the structure of their play is to get them on a stronger academic track. Look at them next year, or look at the students that are in kindergarten now who were in TK last year, and look at where they are on the benchmarks.”⁷⁹

The play facilitators and ECE administrators in the district advocated training principals on child development and best practices in early childhood. Further, the Sunnybrook codirectors included the cost of training administrators in their grant applications because they knew the importance of strengthening

the principals' understanding of play and its role in the classroom. However, the many reform initiatives the principals juggled—especially those in schools with the lowest test scores and highest levels of community violence—displaced early-childhood education as an administrators' priority. One of the directors at Sunnybrook believed that the principals' lack of training in early childhood also reflected the district leadership's lack of understanding about incorporating play pedagogically in children's academic and social-emotional learning. She explained:

We wrote these grants with time to meet individually with the principals and help them understand what is happening in the play, [but] we have never been able to make that happen, either because the principals are too busy, or whatever, the system doesn't seem to support it, and I know the principals are busy. I mean, I know they are. But I think that people don't understand that play is actually a way to teach, and so they think about play as just sort of recess, or like, the teachers having time out while the children play. Whereas in fact, of course, we are really teaching the teachers to teach through the children's play. . . . But people don't understand that. It is not in the sort of common knowledge base about how children learn and how to work with children [in public schools].⁸⁰

As evidenced in these narratives, the challenge of bringing administrators on board was not one of funding or of professional development. Instead, the problem came from the lack of urgency among district administrators. They just did not prioritize early childhood among the many other reform initiatives that demanded their time and focus. Decades of research on effective school change emphasizes the critical role that district leadership plays in successfully implementing and sustaining reforms.⁸¹ Teachers alone cannot affect change if they do not have the support of individuals responsible for their evaluations and job security. This was especially true in a district retracting from over a decade of excessive control and draconian evaluation that had removed play from kindergarten classrooms.

Information on early childhood is not a mandatory component of principal preparation or professional development for principals in most states. Only Illinois includes ECE content in its state licensure and accreditation process for

principals.⁸² Without comprehensive knowledge about early childhood, principals do not have the background to provide effective leadership and supervision for early-childhood teachers.⁸³ The Wallace Foundation identified this gap and called for changes in states' principal preparation systems to improve principals' understanding of early-childhood teaching and learning.⁸⁴

As the TK teachers worked to transform their classrooms from Open Court to play based—without the benefit of any state standards or curricula—they looked to their principals for guidance. A few teachers found support in being allowed to attend workshops and the PLC to learn about best practices for their TK classrooms. However, none of the teachers received anything akin to authentic instructional leadership from their principals, and many felt hindered by their principals' lack of understanding about early-childhood education. Decisions that principals made exemplified the problem. As the district added students to the TK classrooms without providing aides or additional forms of support, some classrooms ended the year with twenty-nine students. In other instances, principals' misunderstanding of child development led to them to misjudge what they should observe in classrooms. As Alex explained to Laura in one PLC, "My principal came in today looking for writing samples. Principals need to understand this better." Laura responded, "Drawing is prewriting." Alex responded, "I know, but principals don't understand this." Because the TK teachers' evaluations are in the hands of their principals, such lacunae in administrators' understanding do not bode well for teachers and their students.

TEACHERS APPRECIATE THEIR WORK. As the year came to a close, many of the TK teachers described the importance of their work and its positive effect on their students. They appreciated that children could acquire academic skills through play, that children did not need to be taught with a scripted curriculum using paper-and-pencil tasks, and that addressing the children's social-emotional needs was the linchpin for integrating play into their classrooms. Cassie explained: "I learned that in play, there is a lot of academic stuff involved, and you can really structure it to where it is not paper and pencil, it can be very academic, and that a lot of our kids need a lot of social and emotional help. . . . So now I see, you know, how [I, as their teacher] have to guide students into that."⁸⁵

