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Structured Spaces of Play in a Southwestern U.S. Urban Elementary Classroom: Dialectics of Community and Academic Rigor

G. Sue Kasun

Sixteen bodies attentively listened from a six foot square blue carpet, facing a small white board covered mostly in instructional posters, hand-made by their teacher, Ms. Chamorro.¹ Ms. Chamorro has just asked her 2nd graders at her Title I elementary school where they can get information for research. Nearly all students' hands flew up in eager anticipation of being called upon, and most did not contain themselves as they called out answers.

"The computer! The Internet!" students called out.

"We can get it from people we know," explained Monique, the one African-American student in the class of otherwise Latino students.

"You can gather information from the TV," Joey, one of the usually quieter boys said.

"Uh huh, right!" the teacher encouraged the students. Other responses ranged from video games to buildings to libraries, highlighting a breadth and depth of knowledge encouraged by the high academic expectations and the instructional structuring their teacher had for them. She eventually focused on the responses which would help lead into an introduction about a large project students would complete on biographies.

"Books," another boy called out, "You can get information books about animals."

Ms. Chamorro asked, "Is that fiction or nonfiction?"

The boy responded, "It's expository text."

Ms. Chamorro smiled broadly at the boy's use of a higher academic register and exclaimed, "Wow!" She launched into a larger discussion of biography writing the students would begin.

The vignette above demonstrates one of several structures one teacher used regularly in her instruction—connecting what students knew and had studied to the work they were about to start. Ms. Chamorro taught the structuring of responses (structuring not often found in many U.S. K-12 classrooms), including the use of academic language and complete sentences. The teacher also facilitated the students'

engagement in multiple curricular spaces, ranging from students' social networks to the school building to various media, including television and Internet. The vignette also shows the spontaneous and unpredictable responses students offer—moments I explain as anti-structure moments, or places of creativity for students to grow in their education. In this article, I theorize how structure and anti-structure work in a dialectical manner, based on ethnographic observations of a public schoolteacher and her students during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Current debates surrounding the field of education focus heavily on school accountability, including state-mandated, standardized testing (Au, 2009). The mandated testing means that teachers work to get students to pass tests, and in schools where students have performed poorly, there is a heavy reliance on the curriculum which correlates with the test items. The accountability movement stems from purported efforts to improve the education for all students, particularly students from groups who have historically been under-served, including African American, Latino, and lower socio-economic status students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Educational researchers have demonstrated that this accountability trend has been damaging for students in terms of the quality of instruction they receive, including the kind of curriculum to which they are exposed (Au, 2009; De Lissoy & McLaren, 2003; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Valenzuela, 2004). Similarly, the accountability movement, with its focus on standards and test scores, has failed to “recognize the mediating role that schools play in the production of space (or social context) through the education of place makers (or citizens)” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620). It follows that schools where historically underserved youth are receiving increasingly proscribed and prescribed curricula become places of increasingly limited possibilities. In this article, I refer to space as a geographic location while place becomes a contextually imbued location shared by social actors.

Undoubtedly, children deserve better than the kinds of education that have been critiqued during this current era of accountability. In this article, I explore how educational and anthropological theory can be applied to understand how one teacher's educational practices among historically under-served students can be understood as a deviation from the nefarious classroom practices which have been persuasively critiqued (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Noddings, 2007; Sloan, 2007). I investigate how this Latina teacher and students in an under-served population create structures of learning. These structures work differently to create places of learning that transgress both common educational practices and the expectations of what can ordinarily happen in the physical spaces of urban schools. I do this in an effort to “take space seriously” in educational research from a critical lens, which often overlooks any analysis of space or place (Helfenbein & Taylor, 2009). Following, I briefly discuss theories of learning and situate my approach in those theories.

Since the field of education became an academic discipline in the U.S., theories of learning have shifted among behaviorism, constructivism, and socio-cultural theory (Palincsar, 1998). Most recently, the latter two have been increasingly theorized

and offered as means by which teachers may work most effectively with students. Constructivists tend to emphasize the internal processes of meaning making which are activated for learners; socio-cultural theorists focus more on notion that all learning is “inherently social” and not located solely within the learner (Palincsar, 1998). Both constructivists and socio-cultural theorists rely heavily on the revolutionary work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and his demonstration of how meaning was made both in the learner’s social context and in the learner’s mind. Scaffolding has been suggested as a key instructional approach within constructivism; by facilitating what students can already do, teachers can help students shift toward new understandings through incremental and subsequent building upon students’ prior knowledge (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). While these theories and understandings regarding learning are helpful, I offer a reframing about the way educators perceive learning.

