Play Against Efficiency: A Synthetic Analysis of Children's and Teachers' Play as Resistance to Privatization and Control in U.S. Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

In our meta-ethnographic synthesis of two separate studies, we analyze the lived realities of early childhood educators and children in Oklahoma, U.S. navigating the persistent and intensifying pressures of efficiency and normative accountability metrics. Both studies are centrally concerned with advancing play-based curricular contexts in ECE, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Oklahoma, U.S. The first study engaged teacher action research with six pre-kindergarten-third grade Oklahoma teachers to understand how the increased pressures of standardized curricula and testing impacted teachers' capacity to enact play-based learning. The second undertook a two-year critical participatory ethnography with six ECE children in a pandemic homeschool cooperative. The study investigated practices of anti-authoritarian community and play-based inquiry as a process of authorizing children's perspectives in their learning alongside the pressures of readying the children to return to public elementary school. Through an interpretive and iterative process, we suggest that play can be conceptualized as children's and teachers' educative enactment of public space-times and reclamation of agency and autonomy. We read and understand play as a form of resistance to curricular tendencies toward order, control, and top-down authority.

Keywords

Early childhood education, play as resistance, anti-authoritarian teaching and learning, public education, school privatization, pandemic learning loss

> *Take a nap every afternoon.*
> *When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,*
> *hold hands and stick together.*
> *Be aware of wonder.*
> *Remember the little seed in the styrofoam cup:*
> *The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that*
> (Fulghum, 1986/1990, p. 6)

Introduction

Robert Fulghum's (1986/1990) classic essay, *All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* remains a cultural touchstone that captures the critical relevance of early childhood education (ECE) praxis for social life, no matter one's age. Fulghum argues that our most essential lessons about care, cooperation, and justice originate within our early socializing experiences as young children, and often, within school classrooms. Today's public education policy environment, in the U.S. and globally, devalues these lessons and instrumentalizes childhood learning as preparation for academic and career achievement. Wasmuth and Nitecki (2017) write that the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has sought to remake ECE across the globe along key features that include

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standardization of learning, a narrow focus on "core subjects, such as literacy and numeracy," high stakes testing and assessments, prescribed curricula, and increased control over teachers (p. 2). Such features of GERM, Stark and Spreen (2020) note, have originated largely from U.S. policies and political actors. GERM envisions ECE within a predominating ideology of neoliberalism, or as "a world built on relationships of competition, contract, and calculation; inhabited by a breed of autonomous, flexible and utility maximising individuals; and actualised through markets, individual choice and technical practice" (Moss, 2014, p. 17 as cited in Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017, p. 2).

In antithesis to such a vision, ECE foundations generally conceptualize early childhood as a profoundly social experience. Play, as a broad and central concept in ECE, allows children to experience and make meaning of their sociality. Professional and grassroots organizations and coalitional networks in the U.S., intra- and internationally articulate play as in global crisis and undertake research, policy advocacy, and action initiatives to defend children's right to play. For example, research and advocacy by the International Play Association, composed of twenty national councils, has documented the ways in which pandemics, war, urban development practices, and climate change disproportionately impact the play environments of economically and politically vulnerable children (IPA, n.d.). A global resurgence in teachers' union movements also contributes to resistance against GERM's effects on the conditions of teachers' work and students' learning, including advocating for increased school resources, curricular autonomy, and access to secure housing and nutrition for students and teachers, and more (Stark & Spreen, 2020). Fulghum's wisdom reminds us that ECE principles, such as play, provide important preparation for our participation in democracy and social life. In this article, we aim to contribute to understanding the impacts of policies that continue to target and standardize ECE spaces in ways that narrow and constrain play as practice (Carroll et al., 2018). Contributing to the special issue theme, we also seek to offer conceptual resources for expanding the impact of ECE traditions of theory and practice in response to global uncertainties produced through increasingly uneven distributions of power and wealth.

We draw from and synthesize two contemporaneous studies, both centrally concerned with advancing play-based curricular contexts in ECE, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Oklahoma, U.S. The first study engaged teacher action research with six Pre-K-3rd grade Oklahoma teachers, and the second undertook a two-year critical participatory ethnography with six ECE children in a pandemic homeschool cooperative. Through an interpretive and iterative process (Maeda et al., 2022), we undertook a synthetic analysis of these educational contexts via a theoretical lens of play as children's and teachers' educative enactment of collective autonomy (Bartell et al., 2019; Cook-Sather, 2020). We read and understand play as a form of resistance to curricular tendencies toward order, control, and top-down authority.

Oklahoma in Context

The U.S. educational system operates under a framework led primarily by state and local educational agencies rather than a centralized national authority. Federal legislation serves as an overarching structure that establishes accountability metrics states must meet to receive federal funding, which

partially supports some operations of public education including English language learning, special education, and school nutrition. This design provides the states flexibility to shape public funding structures, curriculum, standards, assessments, and more.

For the most part, public education begins at the age of five years old with kindergarten. While some U.S. states have publicly funded pre-kindergarten (Pre-K), which generally starts at 3 or 4 years old, Oklahoma is one of the few that, since 1998, has in place a publicly funded universal Pre-K program (Bell, 2013). Pre-K begins at 4 years old and is integrated within public elementary schools across the state (OSDE, 2025a). The state maintains its own standards which includes Pre-K across subject areas, modelled loosely after the Common Core State Standards, a national initiative to standardize learning expectations across U.S. states in 2009 (CCSS, 2010). In our study, we use ECE to refer to the context of Oklahoma's public system of ECE, Pre-K through third grade (roughly ages 4 to 8 years).

