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Review of Pre-K Stories: Playing with Authorship and Integrating Curriculum in Early Childhood

Harmony Petty

University at Albany, State University of New York, hpetty@albany.edu

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Review of Bentley, D. & Souto-Manning, M. (2019). *Pre-K stories: Playing with authorship and integrating curriculum in early childhood*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Dana Frantz Bentley, a pre-K teacher in Massachusetts, and Marianna Souto-Manning, Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, present a compelling case study of how one classroom experiment illuminated the ways in which children's unique strengths, stories, and interests can be honored and harnessed without sacrificing students' academic skill development. *Pre-K Stories: Playing with Authorship and Integrating Curriculum in Early Childhood* follows the development of *The Book Project*; the result of a co-constructed curriculum that emerged throughout the course of one year at the Pre-K East School. In their project, Bentley and Souto-Manning sought to expand their definition of 'authoring' to include the ways that children are already engaged in creating stories through language and play before they even pick up a pencil. Thus, the authors present their experience not as a step-by-step pedagogical method, but rather as a window into the possibilities of co-constructing an emergent curriculum with students.

The text is organized into three parts. In Part I, the authors present a critical foundation for understanding their sociocultural approach to emergent curriculum and play-based authorship. Referring back to the theoretical foundation presented in Part I, Part II outlines the development of *The Book Project* as the students engaged in creative writing, poetry, and disciplinary writing in Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies. Finally, Part III offers reflections on *The Book Project* in addition to the implications of co-constructing an emergent curriculum with Pre-K students.

Bentley and Souto-Manning consider both practitioners and researchers as they discuss the theoretical underpinnings (Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1970) of emergent curriculum in addition to various vignettes from Bentley's (the acting teacher in this study) perspective. As such, Bentley

offers teacher reflections throughout the book as she recognizes her own impulse to assume traditional teacher roles even as she actively endeavored to co-construct an emergent curriculum with her students. Each chapter shares a case study of Bentley's classroom through explanation of emergent curriculum theory, application of theory, narrative excerpts of student discussions, pictures of finished products, and teacher reflections on the process.

Central to Bentley and Souto-Manning's approach to co-constructing an emergent curriculum with students is Freire's (1970) notion of problem-posing literacy education – a view of education that affords teachers time to pose problems through questions and give students the opportunity to answer. Thus, the students' motivation to acquire literacy skills was not predicated on the idea that 'my teacher told me to'. Rather, the culture circle discussions prompted a sense of urgency for students to recognize their own need for print skills as they engaged in authoring their own stories. By 'problem-posing' why people write, or where stories come from, students found purpose in authorship.

Part I: Emergent Curriculum: Culture Circles, Project Work, and 'Sponsors of Literacy'

Bentley and Souto-Manning frame the foundations of their curricular approach through the question, "how do stories come into our class?" (p. 11). They discuss the ways in which they recognize children as capable and position them agentively, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. They contend that valuing children's authentic abilities and stories requires dismantling traditional power structures that position the teacher as the one who holds the "power" and the "answers" (p. 13). Thus, the authors define their use of an emergent curriculum through a "bottom-up approach" as they sought to listen to students' play, interests, and questions and disrupt the traditional notions as the teacher being "all-powerful" (p. 18). Working to share the power with the students, they co-constructed the curriculum through their use of culture circles (Freire,

1970), project work, play-based authorship, and their view of early childhood teachers as “sponsors of literacy” (p. 27).

Culture circles (Freire, 1970), reminiscent of the popular ‘class meeting’, are collaborative spaces in which teachers intentionally give the “power and problem solving...back [to] the children” (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019, p. 19). Each chapter in the text is punctuated with various narrative accounts of the culture circles that occurred throughout the course of the year at the Pre-K East school. Setting the stage for the teachers’ use of culture circles, chapter 1 begins with the account of one culture circle discussion entitled “The Great Sand and Water Catastrophe” (p. 13) in which the students worked together to clean up a mess that was the result of rather exuberant play. As the teacher chose not to admonish the students, nor presented rules for playing in the sand, the students engaged in collaborative problem-solving. In doing so, Bentley and Souto-Manning present one of their tenets of their approach: “small moments and everyday stories lead to big curricula” (p. 15).

Building on the importance of culture circles within a play-based authorship approach, the authors present their understanding of the value of ‘project work’ as they set the stage for the various books that students authored during the course of *The Book Project*. ‘Project work’, they argue, provides a way for teachers to help children make sense of their interests, organize and collaborate together, and document students’ growth. As Bentley and Souto-Manning describe their use of project work through the metaphor of ‘constellations’, they consider children’s “wonderings” and questions as ‘stars’ that teachers can connect, through projects, into “an image, a constellation, that makes up the curriculum itself” (p. 21).

