Play, Oral Language, Writing and Cultural Relevance in Northern Rural Kindergarten Classrooms: Teachers' Roles

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In this paper, we show how two kindergarten teachers in northern Alberta classrooms, Polly and Kahli (all names are pseudonyms), take up roles that support children's oral language and writing in classroom dramatic play. Their practices offer a counterargument to those who perceive school as a place where children learn to read and write only through formal pencil-to-paper activities (Kane 2016; Stagnitti et al 2016).

The play contexts encourage children to build on their background experiences and knowledge to make meanings that reflect their rural life and culture. Through analysis of excerpts of dramatic play interactions in the two teachers' classrooms, we make a case for the importance of play in young children's language and literacy learning, and for the need to consider rural culture and experience in conversations about culturally relevant learning experiences (Ladson-Billings 1995).

This paper draws on data from our Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play) project, in which kindergarten teachers use play as a context for developing children's language and writing in their collaborative action research projects. As long-time residents of their rural communities who are familiar with perspectives, values, activities and rhythms of rural life in their communities, participating teachers consciously integrate rural experiences and perspectives in classroom play and literacy activities.

Through this paper, the oft-overlooked voices of rural teachers, such as Polly and Kahli, can join those of urban teachers, whose work is most frequently presented in educational research (Burton, Brown and Johnson 2013). For example, Polly's and Kahli's classroom activities draw on rural children's experiences, such as riding a school bus down a gravel road or riding an all-terrain vehicle with family members through the bush or across a field. These experiences are far less likely to be documented in research reports in early childhood settings than the experience of riding a subway, LRT or city bus through city streets where many intersections have stoplights. Given the focus on urban education in research and policy, rural teachers may "feel like they are dancing a dance choreographed in an office in the city" (Corbett 2014, 8). Along with the challenges of trying to modify the dance to fit their rural contexts, rural teachers may feel that their practices are less important, and peripheral to those of urban teachers (Corbett 2014).

We begin with a short summary of theoretical perspectives and research on young children's oral language and writing development, the role of play in children's learning, and teacher scaffolding of children's language and writing.

Perspectives and Relevant Research

This study is based on a view of literacy learning as a social process of constructing meaning (Hetherington, Parke and Schmuckler 2005; Vygotsky 1978). Young children in kindergarten classrooms make meaning through marks, drawings, letters or letter-like forms (Anning 2003; Lancaster 2007). Thus, any form that is used to communicate with others is considered to be writing. Given the social nature of literacy, it follows that oral language is foundational to literacy. Young children learn new vocabulary and ways of meaning making through interacting with others in various social contexts (Owocki and Goodman 2002; Resnick and Snow 2009). Dramatic play has been shown to be a particularly effective context for supporting children's language, literacy, social and conceptual learning, problem-solving and divergent thinking skills, and creativity (Bennett, Wood and Rogers 1997).

Teacher support of young children's oral language may take the form of suggesting possibilities, posing a problem or expanding on children's language (Peterson and Greenberg 2017) and funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014). Previous studies also emphasize the importance of using open-ended questions (Turnbull et al 2009).

Much of the research on the teacher's role in writing instruction involves planned lessons in which teachers ask questions, explain or model writing processes, and use published texts as model text forms in whole-group or small-group settings (for example, Coker 2007; Watanabe and Hall-Kenyon 2011). Teacher-directed lessons are followed by independent writing time that often includes opportunities for children to talk with each other as they write.

In the following sections, we describe Polly's and Kahli's kindergarten classrooms and the data sources for our study. We follow this with a discussion of our analysis, showing how the two teachers took up roles that supported children's language and writing in ways that align with and extend previous research, and how they drew on rural experiences.

Research Methods and Contexts

The larger NOW Play research project involves 13 schools in four Canadian provinces. All participating teachers used iPods set up on tripods to record children's play in their classrooms, uploading the videos to a project website for analysis. Graduate assistants transcribed the videos using Jefferson notation (Atkinson and Heritage 1999) to record the utterances and associated actions of all participants in the play.

Polly, who has more than 30 years of teaching experience, teaches in Aspen; Kahli, who has 5 years of teaching experience, teaches in Deerview. Aspen has a population of approximately 2,700, and Deerview's population is approximately 350. At the time of the study, Kahli had 4 kindergarten students, 3 boys and a girl, in her class. They arrived by school bus for full days on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. At the time of the study, 20 girls and 12 boys attended Polly's kindergarten class half time, with some attending only in the mornings or afternoons and some attending two full days per week. English is the mother tongue of Polly, Kahli and all the children in their classes.

Kahli's classroom was spacious, with room for a large sand table, which is the site of the video clip used in this paper, as well as dramatic play centres with themes such as a restaurant and a store, and a construction centre. During centre time, which was approximately 45 minutes in the morning and 45 minutes in the afternoon, children chose to play at one of the centres.