Currently, Oklahoma ranks near the bottom among all states for teacher wages, per-pupil school funding, teacher-student ratios, and standardized test achievement scores (Kelly, 2025). While Oklahoma has experienced decades of decreasing state-level investments in public education, the focus of two statewide teacher strikes in 1990 and 2018, public school districts across the state are also experiencing sudden and drastic defunding of federal education initiatives with the Trump administration's efforts to scale back and eventually fully dismantle the U.S. Department of Education (Pablo, 2025; Mervosh et al., 2025). Before his recent resignation, Oklahoma's top public education official, Ryan Walters, contributed to the state's declining teaching and learning conditions through policies that targeted teachers and teachers' unions as terroristic (Evans & Aston, 2025) and efforts to censor any curricular materials deemed "unpatriotic," even going so far as to implement an ideological assessment to out-of-state educators seeking to teach in Oklahoma (Wolfe, 2025). These conditions have exacerbated the state's troubling teacher exodus and demoralized those who remain.

Alongside "culture wars" efforts, there have been advanced efforts to privatize public education in the form of allotting a portion of public school funding for private school tuition vouchers (Walker, 2025) and to expand privately managed, publicly funded charter schools within Oklahoma. Under neoliberalism, the public institution of schooling is rhetorically championed yet structurally underfunded and hierarchically controlled by federal and state policies via standardized achievement and testing requirements (Lipman, 2013), which have increasingly pervaded ECE classrooms. In the current and uncertain times of the new Right political climate, predominating neoliberal GERM policies work together, and sometimes in tension, with more extreme efforts to divest of public education altogether under the guise of supporting parental "choice" and "efficiency" (Jones, 2025). For example, in Oklahoma, teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders with the U.S. Department of Education-funded Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) are grappling with the recent, sudden cancellation of its initiative to expand play-based learning in ECE settings. At the same time, standards revisions for early grades in public education have doubled down on "pro-American exceptionalism", free market fundamentalism, and bible-based virtue education in ECE (OSDE, 2025b). These reform movements reverberate into classrooms, burdening educators and school leaders with moral and logistical uncertainty as

they navigate standardized achievement metrics alongside increasingly scarce resources.

While contestations over ECE curriculum and pedagogy in our current moment have certainly intensified, ECE has long been a focus of broader social policy. Expanding access to Pre-K had been a cornerstone policy goal of the previous Democratic Biden administration. An undercurrent of these policy efforts presumes that low-income children, who are most targeted and affected by accountability reforms and their effects, can improve school performance with an earlier leg-up on academic direct instruction in ECE contexts. Co-investigator of a longitudinal study of a state-run pre-K program in Tennessee (Durkin et al., 2022), Dale Farran, describes her interpretation of study's findings that students enrolled in the program had significantly worse outcomes across all measures as they entered middle school – including test scores, behavior, and learning disorders – than the study's control group:

> Higher-income families are not choosing this kind of preparation," she explains. "And why would we assume that we need to train children of lower-income families earlier?" Farran points out that families of means tend to choose play-based preschool programs with art, movement, music and nature. Children are asked open-ended questions, and they are listened to (as cited in Kamenetz, 2022).

Robin Holly (2023) uses the term, academic shovedown, to describe this form of preparation in ECE, which is produced by a complex ecosystem of material and affective infrastructure, from scripted for-profit curricula and assessment products and the ways in which they shape temporal and spatial relations in the classroom to the emotional economy of testing (for example, which produces feelings of pride in achieving and shame in failure to achieve). Ultimately, the ecosystem of academic shovedown into ECE produces a curriculum of social efficiency and control that conceptualizes learning as a private process, internal to and measurable of an individual child's knowledge. Farran and her colleagues provide stunning evidence that academic shovedown, or the curricular and pedagogical impacts on ECE of prioritizing normative school achievement, is not healthy for young children (Durkin et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how quickly standardized mechanisms of accountability could be halted when deemed inconvenient (Starr, 2021). However, post-pandemic, policy think tanks and proponents of GERM have articulated a crisis of pandemic-related "learning loss," resulting in an intensification of pressures for ECE teachers to prepare young children to "achieve" on standardized tests and assessments to catch-up (e.g., Dorn et al., 2020). Such framings of learning loss do not necessarily reflect the actual experiences and perspectives of ECE teachers, children, and families captured in studies during the pandemic (e.g., Jones, 2025), and have further narrowed opportunities for play, contributing to skepticism of its educative potential. Play-based learning initiatives, such as Oklahoma's REL, have been characterized as wasteful and inefficient in stark contrast to long-established evidence in support, which even includes enhancing students' normatively defined academic achievement (Parker et al., 2022). Even as they face uncertain federal funding support and an unfriendly policy environment, ECE play advocates in Oklahoma persist in their work to sustain and expand policies, practices, and opportunities for play in

ECE for all, regardless of socioeconomic status. For example, educational leaders in the state's largest urban public school district, which serves a diverse and primarily low-income, majority racial minority student population, have begun developing public Montessori-based elementary schools and one nature- and inquiry-based public school. Advocates and school leaders have developed intra-school networks of support in order to advance strategies to help them navigate external standardization and testing pressures while protecting play and student-led inquiry.