This article highlights the way one Latina teacher and her students create structures for understanding inside and outside the classroom. I argue those structures help shape learning, and, consequently, learning occurs from outside and alongside those structures in learning communities or consensually constructed places of learning. While the space of her classroom was one physical location of this learning, this class was able to take its learning into multiple places. These places are “Thirdspaces” of learning, or a “constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, and meanings” (Soja, 1996, p. 2). Both the teacher and the students are transgressing boundaries which ordinarily contain the students like the ones in this study, in terms of the way they are measured by state and federal accountability standards, including low-income, Hispanic, and English language learners. I see the *structures* implemented by this teacher as pedagogical tools and the expansive places created by them in which unstructured thinking and learning may occur as *anti-structure*. I also look at the construction of structures of the classroom community itself and how the structures may shift in multiple contexts in the learning environment. I focus on a classroom of historically under-served students—in this case, primarily Latino students—the very students who are most likely to be the recipients of mandated-testing oriented curriculum.

This work draws upon anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1969, 1975, 1982) research regarding structure and anti-structure; Turner argues that these occur dialectically and that consensually understood structure is a necessary condition for anti-structure to be able to occur. He demonstrates there are liminal moments in which community is created—in anti-structure moments. Turner describes, for example, how rituals and festivals can create these liminal moments of being “betwixt and between,” where the margins of acceptable social experience are expanded and at times unpredictable. For Turner, community—or *communitas*, as he prefers to call it—is the state of meaningful, intimate, and full presence among others. According to Turner, *communitas* is also the ultimate value of being to which we should attempt to lead our lives. Turner (1982) argues that these moments are spontaneous and

full of “intersubjective illumination” (p. 48). Moments of structure, on the other hand, include largely predictable behaviors, which are clear to the participants in a shared community space. In this study, structures can be mediated through students’ play (Vygotsky, 1978), or the ways they use the structures to create new meanings in the classroom community. By recognizing shared meanings of objects and ideas, students co-construct understandings (Mead, 1925). Additionally, part of the facilitation in this process is the dialectic between the structures that exist for learning and their play in the anti-structures.

For instance, in Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin’s (2003) study of two elementary urban education classrooms, the students and teachers engaged in liminal moments to work through conflicts. They developed the structure of gathering around a lit candle covered by a glass globe to allow students a place and space to discuss conflicts as they emerged in school. They found that students sometimes talked through conflicts, taking slow turns. Other times, students remained quiet. And still other times, the teacher also spoke up in efforts to be part of a place where they created community. The class had created structures where they could gather together in a way where all participants understood the process they had constructed in order to enter the liminal, undetermined moments of what might be said at the peace candle. Huber et al. (2003) do not define these structures, though they clearly fit the Turnerian framework they invoke in their research.

My aim is to demonstrate a broader set of structures and how they work in one ethnographic context in a Title I elementary school in a central Texas urban school district. I examine pedagogic practices of structuring. I show how the practices of instruction—all the while mediated by student participation—demonstrate the dialectic of structure and anti-structure (Turner, 1969, 1977) and its creation of new places of learning. I found creative play in this dialectic process in writing instruction as well as in class discussions. My research shows several examples of this structuring and how it creates places of learning which lend themselves to this dynamic dialectic.