Teachers also discussed how the developmental approach in TK contrasted significantly with the emphasis on achievement and outcomes the students would face the following year in kindergarten. Kendra, a former kindergarten teacher, juxtaposed TK with kindergarten: "It's amazing, and the [TK] kids don't seem stressed like the kindergartners. . . . We had children in kindergarten who were

crying because they couldn't write, you know, they couldn't read, or you know, whatever it was they *couldn't* do. This time [in TK] we are accepting the work, where it is, and then we are trying to help them improve on it."⁸⁶

Given the progress they had made in creating classrooms conducive to child-initiated play, some teachers worried about the fragility of their successes and that their students' progress might be lost if the same approach to learning was not continued in future grades. Jalynn explained: "It [play] has to spread beyond TK though. This group is so skilled at compassion and working out issues, problem solving. And I know that they will lose all of it if they don't continue to have support in practicing these skills. If you enter a classroom with children who have no support in learning these skills, they are going to regress back to not having it."⁸⁷

Interview data from Year 2 suggest that district kindergarten teachers reported differences between the children who had attended the play-based TK classrooms and those who did not. Kendra shared: "As far as kids that were in TK last year that are in K this year, I have heard nothing but good things, mostly about the self-regulation. I mean they are able to sit for whatever short period of time they have to, in circle time. . . . The K teachers are really pleased with the kids that came out of TK because they have this boost in academics and social-emotional development."⁸⁸

Marjorie explained that the kindergarten teacher at her school had also praised her former TK students. She repeated what the K teacher said: "They are all running the class, 'This is how we are in school, this is how we sit, this is how we act, this is what we do.' My kids that were in TK. They were the leaders of the class, and everything they do is, like, what they are supposed to do."⁸⁹

SPRING COACHING RECORDS. Spring coaching records reflect evidence that teachers learned to observe play and to watch for teachable moments before stepping in (e.g., showing children how to match up the corners of the blocks so their buildings would not fall over and providing children with language to use if they did not want to play with someone). As children had learned the play routines, teachers focused more on ways to encourage language development and cooperative play and to develop "master players" (a term from *The Play's the Thing*, the text they read and discussed in the PLC.)⁹⁰ Teachers developed behavior contracts and used a range of strategies learned in district trainings (e.g., Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning's Teaching Pyramid model) to support their students with challenging behaviors. Several TK teachers requested parent workshops to help families understand the impor-

tance of play and further encourage it at home. Additionally, several teachers set goals to develop their outdoor play areas.

Parents' Reactions to Child-Initiated Play

The TK teachers reported that many, although not all, parents and families in their classrooms supported the inclusion of play. When asked to rate the statement, "Families in my classroom think that children learn important skills by playing," 67 percent agreed or strongly agreed ($n=12$) while 22 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed ($n=4$). Kendra mentioned her discussions about play with her students' parents: "Doing our parent conferences, we are talking about play, and they are kind of like, 'What?' But after we go through it, they are like, 'Well, [Ms. Kendra] we are doing that at our house.' I [say,] 'You are your child's first teacher,' so with them, playing with blocks, playing with Play-Doh at home, it's actually reinforcing what we are doing in the school or in the classroom. [I saw] empowerment [for] our parents."⁹¹

Jalynn reported having similar experiences with her families: "In the parent conferences, [I am] telling them 'Let them play, talk with them, ask them questions about what they are doing.' And the parents are coming back, saying, 'I get it, I see it.' . . . How beneficial [it] is when we are able to tell them, 'Well, you know what, working with blocks, they are touching this area of development.' . . . And the parents are buying it. They are like, 'Thank you, thank you!'"⁹²

Several TK teachers reported that parents and families shared the progress they had observed in their children's self-regulation at home. Kendra explains:

We had the positive descriptors in the centers . . . like "We play safely in the block area," "We don't throw blocks," "There are only five people [who] can be in the blocks." Just by these positive descriptors, and they are going home using those same descriptors with their parents. And then just to hear the parents say, "Ms. Kendra, I never heard anything like it. [My child says] you got to treat people the way you want to be treated." So just in those centers, we are touching so much, not just your play, but I would say survival. Survival skills, with the little ones . . . life skills, yeah.⁹³