Conceptualizing Play: Public, Private, and Contested Terrains

Rooted in the intellectual traditions of sociocultural and constructionist theory, play is defined in ECE literature as a child-directed, intrinsically motivated activity that fosters holistic development through active engagement, social interaction, and creative exploration. It is characterized by spontaneity, joy, and flexibility, enabling children to construct knowledge, test hypotheses, and negotiate meaning within their environments (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006; Nilsson et al., 2018). Play facilitates peer collaboration, conflict resolution, and empathy-building through shared experiences (e.g., pretend play, group projects). Play can be understood as children's participation within various, sometimes overlapping communities of practice, in which they negotiate their participation in and sense-making of cultural norms and language through social interactions mediated by their material environment. Thus, we use the term *space-times* of play to foreground the significance of the socio-material conditions within which play happens as well as its temporal precarity within institutions that are generally ruled by adult authority and interpretation.

Beyond and quite resonant with sociocultural and constructionist theories of children's play, literature that prioritizes how children's existence in space and time is mediated by power and authority is an important resource for understanding this precarity. Tracy Skelton (2009), in a review of the interdisciplinary literature within children's geographies, writes,

> [I]t is important to remember that [play] is complexly and problematically socially and culturally constructed. It is spatially and temporally specific. To a large extent, adults define 'play'. While children have always played, what has been understood, accepted, seen as desirable play, and the correct spaces and times for play, have changed over time and space; play does not have a stable identity (p. 1433).

Dominant educational policies frequently marginalize play, framing it as lacking instructional merit and positioning it outside the realm of formal learning. Despite extensive research demonstrating play's central role in children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, many stakeholders persist in viewing it as a non-academic activity rather than an essential pedagogical practice. This policy orientation not only diminishes the value of play but also reinforces a narrow, outcome-driven model of education that constrains authentic learning experiences for young children.

In their multi-year empirical study of several UK early grades schools, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2018) argue that the "datafication" of early childhood, or the increased pressures to collect performance and

other quantified data to define educational success, functions as a kind of disciplinary power. Data become a "socially created set of information or knowledge which also have influence on practices and subjectivities" (p. 6). Albin-Clark et al. (2024) argue that datafication in ECE has increasingly narrowed time and space in classrooms for play and, interrelatedly, agency for young children in public schools. We don't presume ECE scholars and practitioners always agree with regard to what constitutes play or play-based learning. However, building on these areas of literature, and especially ECE resistance literature (Albin-Clark et al., 2024; Yoon, 2021), we theorize play in the context of public schooling an inherently social practice and as an enactment of agency and autonomy: important foundations for sustaining public or common forms of life and living. We suggest that this conceptual framing is useful for understanding and imaginatively countering the ecosystem of power that overtly and insidiously produces a curriculum of unfreedom.

Meta-Ethnographic Synthesis as Methodology

The first study (Robin) undertook practitioner action research to examine the impacts of mandated standardized assessments on PK-3rd grade public school teachers' pedagogical and curricular experiences (Holly, 2023). In the increasingly "constrained" spaces of ECE in classrooms that face increasing pressures related to standardized curriculum expectations and assessment pressures, teachers described shared lived experiences of increasingly narrowed opportunities for play-based learning. Robin engaged purposive and snowball methods to collect in-depth qualitative survey responses from 26 teachers with at least three years ECE teaching experience from across the state. From survey respondents, she gathered a collaborative inquiry community with 6 teachers with self-described strong pedagogical commitments to play-based learning and conducted a series of individual (1-2) and group interviews (2) to undertake collaborative meaning-making on the challenges and opportunities for play in Oklahoma's ECE classrooms. Robin's study demonstrated the impacts of academic shovedown on ECE teachers' practice, including constraining their autonomy, creating moral-ethical conflicts between their ECE commitments to play-based learning and inquiry and school, state, and federal mandates for standardized, rote curricula and assessment.

Erin's study employed a critical participatory ethnography of a two-year (2020-2022) ECE pandemic homeschool cooperative, "pod school" for short (see Dyke (2023) for a more in-depth discussion on methodology). Part research project, part logistical need, pod school grew from a longer term shared childcare cooperative. Six children, including Erin's son, spent their kindergarten (four children) and first grade (two children), and subsequently first and second grade years, in her house-turned school, where they co-constructed their learning with an explicit ethical commitment to shared authority and play-based inquiry. For one semester (fall of 2020), the children were enrolled in their school district's virtual learning program. The study was methodologically informed by Wissman et al.'s (2015) notion of research pedagogies and the complexities of power, agency, and ethics in participatory research with young children (Holland et al., 2010).

While Erin led this study, Robin was a regular thought partner in the curricular and pedagogical practice of pod school throughout its existence and was also a former teacher in the same school that one of the older students in the

group attended for kindergarten. In turn, as Robin's dissertation advisor, Erin provided support and critical friendship (in the collaborative tradition of teacher action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), as Robin undertook her analysis and writing. Due to the contemporaneity and resonance of our studies, the data, questions, and analysis process of both studies were in regular conversation.

