



## The power of improvisational teaching



M. Elizabeth Graue<sup>b,\*</sup>, Kristin Lyn Whyte<sup>a</sup>, Anne Elizabeth Karabon<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Wisconsin Center for Education Research, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1025 West Johnson Street, USA

<sup>b</sup> Dept of Curriculum & Instruction, USA

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Improvisational teaching is responsive to children's diverse resources.
- Children and teachers are partnered actors in classrooms.
- Predetermined scripts should not dominate curricula.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 14 August 2014

Received in revised form

15 January 2015

Accepted 20 January 2015

Available online

#### Keywords:

Early childhood education

Curriculum

Professional development

Mathematics

Funds of knowledge

### ABSTRACT

In this study we examine how improvisation can facilitate understanding how teachers respond to children's multiple resources, interests, experiences, and skills in early childhood programs. Improvisation is conceptualized as a responsive, partnered activity through which teachers and children generate meaning and knowledge together. In our analysis we show improvisation is taken up differently in two classrooms and how it variably provides opportunities for learning. Two cases from a professional development program designed to support culturally and developmentally appropriate early mathematics are used to demonstrate the possibilities improvisation creates in era of increasing standardization of curriculum.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Early childhood education in the United States has traditionally been distinct from elementary and secondary education in its focus on child-centered practice<sup>1</sup> – curriculum and activities guided by typical age-focused development, organized around children's interests, and enacted through concrete activities. Yesterday's

kindergarten, in its idealized form, was a prototypical example. It operated in a liminal space in elementary schools with specially trained teachers and classrooms that were more spacious and informal than other grades. The paint and clay, blocks and dramatic play, and naps all reflected a perspective that was more focused on social learning than academic outcomes.

The early childhood curriculum is the most holistic and least differentiated at any level of education. It is also the most solidly grounded in philosophy, in clearly articulated methodology, and in theory and research. Those who contributed to the discipline of early childhood education came from occupations and professions outside the academic domain. What they had in common was an understanding of children. And that is what makes early childhood education unique; it starts with the child and not with the subject matter. (Elkind, 2009 in Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 9)

Flash-forward to today and you will find early childhood programs across the globe are increasingly standardized, with a

\* Corresponding author. 210B Teacher Education Building, 225 N. Mills, Madison WI 53706, USA. Tel.: +1 608 262 7435.

E-mail addresses: [graue@education.wisc.edu](mailto:graue@education.wisc.edu) (M.E. Graue), [kwhyte@wisc.edu](mailto:kwhyte@wisc.edu) (K.L. Whyte), [akarabon@wisc.edu](mailto:akarabon@wisc.edu) (A.E. Karabon).

<sup>1</sup> Romanticizing yesterday's child-centered kindergarten ignores many of the issues related to progressive teaching practices. This perspective has been critiqued for its colonialist foundations (Delpit, 1986; Fleer, 1998), that valorizes play (Ailwood, 2003), ignoring its frequently cruel enactment by children (Burman, 1994). Curiously, curriculum in many "child-centered" programs is designed to support a prototypical child rather than particular students (Graue, 2005) and positions teachers as hands off managers (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997). All of these have merit, reflecting a Eurocentric perspective of teaching young children. Our view of child-centered practice is an agentive collaboration between teachers and children that is proactive as well as responsive.

curriculum dictated by academic standards, limited play and an assessment heavy schedule (Graue, 2009). This shift was prompted by neoliberal reforms embraced by the majority of western countries that press for student outcomes through grade-level standards (Brown, 2007) and the development of data systems purported to make early childhood teachers more professional in their practice (Bradbury, 2012). This systems approach promoted aligned curriculum, assessments, and standards in K-12 and has been shifting practices in preschool programming as well (Bennett & Tayler, 2006; Brown, 2015) as policymakers seek evidence for investments in public preK (Fuller, 2007). In a search of fidelity of implementation, early childhood classrooms are increasingly scripted with curricula focused on academic outcomes (Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002). Teachers complain that they have no time to have conversations with children; they must fill every moment with assessment and intervention to ensure that children will be ready for school (Bradbury, 2013).

At the same time that teaching young children is becoming more standardized, a growing body of research on classroom quality highlights instructional practices that are contingent on children's knowledge, experiences, and resources. Based on constructivist and ecological developmental theory, quality is centered on teacher–child interactions, with teachers intentionally building on children's knowledge in moment-to-moment exchanges (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, Belsky, Houts, Morrison, & Network, 2007; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008). Key to this kind of interaction-based approach is a teacher who brings deep developmental and content knowledge, as well as familiarity with students' home resources to her practice (Graue et al., 2014). This last element of knowledge is especially important when working with children who are culturally different from their teachers (Tobin, 2010). The powerful metrics emerging to measure quality are tightly related to western notions of the role of the teacher, the nature of the child, and conceptions of adult–child interaction that promotes development (van Oers, 2003; Tobin, 2010).