Polly had two large classrooms located across the hall from each other. The room that is the site of our study houses the sand centre, climbing equipment, a puppet theatre and a two-story frame house that had also served as a restaurant, a store and other buildings, depending on the dramatic play theme of the month. Children were expected to visit every centre at least once during the twice-daily 45-minute centre times in a month.

For this paper, we chose one video from Polly's class and one from Kahli's to examine teachers' roles that support children's language and literacy, and that provide culturally relevant learning experiences for their rural students (Table 1 has information about the videos). The videos were chosen because of their extended length and for their culturally relevant content. We analyzed the ways in which Polly and Kahli scaffolded children's language and their writing, and the ways in which they created culturally relevant contexts for their rural children's learning.

TABLE 1. Video theme, length and participants

Type of video	*Type of play*	*Teacher (pseudonyms)*	*Children involved (pseudonyms)*	*Video length*
Farm in the Sand Table	Dramatic	Polly	Ryder, Jace	9:10
Building Bridges	Construction	Kahli	Melitta, Ruth, Alexis	17:25

Teacher Roles: Creating Culturally Relevant Contexts and Scaffolding Language and Writing

Our analysis showed that Polly and Kahli scaffolded children's language by taking on a role in play, asking prompting questions and helping students negotiate storylines. They scaffolded writing by modelling purposes for writing within dramatic play narratives and by inviting children to create texts to communicate with others in the play.

Supporting Language: Teacher Takes a Dramatic Play Role and Explains New Vocabulary in Context

This excerpt shows Kahli playing alongside three students using kinetic sand to build things collaboratively. When Kahli joined, the group had constructed some bridges and roadways between land masses. Kahli started to play, using a toy rake to first prick holes along the roadways, then to push the edges of the road back together as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Kahli uses the blue rake to straighten the edges of a road, like a grader.

Kahli: rrrrrr [engine noise as she pushes the rake along]
Alexis: Ah!
Kahli: I'm grading the road.
Ruth: Uh-oh they grade the road here.
Kahli: Rrrrr
Alexis: Don't grade the hills!
Melitta: Don't grade it! [pounding the sand to smooth it down]
Kahli: Why not?
Alexis: No. Don't don't don't. [rolling over sand]
Kahli: Did you know that's actually how they fix the roads? Grade them.
Alexis: Don't grade the roads. I'm fixing them. With nice flat road.

We observe Kahli using a strategy to develop students' oral language skills when she introduces new vocabulary at the sand table. While she is playing in role with the students, she uses her hand-held rake to straighten the edges of the road. She uses specific vocabulary related to children's rural lives, where gravel roads must be graded when they become rutted, explaining that she is grading the road while moving the toy as a demonstration. The students repeat and engage with the new vocabulary. Shortly after, Kahli provides a specific definition of the new vocabulary, describing it as "that's how they fix the roads. They grade them." She and the children then talk about one child's dad, who drives a grader, and tell stories of watching the grader go past their farmyard or acreage. Together, they search for pictures of graders on websites and then the children make graders out of Play-Doh to use in the sand. The children and Kahli make lumps in the sand and then use their graders to smooth out the lumps.

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) suggest that for early learners, the best way to learn new vocabulary is orally and in context. If possible, children should have opportunities to hear and say the word multiple times, in order to reinforce their new learning. Children can make connections between what is familiar and contextually relevant to them (for example, their observations of the grader smoothing out the road past their farmyard) and the new vocabulary. In this particular instance, Kahli uses the play setting to introduce and reinforce vocabulary that reflects children's rural experience.

Supporting Language and Writing: Negotiating a Storyline That Includes Print

Polly often participated in children's play, taking on roles that allowed her to support children's language, literacy and conceptual learning. Her action research involved introducing writing by creating signs that are meaningful within the play contexts. She had previously made signs with cardstock glued to popsicle sticks, placing them in a container beside the sand centre. She introduced the signs by asking children to describe signs that they saw on their way to school and to hypothesize why the signs were there. Like Kahli's example above, Polly also draws on children's own rural experience to aid in the process of learning. Polly invited children to create their own signs using the popsicle stick signs she had made. She instructed children to stretch out the sounds of words they wanted to write on the signs and use whatever letters or marks they knew to write the words. Later that morning, Polly was at the sand centre with a group of children, facilitating their sign writing. The following interaction has been previously published in a teacher's resource from many participating teachers' action research projects:

> Polly asked: "Have you ever seen a sign that says, 'Keep out. No trespassing'?" The children nodded and Polly got some paper to write a sign for the farm in the sandbox. She asked, "What do you think 'keep' starts with?" The children suggested the first letter "k", and Polly helped out with the two "e" letters in the middle and the children provided the final letter "p". She explained that the "ou" sound in "out" is tricky and wrote it for them. She then asked the children to provide the final letter after repeating the /t/ sound. Polly placed the sign in the sandbox and the children discussed whether it was friendly or unfriendly to have a "Keep Out" sign and why such a sign might be needed (Portier and Peterson 2017, 25).