Our synthetic analysis is grounded in and builds from these formative conversations. Here, we undertake a more focused process, drawing methodological resources from meta-ethnography as a form of qualitative synthesis, which centers the importance of "primary researchers' contextual knowledge and use of their original data in the synthesis process to develop new conceptual and theoretical perspectives" from various qualitative studies (Maeda et al., 2022, p. 4; Huf & Raggl, 2017).

> Meta-ethnography typically employs seven synthesis phases which Noblit and Hare (1999) describe as (1) getting started; (2) deciding what is relevant to the initial interest; (3) reading the studies; (4) determining how studies are related; (5) translating the studies into one another; (6) synthesizing translations; and (7) expressing the synthesis (pp. 109–113) (as cited in Maeda et al., 2022, p. 4).

To start, we first revisited our earlier conversations during the formative phases of our studies. Then, we began an iterative process of moving back and forth between our research write-ups and primary data sources, which included survey responses, journal entries, and interview transcripts (Robin's study) and fieldnotes, videos, photographs, curriculum materials, and artifacts (Erin's study). Over the course of six months, we engaged regular meetings to interpret our studies together in the current political context of ECE in Oklahoma, nationally, and beyond. Our process began by key concepts that grounded our respective studies: play, authority, agency, power, freedom, and control. We then mapped out relevant events and interactions from our primary data sources. Moving back and forth in a process of drafting potential themes, re-interpreting and synthesizing our data, we fleshed out and refined our analysis in relation to the literature and our collective theoretical orientations toward play.

In our analysis, we illustrate two significant ways we can understand play as a crucial form of children's and teachers' resistance to the increasingly constrained, politicized curricular contexts of ECE classrooms: First, we describe how ECE classroom space-times are authoritatively mediated by private curricula and testing companies. The standardization and privatization of ECE curricula individualizes learning and externally directs its purpose, enactment, and evaluation. We then illustrate the ways in which play in our studies can be interpreted as the creation of public, common space-times of collective meaning-making in opposition to standardization and privatization of classrooms. Play transforms and locally re-directs the *purpose* of classroom space-times. Second, we draw on our study data to demonstrate how play, as public space-time, is enacted by teachers and children reclaiming their agency and autonomy in the teaching and learning process. In other words, play transforms the *relations* within classrooms among students, teachers, and the wider world. Together, our analytic themes aim to conceptualize the dimensions of play as resistance to neoliberal impositions on ECE.

Standardization and Privatization of ECE Space-Times

In the first semester of Erin's two-year pandemic pod school, each of the six children were enrolled in their district's virtual school option. The virtual elementary program was hastily made available to families concerned about sending their child to school amidst the rising spread of the virus. Originally a program for credit recovery, Edgenuity exponentially expanded as a company by marketing products for virtual K12 programs. While each child was assigned a virtual public school teacher, teachers had little autonomy in modifying Edgenuity's program or grade accounting system (Dyke, 2023). Robin was a (non-virtual) kindergarten teacher in the same district at this time. For Robin and her collaborative inquiry community of study participants/fellow ECE teachers, COVID-19 pandemic era policies intensified already increasingly strained time for curating classroom learning experiences via play-based methods, including planning play centers and interdisciplinary methods.

We use the term space-time to center how such curricular efficiency policies make requirements on teachers' and students' *time* to utilize certain tools outside of their control (e.g., pre-purchased mandated curricular worksheets or computer-based assessments) and, inextricably related, how such tools orient people's bodies within the *space* of the classroom (e.g., students sit upright at their desks in front of a worksheet or computer, teachers move to each individual student to ensure they are oriented to completing individual tasks) (Albin-Clark et al., 2024).

All ECE teachers participating in Robin's (Holly, 2023) study expressed that computer-based assessments required significant amounts of time, including time for troubleshooting, helping students to log on to the programs, teaching young children how to operate the computer and to use the specific assessment program, and managing students' noise-levels and stillness in order to complete the assessments (pp. 113-115). Robin also found that her ECE teacher participants understood the required assessments as conceptually flawed. In such instances, the teacher does not have an opportunity to deliberate with or alter the assessment software and has no access to the private space of the curriculum and assessment company that owns the software. We share exemplary data excerpt from a first grade teacher, Nova:

> I'm reading over [a student's] shoulder today because I was just curious what he's doing, and the passage I mean, it was like: "Today is laundry day. I've washed and sorted all my clothes, and I am about to put them away. Then I realized there's one red sock in my white pile of clothes and then it's like, OH NO! Now all my clothes are_____." They're supposed to pick pink and I'm like you know that he's frustrated, like that's not a "looking in the passages for information" issue. That's a... "we're not doing laundry at home because we're in first grade" issue...I was just like really; this is the question? You would automatically think it would turn everything red because [the answers] were blue, pink, then like two random words like dirty and something else. I could see a kid picking dirty. But this right here, it doesn't tell me anything teachable... that wasn't a comprehension of that paragraph at all for fluency...that's just some random thing that happens that you would just have to know.

In the standardized, privatized space-time of curricular efficiency, Nova (nor her school or district administrators) have a straightforward way to question or revise problematic questions.