Method and Context

In this classroom micro-ethnography, I attempted to understand how one Latina teacher and her students in a Southwestern city created the structures of daily activity and how they transgressed those structures as well. Ethnography (Bernard, 2006) is a highly appropriate qualitative approach to find the everyday ways that structures operate in classrooms. My work uses a critical ethnography approach (Foley, 2002; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Lassiter, 2005). This study highlights contributions made in a space which is often demonstrated as deficit (in this case, what is often referred to as an “urban” classroom). I show the classroom participation of a Latina teacher and her students—who are often constructed as “deficient”—was academically rigorous and culturally responsive. As a White researcher, I took extra effort

to understand my findings through member checking (Merriam, 1998) with Ms. Chamorro and also to support the rigor in her classroom. I wrote reflectively about my role as a White person visiting an entirely nonWhite classroom and channeled my energy toward supporting the teacher and the students in the development of their academic community. As a participant observer (Spradley, 1980), I facilitated student work and volunteered for the classroom teacher, Ms. Chamorro, occasionally retrieving her students from other classrooms, helping students in group work, or cutting out curricular materials, deferential to the teacher's authority. I wanted to signal to the students that I respected her work with them. Only by careful recording of daily events did patterns of the structures and their ruptures emerge.

I came to know Ms. Chamorro in the fall semester of 2009 when I worked as the facilitator for an urban education cohort of student teachers, conducting observations of an apprentice teacher who worked directly under the guidance of Ms. Chamorro. I am a White, bilingual (Spanish and English), former English to Speakers of Other Languages teacher, and I had a heightened awareness of the how urban students historically have been under-served (Ladson-Billings, 1995). I was invested in my apprentice teachers' developing a critical consciousness surrounding their work in urban education and the academic rigor necessary to launch their students' success. I realized the apprentice teacher was receiving superior mentorship from Ms. Chamorro and wanted to discover more about what made her classroom so effective. Ms. Chamorro and her principal agreed I could observe Ms. Chamorro's independent instruction throughout the entire spring semester of 2010. I conducted observations two to four times a week, accompanying students to various locations in the school building, including the cafeteria, the gymnasium, and the art and music rooms, as well as field trips. As a participant observer, I was available to fill various voluntary roles as Ms. Chamorro requested—from conducting writing conferences with students to cutting out figures to supervising a field trip. I held informal, unstructured interviews as casual, spontaneous questions with individual and small groups of students. I also interviewed Ms. Chamorro on several occasions, as well as two of the students' parents.

I reviewed documents, such as completed assignments, handouts, and journals, for analysis. I also took photographs of classroom displays (e.g., reproductions on the walls, quotations or other text posted in the classroom, or art historical timelines) for data analysis. Using thick description (Geertz, 1973), I wrote notes during and after each classroom visit. I checked for emerging themes among the data. Using the methods suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), I did both open coding and focused coding of field notes and interview data. Ultimately I clustered data into a few important themes, which I elaborate upon below.

Haze Elementary School was located in an urban, Central Texas school district. It was one of the city's oldest elementary schools and was rebuilt in 1992. The terra-cotta roofed exterior and interior walls incorporated hundreds of student-made tiles, had an attractive and well-maintained vegetable garden, and was

surrounded by a chain-link fence, typical of elementary schools in the eastern side of this school district, where most of the historically under-served residents live. There were 544 students, 95% of whom were Latino; an equal proportion were “economically disadvantaged” according to state-collected data. About 3.5% were African America, and the others were categorized as White. Fifty-five percent were considered “Limited English Proficient.” The school was “academically acceptable” according to state and local district rankings, which means it was not, like many of its counterpart schools in this part of the city, under threat of closure for not meeting state-mandated testing scores.

Colorful student work was posted throughout the hallways of Haze Elementary and was changed throughout the year. Many classrooms’ exterior hallway walls showed multihued, student-crafted portraits in construction papers of various flesh tones, and their works were changed underneath their depictions throughout the year. Student work ranged from Spanish-written pieces such as, “If I won a hundred dollars” writing prompts (as part of their bilingual education program), to fractions represented as students’ unique pizza slice representations, to sensory imagery poems written about animals, to three-dimensional replicas of animals using various media and accompanying reports about the animals. Bulletin boards celebrating what students were learning, often from community connections resembling a funds of knowledge perspective (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), were also changed regularly. They covered topics from why they felt they are part of the community in their particular city, ranging from reports about Martin Luther King, Jr. to Monarch butterfly migration patterns (which migrate from Mexico, where most of the children had family heritage connections, through the city in which they currently reside). Around the *Día de Muertos*, or, Day of the Dead (a colorful, religiously syncretic, multi-generational way of remembering loved ones who have died), most classrooms had altars set up outside their classes, and there was a main altar outside the main office doors.