Summary

The TK teachers learned about child-initiated play in their classrooms during

October

- Allowing children to explore different play areas in the classroom
- Working on routines for cleaning up play materials

November

- Observing children's play and learning to see it through new eyes. "Looks like chaos but it's not"
- Feeling pride in their roles versus embarrassed and marginalized as they reported in the beginning of the year ("What we are doing is groundbreaking and we are the ones breaking the ground.")
- Working to support children's interests in play (Children's pretend 911 calls led teachers to introduce police uniforms in classroom)

December

- Many reports of children playing well

January

- Announcing that they are managing to teach a play-based class with no help although it is very challenging to have such large class sizes
- Discussing the importance of self-care
- Coach reports that teachers are changing their language and tone with children from direct to indirect

February

- Extending children's play (e.g., with science materials)
- Introducing play materials during recess to improve behavioral challenges

March

- Routines/strategies for managing behavior are in place
- Report they are no longer interrupting children's play (e.g., hollering across the room, insisting on cleanliness over children's exploration)
- Reduce number of materials in play environment instead of everything coming out at once
- Introduce literacy materials into children's play
- Following children's interests in curriculum development

April

- Continue to reduce materials in play areas
- Expressing the importance of child-initiated play
- Modeling the use of play instructionally for other teachers

May

- No longer using charts or assigning numbers to play areas. Children following rules independently.
-

Figure 1. Themes from PLC Field Notes Related to Teachers' Learning, 2012–2013

their first year TK teaching (figure 1). Many teachers began the year with questions and concerns about incorporating play in their classrooms given large class sizes and the challenging behavior of many of their students. By year's end, the

October

- Being alone and not having help; large class sizes
- How to walk children to bathrooms that were far away without an aide or parent
- No or few routines established

November

- Administrative realignment: Change in governing structure within district.
- Hearing mixed messages about curriculum and assessment practices required for TK
- Lack of consistency in what they were learning in the Play PLC with other district professional development and the literacy coaching they were receiving
- Children's challenging behavior (hitting, running, screaming, sexual behavior)
- Steep learning curve to learn new content standards and assessment tools (e.g., California's Preschool Foundations and Frameworks, DRDP Observational Assessment Tool)
- Changing identities (e.g., What is a TK teacher? Are we preschool teachers?)
- Marginalization from other public school colleagues for including play in curriculum ("I have people at my school who think that I don't teach")
- Trauma and violent themes entering children's play
- Not knowing how to observe children and complete required documentation

December

- Allowing students to have autonomy, struggling with not being too "teacher directed"
- Listening to children to discover props to add into their play
- Principals not understanding demands of a play-based program. Continuing to add students (some classes at 28 students)
- Children's challenging behaviors
- Children's trauma entering play

January

- Inability to find quality substitutes who understood play-based programs

March

- Children's challenging behavior
- Lack of support from principals

April

- Children's challenging behavior
- Still waiting for support for children with special needs (e.g., autism) requested in fall

May

- After all the hard work, learning, and progress, worry that children would regress if they entered classrooms that did not maintain a focus on social-emotional development
-

Figure 2. Challenges Teachers Faced Across the Year Identified in the PLC Field Notes, 2012–2013

teachers became strong advocates for play, able to articulate many examples of how the play in their classrooms encouraged the students' learning and development. These findings extended into Year 2 of the study. For example, by January

2014, 100 percent of the survey respondents agreed ($n=5$) or strongly agreed ($n=13$) that play can “help children develop better thinking abilities,” “improve children’s language and communication abilities” and “help children learn to express their feelings” (Mean=3.72 for all three items).