Increased responsiveness, which involves teachers using children's interests and knowledge as resources in instruction, fits poorly with the standardization that has accompanied accountability policy. With the stakes attached to student performance, all of the momentum is directed toward ensuring that children achieve specific benchmarks. As a result, administrators “suggest” that teachers devote precious instructional time to measurable outcomes and teacher energy and action is often diverted away from child-initiated activities, play, or utilizing the knowledge and experience children bring to school (Graue, 2009). While it is certain that some child-centered or play-based activities are the educational equivalent of marshmallows – lots of fun with limited learning opportunities – abandoning informal learning seems shortsighted. This is a particular concern for the practice of early childhood education, which has been caught up in a cycle of curriculum escalation (Hatch, 2002) that pushes informal play based activities out and prioritizes teacher directed, content-based tasks. A prominent concern of early childhood educators in the United States, the context for our research, it is also connects to global curriculum escalation concerns in countries that focus strongly on cognitive development (Bennett & Tayler, 2006; Bradbury, 2012).

In this paper we explore an effort to rethink pedagogical decision-making and responsivity with a group of public pre-kindergarten (preK) teachers working in a context of curriculum escalation and commitment to play-based pedagogy. Through a professional development (PD) program designed to support developmentally and culturally responsive early mathematics, we examine how teachers took up the idea of engaging 4 year olds in mathematics in a way that married content knowledge and home

practices. We use the notion of improvisation to describe how teachers can build on diverse information to enrich their educational interactions with children. Improvisation has been a useful tool in a variety of studies; we feel a critical contribution of this work is the recognition that improvisation includes multiple actors in the classroom drama – both teachers and children. To deepen our understandings of the role improvisation plays in an early childhood classroom we address the question: How do teachers and children take up the resources that they bring into the classroom in improvisational practice?

## 2. Literature

Responsive teaching requires content knowledge and teacher recognition of children's resources. But equally important, it requires *action* contingent on that knowledge (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003). Because of the multidimensional nature of this knowledge/action, responsive teaching cannot be scripted. Instead, it is improvisational:

It is through improvisation that we weave familiar and unfamiliar activities and ideas in response to social, contextual and individual needs ... We find that not only does improvisation provide children with opportunities to engage in sophisticated, collaborative problem solving processes, it also serves as a tool to revitalize our thinking about the relationships between teaching, learning, and development (Baker-Sennett & Matusov, 1997, p. 210)

Improvisational teaching requires deep subject-matter knowledge; to respond creatively to unexpected student ideas a teacher needs a more profound understanding of relevant content than if the teacher is simply reciting a pre-planned lecture or script (Sawyer, 2004, as cited in Reeves, 2010, p. 254). For early childhood teachers, this would include knowledge of child development, pedagogy for young children, subject matter, and a disposition to follow a child's interests. A focus on responsivity helps teachers distinguish between the seemingly opposing ideas of following a predetermined curriculum script and following children's interests (Baker-Sennett & Matusov, 1997).

Teachers improvise when they actively respond to children's diverse intellectual, social, and emotional experiences and needs; taking multiple bodies of knowledge into moment-to-moment interactions with children. Teachers create individually tailored learning experiences when they use their knowledge of children inside and outside the classroom as a source for teaching. Teachers cannot improvise alone. They “have to be willing to go on a creative journey with children without knowing exactly what is going to happen” (Lobman, 2005, p. 252).

One approach to improvisational teaching views all children and families as possessing *funds of knowledge* (FoK)—bodies of knowledge that are foundational to everyday wellbeing (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992), based on life experiences (Moje et al., 2004), and interests influenced by popular culture (Hedges, 2011). Initially derived from a project on culturally responsive teaching for bilingual children, participating teachers conducted ethnographic home visits and collaborated with colleagues to create academic activities that capitalized on their students' family practices. FoK practice situates children as active agents who construct rich bodies of knowledge scaffolded by teachers who understand and value their experience and knowledge. Improvisation is relational, so the role children play in this process must be considered as well.

Recognizing the contributions of earlier scholarship on improvisation, we build our analysis around work by critical

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6850966>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6850966>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)