As the teachers sanctioned naturally-occurring play as ‘stories’ within the classroom, they took on the role of “sponsors of literacy” (p. 27) by valorizing students’ oral language as literacy

and setting the foundation for later writing. Grounded in a sociocultural view of authorship (Vygotsky, 1978; Brandt, 1998; Dyson, 2008), the notion of teachers as ‘sponsors of literacy’ positions educators as facilitators engaged in a reciprocal relationship with students as they create spaces where authentic stories and student-led authoring can flourish. However, Bentley and Souto-Manning also recognize the pressures for students to read and at a younger age. The authors problematize this push for early literacy while also offering a window into the ways Bentley navigated the academic pressures of her particular situation as she sought to honor her students’ unique strengths and development.

Part II: The Book Project or “How can our stories turn into a book?”

Part II of the text, comprised of five chapters, demonstrates the ways in which Bentley implemented culture circles, project work, and leveraged her position as a ‘sponsor of literacy’ in order to create authentic books with students that simultaneously addressed various curricular standards in Creative Writing (chapter 4), Print Concepts (chapter 5), Science and Mathematics (chapter 6), Poetry (chapter 7) and Social Studies (chapter 8).

Furthermore, chapters 4-8 provide a window into how Bentley honored children as authors by building on their prior knowledge and authentic interests, engaging them in critical conversations, and “purposefully and intentionally...complicat[ing] the uncomplicated”. As Bentley engaged with her students through culture circles, she set the foundation for students to desire to write, not because a lesson objective directed them to, but because they needed print skills for a story they were authentically motivated to write. She urged teachers to “let go of restrictive notions of authorship” (p. 70) and literacy as they engage with students’ authentic meaning-making. For example, in chapter 7, as the students participated in periodic nature observations and wrote a few words to encapsulate that particular season, they noticed that their phrases over

time resembled a poem. Seeking to honor the authentic interests of her students, Bentley took this ‘discovery’ and assembled all of the words and phrases into a poem entitled “All of the Seasons Square: A Season World” (p. 92-95) to include within their final book project.

Part III: Reflecting on The Book Project in the Larger Context of Teaching and Learning

In the final section, Bentley reflects on this documented year of her work with an emergent curriculum, but also on her desire with each new group of students to continue to share the power with young children. While she admits she is tempted each school year to rely on previously prepared lessons and ‘binders’ rather than allowing the curriculum to ‘emerge’, she contends:

You really have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It is in this discomfort that you can begin to create the space where authentic ideas can be born. When you allow the trouble to happen, when you rely on the children to come up with the answers, you start building the space in which the real work can begin (p. 120).

Bentley and Souto-Manning also argue co-constructing a curriculum with students does not position the teacher in a passive way, but rather requires more organization and leadership than didactic pedagogical methods as the teacher is the “facilitator of the unfolding” (p. 121).

In the final chapter, Bentley recounts her interview with two students from this year of *The Book Project* three years later when they were second-graders. As they perused through the books they created that year and laughed at their writing or how young they looked in their pictures, she was struck by the value of their shared memories and the community they had built together. The children she interviewed had grown up, but they remembered fondly their Pre-K classroom as a space where they were understood and respected.

Final Thoughts

As I read the story of *The Book Project* through the eyes of the teacher-researcher (Bentley) and the narrative excerpts of student discussions, I was mesmerized by the beautiful picture that emerged and reminded me of the many reasons I became an educator. In an age of accountability – when the public seems to claim that early education has lost its way (e.g. Genishi & Dyson, 2012) – Bentley and Souto-Manning’s account offers a way forward for educators who desire to navigate very real academic pressures in our field while also honoring students’ strengths and sharing the power together. By taking the time to ask questions and problematize common knowledge through culture circles and project work, Bentley gave students the opportunity to see themselves as capable, to understand their need for literacy, and to develop community.

From a pedagogical perspective, I desired to see more practical advice such as lesson plans, scripted steps, or reproducibles in the back of the book that I could simply copy and implement immediately – and yet Bentley and Souto-Manning warn that this approach will look different in each classroom as educators engage authentically in this process. As the authors invite teachers to “look for possibility” (p. 9) within the account of their particular experience, they imply a teacher professionalization and capability that some would argue is missing within the field. As such, they argue that as educators engage in the process of co-constructing curriculum with students, they are left with memories and experiences that become their “metaphorical binders” of lesson plans that will encourage them to keep pursuing this difficult, yet meaningful, work (p.120).

Overall, *Pre-K stories: Playing with authorship and integrating curriculum in early childhood* carefully examines the current tensions between academic pressures and developmentally appropriate practices within early childhood classrooms through insightful reflections and rich narrative description. As an educator and graduate student who has struggled to reconcile the increasing academic demands on young children with the need to honor their

unique strengths and development, I would recommend this text to any researcher, teacher, administrator, teacher educator, or early childhood education advocate. Together we can give young children autonomy and empower them to “shape a curriculum that might otherwise dominate them” (p. 7); we can truly embody the notion that education is not preparation for life, but rather *life itself* (Dewey, 1938).

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