As the TK teachers adapted their curriculum and instruction to support child-initiated play, they faced a range of challenges (see figure 2). The four concerns most discussed over the course of the two-year study were the lack of a TK curriculum to guide teachers’ instruction; trauma and violence in children’s lives that filtered into children’s classroom play; the complexities associated with receiving professional development and resources from a private, outside organization; and principals’ lack of support for, and understanding of, play. The TK teachers’ commitment to incorporating child-initiated play in their classrooms remained strong despite the challenges they continuously faced during the two-year study.

Discussion

The era of No Child Left Behind represented a significant change in the federal government’s role in the nation’s schools, leading to discussions about an urgency to attenuate opportunity and achievement gaps, increase academic rigor in public education, and tether school policies to standardized testing and the disbursement of sanctions and rewards.⁹⁴ More recent policies herald imperatives that both align with and diverge from NCLB narratives, portending the skills, knowledge, and dispositions students need to compete in twenty-first-century global economies where creativity, collaboration, and communication⁹⁵ will likely signify success. The history of education policy reflects a landscape in motion—like the steady beat of a metronome—shifting back and forth to privilege different philosophical and pedagogical priorities for schools and goals for students’ learning. These constant changes in school policies require nimble teachers to adjust rapidly from one new plan to the next. Teachers working in underfunded, often urban, school districts—where pressures mount to ameliorate low-test scores even as plans and policies shift frequently—face this reality most acutely.

The role of play in public schooling follows a similarly mercurial history over a century.⁹⁶ Despite a back and forth about the merits of play in children’s

learning that reach back to the writings of the New England Puritans, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau,⁹⁷ play had enjoyed a relatively long period of inclusion in kindergartens until the enactment of NCLB. As Miller and Almon proclaim, “Kindergarten has changed radically in the last two decades in ways that few Americans are aware of. Children now spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations.”⁹⁸ A recently published longitudinal study challenges these national priorities.⁹⁹ Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley used data from the Fast Track study of low-income neighborhoods to examine outcomes for eight hundred children over a twenty-year period. They found that children’s social-emotional skills in kindergarten (e.g., sharing, cooperation, helpfulness, and getting along with peers—all skills learned in child-initiated play) are the strongest predictors of adult success in finding employment, getting an education, remaining mentally healthy, and avoiding criminal behavior and substance abuse.

An increasing number of stakeholders across the nation are questioning the elimination of play from public school classrooms, aptly reflected in Peggy Orenstein’s 2009 article “Kindergarten Cram,” from the *New York Times* magazine.¹⁰⁰ She decried the challenges of finding a kindergarten for her daughter that did not impose nightly homework assignments. She shared her obvious exasperation: “How did 5 become the new 7, anyway?” Most critics realize that returning to Froebel’s kindergarten where children are free to develop in a metaphorical garden of playful exploration no longer aligns with our current sociopolitical world. Decades of data metrics and empirical research highlight the benefits of early intervention and tiered support, which increase equitable outcomes for children.¹⁰¹ Diverse stakeholders challenge the false binaries of play-based versus didactic instruction, recognizing that “setting expectations for children and encouraging playful classrooms are not mutually exclusive” goals.¹⁰²

The school district in this study took the courageous step of returning play to its classrooms while remaining committed to decreasing the disparities in achievement among its students and to reconfiguring the district curriculum, instruction, and assessment to align with the CCSS. Instead of positioning play as an impediment to these goals, district administrators believed that reinserting play into TK classrooms could become a primary mechanism for improving child academic and social-emotional outcomes. Progress in district TK classrooms continues. For example, for fall 2014, twenty-nine classrooms made available blocks, dramatic play supplies, Play-Doh, and other play materi-

als and every day dedicated time to child-initiated play. The district continued to transition from automatized instruction and a lack of trust in teachers, characteristics associated with scripted curricula, toward increased recognition of the importance of children's engagement in their construction of knowledge and support for teachers' learning and professional growth.¹⁰³ These changes are significant and represent epistemological U-turns for the district. In the words of adult learning experts English and Mayo, "Knowledge is being rendered as 'dynamic,' rather than static,"¹⁰⁴ and the district is shifting toward practices that support what Paulo Freire describes as "epistemological curiosity."¹⁰⁵