Another teacher participant describes an interaction between the "owl" character (seen on the computer screen in Image 1) that serves as the assessment facilitator:

> [The owl] talks to them too much, it does. I mean they're; they're trying to concentrate on what it just asked them but then it's sitting there talking and it's like hurry up quit talking. I mean I've got one little boy that is autistic, and he argues with the little owl that talks to him. He's like, "no, I'm ready to answer now." I mean he sits and argues with it. I mean, I have several of them who will even say, "Will you tell him to quit talking to me right now?" And I'm like "baby, I can't <laugh> ask it to stop talking to you," because they're all ready to answer but three times the same words, three times [iStation repeats each question 3 times] to make sure you hear it. (Indie)

Indie's experience illustrates the ways in which such curricular and assessment tools privatize and individualize learning between the student and the software platform, rendering teachers as simply facilitators. Indie's students looked to her to aid them in speaking back to the "owl," however she had to inform them that she did not have the ability to "ask it to stop talking to you."

Similarly, while Erin's pod school children were enrolled in virtual learning, her students were required to take monthly standardized assessments, sometimes proctored by their virtual school teacher via Zoom. Erin's experiences resonated strongly with Robin and her collaborative inquiry community – the assessments produced very little pedagogical information of value, often creating self- and inter-student competitive feelings as they viewed their progress graph go up or down at the end of each assessment session.

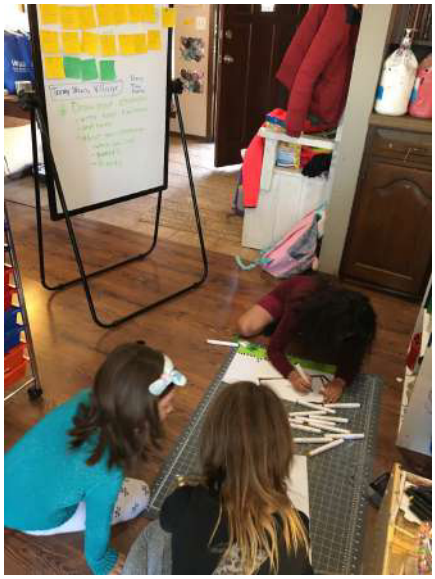

Image 1 (top). A pod school student taking the district-required monthly literacy assessment. Image 2 (bottom). Pod school children making graphics for their collaboratively authored comedic film skit about a village besieged by a zombie virus spread through food.

While above images are from pod school, they capture the ways in which the required computer-based assessments individualized, internalized, and privatized learning in contrast to the social, collective activities of creation through play.

Play for Creating Public Space-Times

In the fall of 2020, an Edgenuity social studies unit focused on teaching time and space. Erin's pod school students were tasked with creating a 12-month calendar alongside worksheets learning the basic elements of a map. In the introduction to the unit, Edgenuity developers wrote: "How did Christopher Columbus know where the new world was? He didn't. But once he found it, he drew a map so that others could find it. … In this lesson, you will learn how to find your way around – and to show others how!"

The narrative hook inviting children to "be like Columbus" reveals the colonial epistemological perspective of Edgenuity curriculum designers. The "science" of map-making, or cartography was:

> a crucial cog in the bureaucratic machinery of colonial rule. First, [maps] acted as advertisements, enticing potential settlers through the promise of available land covering a vast and fictitiously empty landscape (Kain & Baigent, 1992). Second, they were the "actual instruments of imperialism," simplifying and making the local situation legible to an outsider (Dyke et al., 2020, p. 34).

Like colonial cartographic science, the curriculum hook primed students to learn a series of externally and privately determined facts and skills while subtly normalizing and recruiting their uncritical participation in settler colonialism, characterizing it as a progressive project. This particular social studies unit served as a crucial turning point in which Erin began to refuse the majority of the virtual curriculum. This posed a challenge as the children's completion of the virtual curriculum was already emotionally draining and time-intensive. Simply uploading their completed worksheets to the system required 3-4 hours of Erin's time every Friday afternoon. Because the children's virtual teachers knew Erin and their unique situation (and also despised much of Edgenuity's platform and curricular assumptions), they allowed Erin to upload and justify some alternative assignments, including their collaborations on co-authored stories realized in the forms of digital books, shadow puppetry, and plays.

Informed by Erin's study of children's cultural geographies and counter-cartography, she re-designed the time and space unit to reconceptualize maps as cultural tools for collectively describing and interpreting space rather than as tools for abstraction and simplification. The purpose of the learning context transformed from externally imposed compliance with the software platform and toward playful, collective inquiry into children's sense-making of their learning context situated in space and time. Taking inspiration from a community mapping project, "Mapping Joy and Pain" (Krinke, n.d.), in which residents contributed to spatially representing their memories of joy and pain across Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN, Erin created a "Happy/Sad" map on a large piece of white paper, outlining the floor plan of the one-story house-turned-pod school. The children drew pictures, wrote themselves, and/or dictated to her, using dark pink post-its for sad feelings and bright green post-its for happy feelings. Green post-its dotted

spaces of play in the dress-up area, art table, and their favorite hide-and-seek spots. Dark pink post-its surrounded the carpet where they held the majority of their more didactic learning (group time), recalling frustrations with teasing or disruptions as Erin tried to get them on "school time" and "ready to learn." In other writing, Erin details her constant percolating unease and uncertainty about whether she was preparing them for standardized expectations they would encounter at the "next level" when they eventually returned to in-person public school (Dyke, 2023).

