

“Using the Master’s Tools” to Integrate Play With Kindergarten Mathematics: Creative Insubordination Through Playful Resistance

Brittany Caldwell, Anita A. Wager
Brittany.caldwell@vanderbilt.edu, anita.wager@vanderbilt.edu
Vanderbilt University, Peabody College

Abstract: In this study, we focused on the challenges that kindergarten teachers discussed related to curriculum, lack of teacher autonomy, and administrative control. We explored teachers' resistance using the lens of creative insubordination (Gutiérrez, 2016) to answer these questions: 1) What challenges do kindergarten teachers discuss about implementing playful math in kindergarten? and 2) How do teachers discuss navigating implementation challenges? We found that teachers used playful resistance as a way to enact “Using the Master’s Tools,” an approach to Creative Insubordination outlined by Gutiérrez (2016). This study corroborates and extends prior work on creative insubordination by focusing on early childhood mathematics and exploring teachers’ strategies to employ playful resistance.

Purpose

This study responds to the widely discussed concern about ‘kindergarten as the new first grade’ (Bassok, Latham, & Rerom, 2016) by positioning kindergarten teachers as professionals with agency to make choices in their classrooms. In this study of early childhood (EC) teachers’ playful resistance, we highlight teachers’ agency as they invoke ‘the master’s tools’ to make developmentally appropriate changes within existing structures, in particular, disrupting a system that is eliminating children’s opportunity to play. Analysis of a weeklong professional development (PD) with four kindergarten teachers revealed what they identified as barriers to curricular interruption and initial steps they imagine in thinking ahead to implementing play in their classrooms. We analyzed teachers’ resistance using a lens of creative insubordination by exploring the strategies teachers imagined to resist and overcome challenges to bringing in play posed by their perceptions of the curriculum, school administration, and district and state testing and evaluation mandates; and to answer the questions:

1. What challenges do kindergarten teachers discuss about implementing playful math in kindergarten?
2. How do teachers discuss navigating implementation challenges?

Framework

Acts of resistance or ‘creative insubordination’ are the ways professionals interrupt rules to provide better services and conditions (Grando & Lopes, 2020, p. 621). Gutiérrez (2016) outlines an approach to resisting the systems operating against teachers using six strategies for being creatively insubordinate: press for explanation, counter with evidence, use the master’s tools, seek allies, turn a rational issue into a moral one, and fly under the radar. Gutiérrez (2016) proposes that these approaches are a stand against the status quo in efforts to change schools to match the best interests of the students. These strategies provided a lens for us to examine how teachers imagined paths of resistance. In our study, we found the teachers enacted on approach in particular, ‘using the master’s tools’ to align with the rules and goals while bending the rules to meet the needs of students. Although, using the master’s tools is an ineffective strategy to dismantle oppressive powers (Lorde, 1984), we found it effective way to work within the system. We offer the phrase “playful resistance” to capture how teachers used the masters tools to resist constraints (e.g., enforced pacing, administrative control, limited teacher autonomy) by bringing play into mathematics.

Methods

As part of a four-year longitudinal research project to investigate play in early mathematics, we facilitated a week-long PD with four kindergarten teachers designed to support EC teachers to incorporate play into their math classrooms. All discussions and activities during the PD were video and audio recorded. In individual interviews during the PD teachers were asked to describe their teaching experience, philosophical views about play and current teaching environment. All interviews were audio recorded. Using descriptive codes, we analyzed observation notes, video recordings, and audio recordings from the teacher’s interviews to understand how teachers talked about navigating challenges to enacting math curriculum by using the masters’ tools.

Findings

Throughout the PD, teachers discussed various challenges with bringing play into their classrooms including: issues with curriculum, state-wide assessment portfolios/pop-up observations, disjointed communication with administration, lack of autonomy, fears of reprimands, and views of play and academics as separate. Some of these challenges stem from an era of accountability, standardized testing, and an emphasis on academics over play in practice and research (Author 2; Schoenfeld, 2002). The larger social climate can frame play and academics in tension and perpetuate teachers' beliefs and practices that deemphasize play. All these challenges set the larger context of the school, administration, and classroom. However, the analysis for this study focused on the challenges teachers discussed related to the curriculum, lack of teacher autonomy, and administrative control as these were the most prominent in our discussions with the teachers in this study.

In Table 1, we provide a summary of vignettes that illustrate how teachers proposed to navigate the challenges. We found that the teachers had explicit ways of describing and planning for creative insubordination to bring play into mathematics instruction, specifically related to using the master's tools (Gutiérrez, 2016).

Table 1

Summary Vignettes

Navigating the Tension Between Play and Academics	Navigating Limited Time and Autonomy with Playful Resistance
This vignette highlights how the teachers discussed the tension between their mathematics curriculum and play and envisioned navigating this challenge with playful resistance by bringing in games to differentiate mathematics instruction and supplement the official curriculum. In this example, the teachers employed playful resistance as they followed the rules of using the curriculum materials while bending them by imagining how to differentiate activities with games.	This vignette highlights how teachers discussed navigating tensions they faced related to limited time and teacher autonomy for curriculum and scheduling. The teachers in-the-moment decisions without permission to teach with less fidelity to the curriculum and schedule illustrates how they employed playful resistance to administrative control as they discussed interpreting "problem-solving time" as a space to bring in a playful lesson. The teachers used the master's tools by following the dictated school schedule, yet, through their interpretation of "problem-solving time," they created a plan for playful resistance.

Conclusion and implications

We found that the teachers used playful resistance as a way to enact using the master's tools. While the teachers discussed other ways they could resist neoliberal practices (e.g., flying under the radar), we found that explicit connections to play were related to the approach of using the master's tools. Theoretically, this study corroborates and extends prior work on creative insubordination by focusing on early childhood and exploring how teachers invoke strategies to develop playful resistance. From a practical perspective, we see an opportunity to rethink future PD with these (and other) teachers that supports them to develop strategies for creative insubordination. We envision using this data in conjunction with readings from Gutiérrez so they can explore how they came up with their own strategies and how they might develop others. We then would have them practice using strategies in order to defend and support the decisions they make for their classrooms.

References

- Bassok, D. Latham, S. & Rerom, A. (2016). Is kindergarten the new first grade? AERA Open, 1(4), 1–31. DOI: 10.1177/2332858415616358
- Gutiérrez, R. (2016). Strategies for creative insubordination in mathematics teaching. *Teaching for Excellence and Equity in Mathematics*, 7(1), 52–60.
- Lorde A. (1984). The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Comments at the "The personal and the political panel," Second Sex Conference, New York, September 29, 1979). In *Sister outsider*(pp. 110–113). Sister Visions Press. (Original work published 1979)