Although it is essential to recognize this encouraging momentum, school-based reforms this ambitious are extremely fragile in their early years of implementation and require a sustained investment for any long-term change. The most significant vulnerability for the district continues to be the dynamic influx of district leaders (superintendents and instructional cabinet members),¹⁰⁶ new state policies, and powerful outside stakeholders, including philanthropists whose donations increase their own political influence in school districts and education politics.¹⁰⁷ These factors strongly influence decisions in urban schools where turnover remains high, resources are limited, and districts must increasingly rely on private benefactors to make up funds lost to reductions in federal and state funding.

Conclusion

Throughout the two years of our project, PLC facilitators used metaphors to describe the TK teachers and the importance of their work to encourage play-based learning in their classrooms. The teachers' work was equated with "turning a ship that was moving very slowly," arriving "first on the beach in Normandy," and, as teachers of play, "creating artwork" in their interactions with their students. As one PLC facilitator told TK teachers, "It is so big what we are trying to do. . . . This is good for humanity. . . . I appreciate your openness and willingness to step into this void and begin to create."¹⁰⁸

The TK teachers experienced significant learning in transitioning to play-based classrooms. Many of them had worked with scripted curricula in environments that demanded little of their professional agency but offered them the comforts of certitude and predictability. Integrating child-initiated play required teachers to deal with uncertainties, forced them to take risks, and pressed upon

them inevitable vulnerabilities. We documented how the TK teachers embraced the integration of play despite the professional disequilibrium it created.

As Jalynn told us in one of her interviews, “Going to Sunnybrook and having PDs there and actually seeing the children play, the different age groups was just phenomenal. . . . Now that we are learning that [play] is important in children’s development, we understand why it is important. And these children, when they are playing, what you notice is, that they are living out their lives, living out their lives, right in those centers.”¹⁰⁹

The future of play in these TK classrooms depends on a range of intersecting and dynamic sociopolitical factors including the district administrators’ understanding of and priority for early-childhood education, district policies, and school reform initiatives; TK students’ future test scores; resources and support for teachers; and teachers’ experiences and opinions about teaching through play. Despite the obstacles that could remove play once again from this district, the number of TK classrooms continues to increase: the district plans to have a TK classroom at every school. District staff is securing toys and play materials for a new group of four-year-olds who will enter their classroom doors each August ready to, in Jalynn’s words, “live out their lives” as they play together, organizing their ideas, feelings, and experiences in their TK classrooms.¹¹⁰

Coda

Since the completion of our study, many changes have taken place in the district. The district made a decision not to continue supporting a PLC devoted entirely to play for TK teachers. Instead, a new private philanthropic partner approached the district with substantial funding to provide professional development for TK teachers focused exclusively on early literacy. Worried that the knowledge they hoped to share in the district would be lost, the directors of Sunnybrook Center and Laura, the play coach, wrote a hundred-page training manual about child development and teachers’ roles in a play-based classroom. They funded the publication of this booklet and offered it to the district for free to disseminate among new TK teachers.

The school system was also adjusting to a new superintendent’s reorganization of the district’s administration and instructional cabinet. In fall 2014, a private philanthropy funded a new cabinet-level position for early learning with the expectation that the district would institutionalize it within a few years.

Additionally, the California legislature passed a law that affects TK classrooms in all California public schools. First, an amendment to the Education Code required all TK teachers to use the play-based California Preschool Foundations and Frameworks and the DRDP, a curriculum-embedded observational assessment. Second, a bill (SB 876) mandated that all TK teachers hired by July 1, 2015, and after must by 2020 either complete twenty-four units of early-childhood or child-development coursework or have comparable experience as determined by their employers. The combination of these changes and their impact on the presence of child-directed play in the district's TK classrooms is a story we hope to report in the future.

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