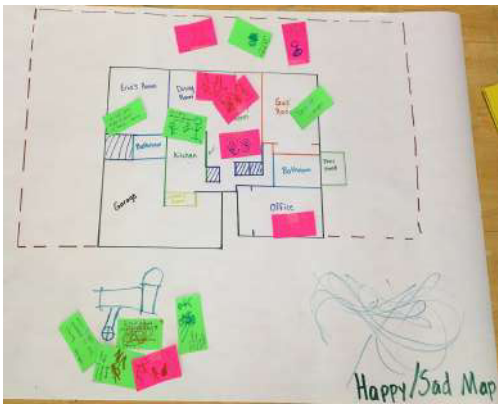

Image 3. "Happy/Sad Map" from September 8, 2020.

On a large white space on the page, the children added a symbol of a swing to represent the tree swing in the front yard. Erin hadn't thought to include it. Nearly every child included a green post-it near the swing indicating a happy memory of "pushing" (not swinging, but being the one to push). One dark pink post-it described a child's frustration with a parent who did not push them in the way they liked (they wanted to be pushed and *spun*, not just pushed!). Interpreting their additions to the map in relation to Erin's iterative interpretation of play with Robin, she came to realize that the swing was a unique space-time.

The furthest point in the pod school yard away from the house and close to the street, the swing was a public space in which the children navigated their social relationships relatively far away from the gaze or expectations from any supervising adult. At the swing, the children interacted with their across-the-street neighbor, Steve, and made new friends with passing dogs walking with their owners or the neighborhood cats. Often, they took turns having one child push all five of the others piled on the saucer swing, as they shouted with glee and encouraged even bigger pushes. They experimented with motion and positioning, tested centripetal force and their limits of their strength, told endless stories, and observed the ever-changing foliage and diverse animal residents of the surrounding massive elm and hackberry trees. On many occasions, they'd take various toys and art supplies to the swing to include in their games (ruining a forgotten library book or two in the process). By the end of their two years together, Zita came to be recognized as the strongest and most skilled swing pusher among the group, publicly acknowledged by the children as such during group-time share-outs on many occasions.

Image 4. Zita pushing children on the front yard tree swing on August, 18, 2020.

Interpreting the Happy/Sad map and their descriptive cultural mapping led us to understand the significance of the swing as a

public space-time in which they freely co-mingled with the human and non-human world of the neighborhood with very little adult intervention or direction. While Erin felt external pressure and anxiety to follow the district curriculum, she had flexibility and authority as a parent to be able to reject it and assert time and space for ensuring and interpreting the children's play outside the confines of the school building. Alternatively, the virtual teachers' relationships with their virtual students were more intensely mediated by the privatized space-time of the software platform and its time- and record-keeping demands.

In Robin's study, teachers also described learning from students' experiences and reflections rooted in their training within the practice traditions of the ECE profession and using this knowledge to create alternative public space-times. Such alternative space-time-making included collectivizing children's anxieties around the mandated assessments as a normal response to the ways in which the programs were constructed and using socio-emotional learning strategies to make visible the problems with these curricular and assessment programs. In addition, teachers reported creatively re-working the curriculum, as we turn to in more-depth next.

Loss and Reclamation of Teachers' and Children's Autonomy

While play can reorient the purpose of learning within classrooms, it also transforms the relations among students, teachers, and the institution itself. We draw on our data to illustrate the ways in which desires to play and to create the pedagogical conditions for play were understood by Robin's teacher participants and Erin's pod school students as motivation to resist pressures of atomization and feelings of dispossession of agency and freedom of self- and community-directed inquiry. Creating the conditions for play and playing were positioned by teachers and students as reclaiming agency and curricular autonomy in their teaching and learning.

Accountability reforms, particularly the proliferation of scripted curricula and standardized testing, have dramatically curtailed early childhood educators' ability to exercise independent professional judgment in their classrooms. Not all teacher participants felt they had the capacity to plan quality play-based space-times in their classrooms. Collaborative inquiry community member, Sarina described her frustration with the loss of pedagogical decision-making to computer-based standardized assessments, "We don't freeze, and we don't lose data." ECE teachers described a landscape increasingly dominated by externally imposed mandates. This resulted in a widespread sense of disempowerment among Robin's participants, who felt profound pressure to conform to rigid standards and frameworks that prioritize academic outcomes at the expense of holistic child development.

This erosion of pedagogical freedom is vividly described by educators themselves. As Sarina, a kindergarten teacher with 22 years of experience, reflects, "I know play is how they learn best, but there's just not enough time anymore. We have to get through the benchmarks, and if I let them play, I feel like I'm not doing my job the way they want." Nova, a first-grade teacher, echoed this tension: "There's a lot of pressure to show growth on the data. Sometimes I feel like if I let them play, I'm not doing what's expected of me as a teacher." Indie similarly noted, "I feel torn. The district wants numbers and proof, but I see kids need to move, to talk, to play. It's like I'm always choosing

between what's right and what's required." These accounts are reinforced by survey respondents in Robin's study, for example, "There's this constant pressure to prove that my students are learning, and that means less and less time for centers or dramatic play. I feel like I'm always justifying why we need blocks or art in the classroom." Sarina's and Nova's experiences evidence the prioritization of "relationships of competition, contract, and calculation" that characterize neoliberal educational policy described by Moss (2014) (p. 17, as cited in Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017, p. 2).