Ms. Chamorro’s exterior hallway also had the student-portraits and rotating projects beneath each student’s portrait. A larger-than-life Dr. Seuss poster of the Cat-in-the-Hat greeted those who entered the room, as did color photos of each of her students. A sign by her door listed students’ possible locations, and a student was in charge of moving the clip to indicate what part of the building students are in at any given time (this includes the cafeteria, the gym, and the classroom, among others). Entering her room could feel overwhelming at first. It was as if a book of best instructional practices came to two-dimensional life along her walls. Each of her four walls was devoted to particular curricular areas. The math wall had the numbers from 1 to 20 spelled out and written in numeric form. A number line up to 100 ran across that top wall. A large calendar was used, with movable numbers and month names as well as posters with U.S. coins, less than and equal signs, and numerical representations of fish, insects, and birds.

Her science wall included a chart of insects, mammals, fish, amphibians, reptiles

and birds with pictures accompanying these groups. “Processes of science inquiry” was another chart she has created on her wall; several women are performing the scientific inquiry steps on the chart. Shelves were full of math toolboxes, math books, student materials, and there were at least 40 boxes of well-organized pleasure reading books for her students to check out in her room. Her reading wall is changed with an author-of-the-week along with reading strategies, particularly the “COW” (which I describe later). There were charts along another wall for writing process activities as well. Six incandescent lamps were usually lit throughout the room, and the fluorescent school lights were almost never turned on.

Ms. Chamorro, a 30 year-old Latina of Mexican origin who hailed from the city where she taught, was the school’s lead teacher and relied upon heavily by her principal for multiple teacher leader positions, including organizing a large Cinco de Mayo annual presentation. Like the recommendations made by educational researchers for social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Michie, 2005), she and her husband lived in the community, within two blocks of Haze Elementary. She had been teaching at Haze since her student teaching assignment from the state university placed her there when she was an undergraduate. Her assigning professor at the time told her he thought it would be a good placement. He was never explicit that there was a connection between her ethnicity and that of her students, but she understood that to be his intention. Initially she wasn’t sure she appreciated that, but now she says she is delighted to be working where she is.

Ms. Chamorro’s classroom was comprised of 16 students. All but one were Latino; the non-Latino was Monique, an African-American student who transferred into the class during the middle of the year. Three students were considered “English Language Learners,” and their parents had opted them out of bilingual education (though Ms. Chamorro believed these students would be far better-served there because of their language needs). She had recommended five of her students to receive special education services based on their several years of academic struggles.

Findings

In order to demonstrate the dialectical play between structures and places of anti-structure in Ms. Chamorro’s class, I describe some thematic examples of structures and how they worked with representative examples from her class in italics. I have selected a few of the more important structures Ms. Chamorro implemented. She explained that she worked throughout the year to maintain each of the following structures, first by introducing and modeling them, and then by discussing and revisiting them throughout the year. None of the following structures was accidental; through her years of practice at her school, she found these to be helpful for the students to learn. Nonetheless, she was open to implementing new structures and shifted and adapted some of them as years passed.

Community and the Rose Ceremony

Underpinning Ms. Chamorro's classroom climate was a sense of community, echoing the ultimate goal anthropologist Victor Turner advocated in his research on structure and anti-structure (Turner, 1969). The creation of a caring community is also among recommendations of scholars who have studied historically marginalized populations (Gay, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). When asked about the sense of community in her classroom, she explained that she achieved that by having the students (and herself) follow three rules. When we were talking in her classroom one day, she had some difficulty recalling precisely what they were, and she briefly interrupted a student, Mariah, to name them. Without hesitating she ticked them off (and subsequently went back to work):

1. Follow directions.
2. Listen carefully.
3. Be friendly.

"I tell them 'I'm not your friend.' I make it very clear to them... but that I'm an adult they can trust and that anything they can possibly need I will provide for them," she said. These ideas of setting clear boundaries and expectations align in many ways with caring yet firm classrooms demonstrated by Foster and Ladson-Billings to be an effective part of instruction (Foster, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995). She explained that her philosophy was in contradiction with teachers (including her former mentor with whom she maintains professional dialog and approaches for advice) who tended to refer to their students regularly as "Friends" in their common discourse with students. Instead, she regularly told her students, "We're a family, but like in real families, we all have roles." She also stressed that she was like the mom, and they were the children. She said they talked regularly about how to listen, how to be friendly, and how to be a family. It is also worth noting that she explicitly did not utilize currently common practices of "behavior management strategies" such as the placement of clips next to student names based on their observable behavior in the classroom. "I tell the students, the principal doesn't come in here and put a clip on my name. That's not real life, so I'm not going to do that to them."