On another occasion, two boys, Ryder and Jace, are bending over a sand table to build a farm using animal figurines including pigs, horses, sheep, cows and donkeys, as well as a farmer. Each child comes up with a sign for the farm, as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. Responding to Polly's prompt, Ryder and Jace came up with the signs for their farm.

Polly: Well, maybe we should make a sign for our farm. Here's a sign. What do you think that says?
Ryder: Umm … it says … "Come look at these animals!"
Polly: Come and get these animals?
Ryder: No, it says "Come look at these animals! They're so cool!"
Polly: What does the sign say? What's the sign say, Jace? You can decide what it says.
Jace: I want to say, "No going into the fence."
Polly: "No going into the fence." Then that's what it says!
Ryder: No, my—no, this sign says "Come look at these animals. They're so cool!" That's what it says, Jace!
Polly: He says—his sign says the opposite. His sign says "Don't go by the animals." So maybe you can put your sign over by—
Jace: It says "No going in!"
Polly: Oh, "No going in!" So you're saying "Come look at them!"
Jace: Yeah. No leaving the door open.
Ryder: But they can't go in. They can't go in.
Polly: That sounds like a really good rule. They can come look, but they can't go in.

Joining children in this interaction, Polly contributes to advancing the narrative by suggesting that the students make a sign for the farm and prompts each student individually. The children are encouraged to provide their own opinions and each comes up with an idea. Children use ways of expressing their needs (for example, "I want to say") and correcting someone else's misunderstanding (for example, "No, it says"). As Jace gives his suggestion, Ryder thinks that Jace's idea is contradictory and asserts his own idea. Polly then adds her explanation and suggests a solution to this contradiction when Jace interjects to explain the meaning of his sign further. In response, Polly again makes a comment to resolve the misunderstanding,

clarifying that the children's signs do not express opposing ideas.

While children are already interacting with each other to create a storyline and negotiate the signs themselves, Polly extends their conversation, narrative and learning in play by prompting children to give their own ideas, helping them to negotiate opinions and resolve a misunderstanding, and summarizing information. She creates an authentic context for the children's communication through print by suggesting that they create and use signs to direct the play narrative. It is important to note that the setting of dramatic play has been constructed using a farm, which can be easily found in the children's rural settings, so that students can draw on their cultural experience as part of funds of knowledge and reflect these understandings in the narrative.

In the final section, we suggest ways in which teachers might draw upon Polly's and Kahli's play-based practices to support young children's language and writing in their classrooms.

Culturally Relevant Language and Literacy Learning Through Dramatic Play

Other teachers may benefit from Polly's and Kahli's examples in order to create culturally relevant contexts that support young children's language and literacy (Ladson-Billings 1995). Teachers might begin by getting to know their communities' perspectives and values, and participating in or at least being familiar with community activities. Examples from rural and Indigenous communities might include harvest fairs, rodeos, tractor pulls, drumming and dancing ceremonies, First Night festivals, hockey or soccer tournaments, ice fishing, farmers' markets and so on. These community activities and events can be the themes for dramatic play centres that are reflective of children's lives so that children can draw on their funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014).

Teachers can then introduce the themes, activities and objects in the centre through field trips, guest speakers and modelling. Modelling may involve taking on a role in the children's play narrative and capitalizing on the natural opportunities that arise in play to introduce, define and practise using new words (Beck, McKeown and Kucan 2013). While children play in the centre, teachers may, as Polly and Kahli did, participate in keeping the play narrative moving by asking open-ended questions and offering opinions and possible ways to resolve misunderstandings. Additionally, because many community activities and events involve print, teachers may also model various uses of text in the play narrative (for example, signs, posters, tickets, brochures, schedules of events, instructions, directions, and programs that list the activities and the people carrying them out). In kindergarten, the meanings of these texts may be communicated through drawings, scribbles and print (Anning 2003; Lancaster 2007).

In addition to serving as a culturally responsive, open-ended pedagogical tool, dramatic play provides an authentic context for teachers' observations and assessments of children's uses of oral and written language for meaning making and communication. This is especially important for teachers in nonmainstream communities because the limited culturally responsive tools for assessing children's written and oral language tend to remove children from authentic interactions (Alberta Education 2018; Dunn and Dunn 2007).

Dramatic play settings offer rural, urban and suburban teachers the flexibility to create themes that engage children in authentic interactions using oral and written language. Play is open ended and allows teachers to use children's inquiry to guide curriculum engagement. Students are able to draw on their home and community experiences to choreograph dances with their teachers that support children's language and literacy.

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