Robin's participants describe a "discourse of control" in which their expertise is subordinated to bureaucratic expectations, eroding both trust and professional identity. Constance articulated this loss of autonomy: "It used to be that I could decide how to teach a concept. Now, I have to follow the script and make sure we hit all the [data] points. Sometimes I feel like I'm just checking boxes instead of teaching." Milani, a Pre-K teacher, referenced the challenge to her philosophy of play-based and developmentally appropriate practices, stating, "You war with that. [With] time for free choice centers, you want to have time for things that we know are important to the kids, and their development." Sarina added, "We used to have a lot more say in how we taught," highlighting participants' experiences of the intrusion of scripted curriculum on their autonomy. This imposition left her feeling mistrusted, or in her words, "it's like they don't trust us to know what's best for our kids", a sentiment echoed by survey respondents and others in the collaborative inquiry community discussions.

The tension between professional values and systemic demands is palpable, as teachers like Indie confessed, "I feel like a robot some days" as she follows the pacing guide expressing not really teaching the way she knows works but more she highlights that "learning [is more of] the *institutional* type of standing in front of them teaching." Indie elaborated:

> There's not the trust in education, I mean, COVID didn't help that any, but I mean instead of just letting us be teachers and trusting us with that, it's always been kind of, it's like well we need to have, we still have to have the *control* even though they've never stepped foot in a classroom as kind of the legislators and the big, higher [administration], they want everything to have equity is another reason, and that's never gonna happen [without play-based learning and educator autonomy] (Indie).

While educators in Robin's study shared their experiences and collective feelings that their professional knowledge and expertise as ECE teachers were being eroded by academic shovedown, Erin's pod school students' experiences elaborate the effects of teachers' loss of pedagogical autonomy on students' freedom and participation in their learning.

In Erin's study, this loss of pedagogical freedom mirrors, in many ways, the children's experiences as they transitioned from pod school to public school as second and third graders in the 2022-2023 academic year. In May of 2023, Erin hosted "pod school summer camp" the week after public school ended for the summer. For a week, she hosted five former pod students (Zita had moved with her family out of state the previous summer). At the beginning of the week, she gathered the children on the living room carpet to reflect on their first year in public school in relation to pod school. At the kids' request, they started by looking back at old photos, videos, and stories they created over the

years. Next, she asked them to take some time to draw and write to brainstorm their favorite and least favorite things about pod and public school.

Much of the responses for Table 1 are unsurprising. Their favorite experiences in pod and public school point to space-times in which they socialize and build relationships, move their bodies with relative freedom, and have autonomy. For public school, these space-times are described as primarily recess and lunch – space-times of public sociality and play. In pod school, the children only specifically reference what they called "video game time" or the hour of free play following lunch.

Table 1: Favorite/least favorite things about pod and public school

Favorite things about pod school	**Favorite things about public school**
"I can move."	"recess"
"You some times can play play play"	"I have firends [friends]"
Drawing of a bug [collecting, investigating, building homes for, and studying bugs was a big theme in pod school in which we spent a lot of time outside and in the woods]	"cas my teecher is nice"
"Frins" [friends] + drawing of a stick figure and a heart	"it's lunch is good"
"video games"	"have no Erin" [Leila mad at Erin in the moment]
"it's fun"	
Least favorite things about pod school	**Least favorite things about public school**
"erin losing her phone"	"learning"
"Waiting" + drawing of a stick figure in a box	"learning"
"Erin farting" [Erin's son, joking]	"learning"
"erins farting" each word drawn in a circle with a slash across [Leila, joking]	"learning"
"Max sumtimes"	"learning

When it came time to describe their least favorite things about pod and public school, every one of the five children wrote *"learning"* as their least favorite aspect of public school. For pod school, they did not write "learning" but used more specific words. They did not enjoy "waiting" for everyone to be ready at the same time to do something, Erin's constant forgetfulness amidst the chaos of the day ("Erin losing her phone"), and the occasional times that Erin's son, Max, had a hard time sharing her with others all marked very specific disruptions to our regular activities. Other responses demonstrate the playful, familiar relationship between Erin and the kids (jokes about Erin farting, lots of giggles during share-out). After the brainstorming session ended, they re-gathered as a group to have a conversation about the brainstorm. Erin asked them to describe what "learning" meant to them, and they shared phrases like "worksheets,"

"sitting at our desks and working," "morning work" (worksheets), and "sitting still and being quiet." As a fifth grader now, Erin's son continues to persistently use "learning" to refer to these specific forms of teaching and learning at school. For example, Max exclaimed his excitement recently for a special day in which his teacher allowed students in his class to bring cozy blankets and pillows to read their choice of books all day long. He shouted, "Yay! No learning today!" (as if choice reading is not learning!).