One of the family-oriented activities which Ms. Chamorro implemented was her version of what is often referred to as "circle time," or the activity in which students check-in every morning about how they are feeling and any important ideas or issues they want to share with their classroom community (Mosley, 2005). The routine was highly ritualized and referred to as the "rose ceremony." One student would start, holding the long, felt yellow rose reserved for this activity and share what she or he was thinking. The student would then pass the rose around the circle, which met on the plush blue carpet in her room. The student who started picked a sentence stem for the students to use to describe what they were experiencing, feeling, and thinking about. Following is an example of part of one rose ceremony on one Friday morning. Throughout the discussion, one student, Christopher, made

sure the rose was passed from student to student, especially when any student chose to opt out of saying anything by “passing.”

Luis looked down and said quietly, “Today I am feeling kind of sad because I didn’t bring my project.” Other students maintained the quiet, and he passed the rose to Justin.

Justin continued, “Today I’m feeling very good because today my cousin and I are gonna go eat Cici’s Pizza. He never tried Cici’s Pizza I let him tasted [sic] my pizza pocket and he said we’re gonna go play outside today and tonight.” The other students agreed the pizza was good at Cici’s.

Ms. Chamorro smiled as she took the rose from Justin: “Today I’m feeling fantastic. We’re going to be going on a field trip real soon. And tonight my husband doesn’t have to work and the rest of the week I’m not going to see him because he has a lot of music stuff to do [as a musician] because [the music festival] is from like 10 am in the morning all day.

Monique added, “You should go with him.”

Christopher asked, “What about your cat?”

She answered, “He’s at home,” and passed the rose to Marissa.

Marissa continued, “Today I’m feeling excited because I get to watch Alice in Wonderland in 3D this weekend with my grandmother.”

Lucia echoed Marissa’s excited, “Today I’m feeling happy because in the weekend I’m going to get to spend time with my family.” She passed the rose back to the day’s leader, who asked if anyone else wanted to speak. They waited several seconds, and no one answered.

He looked up and indicated they should close, and they said together, “This concludes our rose ceremony.”

Other conversations had a heavier feeling to them, as occasionally students shared problems from home or worries or concerns they have. This conversation demonstrates, however, the unscripted nature of students’ expressions within the confines of an expected structure for discussion. Students were free to share what they were thinking about as relevant to the rose ceremony question, and nearly all did so. Student responses included verifications of facial expressions and sometimes-audible exclamations. Students did not try to derail the discussions or make comments that didn’t fit the structures of the rose ceremony. In this conversation, most students shared events they were looking forward to. One student was able to express her sense of being upset about not completing her homework, which most likely would help the teacher understand why the student felt glum that day. The classroom space, in these moments, was converted to a place of emotional sharing by the teacher and the students. Because of the successful transgression of the space of classroom and the strictly academic expectations which usually surround it (bolstered in an age of accountability), the circle time, like many other moments in Ms. Chamorro’s class, became moments where the students’ unstructured responses created a Thirdspace of participation (Soja, 1996), where students could explore new thoughts and feelings.

Holy COW

Along the reading wall of Ms. Chamorro's classroom, a small poster listed the acronym "COW," and the words "connection, observation, and wondering" after each letter. These words are among highly-effective cognitive reading strategies (Beers, 2002) which she and her students used in her instruction every day, throughout the day. In fact, many of her strategies used patterned structures for learning, ranging from kinesthetic memory-activators (such as using hands and arms in a circular motion to review the writing process step, "revising" by saying, "Revising, revising, changing the words around") to other acronyms such as "CUPS" for students' daily oral language activities (CUPS stands for capitalization, understanding, punctuation, and spelling). The strategies were regularly used and reinforced as ways to push students' thinking and classroom performance.

When using COW, students spontaneously raised their hands and began what they wanted to say with comments such as, "I have a connection," or "I have an observation." Students made such comments in all manner of classroom activities, from math center work to language arts to circle time. Typically, Ms. Chamorro would either call on or gesture to students to allow them to make their comments and give them the space to share their ideas. She or other students would follow up on their comments and then usually return to the overall conversation. Equally as common, she invited students to make a COW to material she was sharing with them. Students sometimes shared first with a partner and then reported back their partner's comments; or, they thought silently and then raised their hands, forming the letter of which aspect of COW they wanted to make. Following are two examples of how COWs have worked:

After a few of Ms. Chamorro's students admired some student projects with pictures and descriptions of tornados displayed outside a 3rd grade classroom, Ms. Chamorro invited four of the students to share their work as models with her students.

The first student began to read her work after sharing captions and art.

One of Ms. Chamorro's students raised his hand after she had read about why people should not try to out-run tornados. Ms. Chamorro called on him. "Why do we not want to race?"

Ms. Chamorro responded, "We made a connection yesterday. Who remembers why we can't race a tornado?"

Mariah responded, "It's really fast!" And other students commented it was as fast as 300 miles per hour. Ms. Chamorro reminded them that conventional cars could only go up to half as fast. The 3rd grade student continued reading about how flying debris could hurt people, and Ms. Chamorro's student, Guisseppi, raised his hand with a C.

Ms Chamorro asked, "Why did you put up a C?"

"Because yesterday we read that it could be dangerous."

In another instance, the class was discussing the differences and similarities between George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in an article they were reading.

Ms. Chamorro directed the students, "Let's talk quickly about what you noticed in the text. Give me a COW, and show me what you're going to give me." After a few seconds, she gestured toward Marissa for her answer.

"My brother said that when he gets older he wants to be a president just like George Washington."

Ms. Chamorro encouraged Marissa by saying, "Great!" and then directed her attention toward Marco, "You have a wondering?"

"I wonder if George Washington and Abe Lincoln ever met."

She then redirected them to the text section called, "Did you know?" which explained that they lived over 100 years apart and then asked the students, "Why were they not BFFs?"

Katrina answered, "They were not BFFs..." and her voice grew soft.

Mariah spoke up, "Katrina said that George Washington and Abe Lincoln could not be BFFs because they did not live at the same time."

These examples shows how children made spontaneous connections to what they learned and what they were engaging in the moment. In the first example, students both looped into their memory of former connections they made as well as offering a new, improvised idea. The effective COW structure has provided a ready way for students and teachers to use their minds to loop into prior knowledge. In the second example, one student was able to express what may be considered aspirational capital (Bourdieu, 2008; Yosso, 2005), or the achievement hopes for someone in Marissa's family. These kinds of personal connections were also readily accepted and provide a place for the students to connect the school curriculum to their real lives, an example where the spaces of community and the classroom connect in a meaningful and instructive way, sensitive to the context of students' lives (Gruenewald, 2003). Additionally, Ms. Chamorro was able to loop their spontaneous utterances into engaging the students further into the structure of the text, and students related a cause-and-effect hypothesis about why Lincoln and Washington were not friends, helping build a sense of historical time for the students as well.

Glowing and Growing

Ms. Chamorro heavily emphasized celebration and constructive feedback toward student achievement in her classroom as regular, routine structures of practice. As in the COW activity, she instituted structures of academic language, which students use to verbalize their feedback. "I try to get them to use that language," she explained, "so that they will also write with it. They need the words to write, and I've heard that after second grade students can shut down if they didn't get good writing instruction." When the class completed the publishing process of a writing assignment (such as when they completed a large memoir booklet), they both visited other, older student classrooms to share their work and also enjoyed a small feast of sweet treats in the classroom. This practice aligns with the recommendations of writing process theorists' suggestions to make sure students have an authentic audience and moments of celebration to reflect on the process of writing (Calkins, 1994; Murray, 1998). In

another instance, her students did most of the performing at the school's Black History Month assembly, including performing Langston Hughes's poem, "My People," and their recitation of the Negro National Anthem. They discussed what went well about their performances and how they could improve for the next time. The students transgressed spaces where they were not supposed to be experts but became them, under the structuring Ms. Chamorro provided. Furthermore, they reflected on their skillfulness to engage those places of learning.