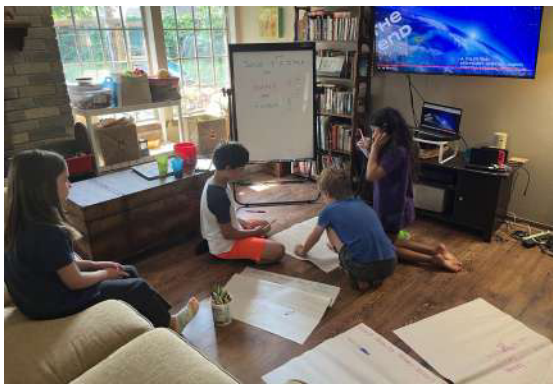

Image 5. Former pod school students visiting and reading after interpreting our "Favorite/Least Favorite things about pod and public school" activity. The television displays the end credits of a short film, "Space Ghost", the children wrote, directed, and acted in the previous summer.

Using the whiteboard, we culminated our activity with a co-authored statement, which I scribed, that summarized our interpretations of their writing: "School is always a place of control and freedom." Satisfied with the summary, we moved on to get back to "play, play, play" and the continued negotiation of shared authority.

Engaging with Erin's study, we notice the importance of the pod school children's reflections on their teachers. In the activity, the children described their love of their teachers as rooted in moments when they felt listened to and when they were allowed to play or engage in collaborative activities – times in which teachers honored children's agency and autonomy. Resonantly, among Robin's ECE teacher participants, play was narrated as a form of grassroots resistance to the prevailing regime of efficiency and curricular control and a reclamation of their own professional autonomy.

Educators described adapting their practice to fit both their beliefs and the demands placed upon them. Sarina shared, "I try to sneak in play during transitions or after we finish the required activities. It's not the same as before, but I do what I can." Nova recounted, "Sometimes I turn a math lesson into a game or let them use blocks after we finish the worksheet. It's little things, but it helps." Indie noted, "I let them have five extra minutes at centers if we finish early. It's not much, but it's something." Another shared, "Sometimes I combine the math lesson with a game, just so they can move and talk. It's not the same as free play, but it's one way I try to keep some joy in learning."

ECE teachers positioned play-based learning as a subversive act that challenged the primacy of data-driven instruction and reasserted the value of children's agency. Sarina stated, "Letting them play, even if it's just for a few minutes, feels like I'm pushing back. I know it matters." Nova confided, "If I can get away with a little extra play, I do. It's my way of resisting all the pressure to just do academics." Indie shared, "Sometimes I let them build with blocks longer if I see they're really engaged. I guess that's my little rebellion against all the rules." Educators use play to subvert rigid curricula, asserting their expertise in child development (Pyle & Daniels, 2017), challenge the homogenization of learning experiences, and honor socio-cultural diversity (Hesterman &

Targowska, 2020). Reclaiming space-times for play meant reclaiming their own and children's pedagogical autonomy (Parker et al., 2022).

In the pod project, Erin actively listened and tried to respond pedagogically to children's autonomous and semi-guided play in order to afford their agency in their learning and to authorize their perspectives, frustrations, and collective interests (cf. Paley, 1993). Likewise, in Robin's collaborative inquiry community discussions, ECE teachers authorized one another's experiences and perspectives as they negotiated top-down pedagogical control of their practice and worked to share agency and authority with their young students.

Conclusion

In our meta-ethnographic synthesized study, we sought to illuminate the lived realities of early childhood educators and children in Oklahoma navigating the persistent and intensifying pressures of accountability reforms and the logic of efficiency. Our analysis reveals that, in both contexts, the logic of efficiency not only narrows the possibilities for play, inquiry, and authentic learning but privatizes and externalizes control of ECE space-times. In public school settings, educators described the loss of pedagogical freedom, increased surveillance, and the erosion of trust in their professional knowledge. The pressure to conform to scripted curricula and data-driven mandates left many feeling de-skilled and forced to compromise their beliefs about and commitments to the developmental health and well-being of young children.

Yet, even within these constraints, teachers undertook acts of reclamation and resistance. Teachers snuck in play where possible, adapted lessons to include playful elements, and found small ways to assert their expertise and values. In Erin's pod school context, the absence of external mandates allowed for the co-construction of curriculum and the flourishing of play as a site of agency, meaning-making, and joy. However, even here, the shadow of accountability and the anticipation of re-entry into standardized schooling influenced curricular decisions and the emotional landscape of teaching and learning. In both contexts, making these pressures visible and critiquing them through reflection and collaborative inquiry was important for resisting these pressures and expanding play.

Across both studies, play emerges not simply as a pedagogical approach but as a public social practice and a reclamation of agency. In line with ECE literature documenting the impacts of academic shovedown on ECE contexts (e.g., Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017), our studies contribute to theorizing play as a form of resistance to the logic of social efficiency employed to justify educational policy responses to narratives of post-pandemic learning loss crises, among others, that conveniently turn our heads away from social and economic inequity.

Returning to Fulghum's (1986/1990) essay, we conclude by firmly stating that play is not an extracurricular luxury but an essential right of childhood and of life at any age. By conceptualizing play as a form of resistance to the powerful politics of privatization of education and hierarchical control of curricula, we affirm our commitments to traditions of ECE pedagogies in which we must hold hands and stick together, be aware of wonder, and remind ourselves that we are more like seeds than robots.

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