Much more frequently, the students and Ms. Chamorro provided each other what she called "GLOWs" and "GROWs" (posted in the room in all capitals, complete with sentence stems to help students get started) to students after their weekly individual poetry recitations and daily writing activities. A GLOW was given for work well done, always with specific feedback for the student or students to understand why they were being complimented. A GROW was, as she described it to the class, "constructive criticism" with very specific information for students to improve their work. I consistently saw positive feedback, even in the critiques from the students. The comments were offered in analytic tones; I never heard them delivered in ways that I interpreted as mean-spirited. Some examples of when GLOWs and GROWs were given were when 7th graders from a nearby middle school shared children's books they had written with them, the 7th grade students acknowledged that Ms. Chamorro's 2nd graders actually gave better feedback than they gave each other in their writing processes.

Marissa shared what she would take to a deserted island as her piece of writing. She read: "A tent so I can live in it and don't [sic] get wet. I will take a blanket. It is pink and brown monkeys on it and will keep me warm. I will bring a lighter so I can see in the tent and so I can see if a dangerous animal and I can make a campfire." The students clapped, and Ms. Chamorro asked, "Can anyone give her a grow?"

Luis commented, "I didn't really hear the hook. The only reason I knew was because we've been working on it in." Ms. Chamorro agreed with him.

Monique added, "Like how did she get her stuff?"

Marissa's hand was up, and Ms. Chamorro called on her. "I think you should add more about your tent."

Monique said, "Like describe it, if it's green or yellow."

Ms. Chamorro shifted the type of feedback by asking, "I think we have time for one more. Can someone give her a compliment? Let's end with a compliment."

Paul's hand was up, and he was called on. "You did a great job because I mean, I like the way you, um, described it like your blanket, but the um you kinda went on towards I mean I like the way you described your blanket and um." He paused.

Ms. Chamorro tried to redirect him, "What did you like about the way she described it?"

"I liked the way you described it, your blanket and the color," he finished, smiling.

Ms. Chamorro concluded by asking the group, "Could we give her a round of applause," and the class clapped with polite enthusiasm.

The following day, students were still working on the same assignment. Ana Paula read hers, saying she would take a skirt without providing any further details about the skirt. Ms. Chamorro asked the class, "What else could you use the skirt for besides wearing it?"

Answers ranged from: as a trap, to use as a fishing net, curtains, and to sit on. When one student offered, "as a book," Ms. Chamorro giggled and said, "Could you use a skirt as a book?" and the students laughed and said, "No!" Ana Paula was then offered GROWs from the group, including, "I like how you projected your voice," and "We could get a picture in our head," from the other details. Ms. Chamorro then asked the students, "Can you put your thumbs up if this is helping you to think about each other's writing to become better writers?" All thumbs went quickly into the air.

Both examples of the GLOWs and GROWs demonstrate the structured environment in which students learned how to offer unscripted, creative and constructive feedback to help the students become better writers. In the first instance, Ms. Chamorro solicited helpful feedback as well as ending positively for the student. When Paul struggled to define what he liked, she skillfully helped coax a helpful response from him. In the second instance, students offered creative and even fun ideas the student author could incorporate in her next revision. In classrooms where students might feel less community or where fewer structures were implemented for such feedback (such as the visiting 7th graders), the constructive criticism would have likely been far less helpful or interesting. Finally, the structuring of the GLOWs and GROWs helps the students become more analytical thinkers about their creative processes.

It Takes a Village

A final structure I highlight was Ms. Chamorro's effort to integrate the community with the students. She took students on multiple field trips to the Mexican American Culture Center as well as the neighborhood library for puppet shows and artistic presentations. She drew regularly upon knowledges the students brought with them, mentioning local grocery stores the kids' families shopped at to the foods they ate, including *nopales*, Texas chili, and tortillas. She arranged an annual trip to one of the U.S.'s largest cities to a natural science museum, financed partly by a family-friendly after-school carnival held on campus. She said she attempted to give students every possible opportunity she could in order to help expose them to the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2008) for them to succeed in school. Throughout the year she told students not only about the current community in which they lived but also the community of the university and what is regularly expected there, repeating regularly that she expected them to go there one day. During my observations, several community volunteers participated in Ms. Navarro's classroom. These ranged from a neighborhood woman who lived nearby to a student from four years ago (the son of the school's parent support specialist) to a businessman who read to students. I was invited, also, to read to students, and I shared Subcomandante Marcos's *The Story of Colors* (1999). After I read about how a character wanted to protect all the

colors in the world, I asked them how they would protect the colors. A few of their responses, reflecting the anti-structured, creative play of their thought, included: put them in my mouth, cover them up so the rain wouldn't ruin them, put them in my room, put them in my pants, and sleep with them.

The regular mixing of students and multiple community members in multiple spaces can never be predicted. Students became extremely accustomed to interacting with new people, to the point that new observers hardly surprised them. They also appeared to be comfortable in non-school environments, interacting with new people in different spaces with ease. The structuring of these non-typical schooling experiences helped integrate the students with the community and to appropriate certain spaces as their own. Such educational experiences would certainly help students understand these spaces as part of their habitus (Bourdieu, 2008), which pertained to them.

Implications

Children have been at play as long as they have been learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and will continue to find spaces of play, or anti-structure, often a kind of play that works against the teacher's intended agenda of successfully covering curricular material (Foley, 1994). In this article I highlighted how structures were built effectively in one Title I elementary classroom. Students were challenged to use play in ways that challenged their thinking skills as well as their creativity in a dialectical, dialogic process which created a place that translated inside and outside school walls as a rigorous and caring learning community, a border area which became a Thirdspace of student participation (Soja, 1996). I argue that because of the structures and playful spaces of anti-structure, Ms. Chamorro's students performed well both socially and academically. I believe these structures were so effective because of Ms. Chamorro's commitment to the community in which she lived as well as her reflective practice and implementation of structures which were meaningful and academically challenging. As a result, her students were not merely offering simple, mechanical responses, but thoughtful and engaged responses and new ideas in construction throughout the year. Her students had internalized the structures she taught and produced new thinking and ideas as a result. They became more accustomed to inhabiting places she introduced them to, including cultural centers and a world-class museum.

Testing data show that Ms. Chamorro's students outperformed the three other second grade classrooms in her school and that all students' work improved at least one grade level, usually more. Interviews from parents and the principal demonstrate families wanted their children in Ms. Chamorro's rich learning environment year after year. Ultimately, focusing on the structures a successful teacher implemented show one case, which may be an example for considering how structures and anti-structure work in other classrooms as well.

Despite the increasing demands of the accountability movement in education, teachers and students can maintain places of agency and play in meaningful ways that create both community and rigorous learning, when the administration is supportive of such work. Ms. Chamorro followed her district's prescribed instructional guide; along with her other grade level teacher peers. She would possibly enjoy more flexibility without a mandated curriculum, yet she managed to succeed in making her 2nd grade classroom highly interactive, engaging, and academically rigorous. There are many other structures I have not been able to highlight due to space constraints, but these are representative of some of the structures which go beyond the basic classroom routines suggested in popular teacher education literature (Wong & Wong, 2004).

Despite the increasing demands of the accountability movement, the teacher and students in this study maintained places of agency and play in meaningful ways that created both community and rigorous learning. These are representative of some of the structures which challenged and even subverted the basic classroom routines suggested in popular teacher education literature (Wong & Wong, 2004). In-service teachers can benefit from considering the structures they use, and how and *if* they are relevant for the students they teach. A reframing surrounding the reflective practices of teachers could help teachers consider how structures are or are not supporting instructional goals and spaces of anti-structure as part of learning. This is not to say that using deep structures is the only way to teach; it is one way that can be effective. For future research, it is important to consider if other teachers who appear to be successful and have fewer structures in fact have more covert structures informing their teaching. Additionally, it would be beneficial to study more classrooms among various student populations—multiple contexts—to see how structures and places of learning play out.

Note

¹ Participant names have been changed to pseudonyms.

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