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A Case Study of Fun and Freedom of Choice in the Pursuit of Literateness in a First Grade Classroom

by

Paula B. Weiss and Peter H. Johnston

with Patricia Colfer

Introduction

“I think it’s real important for them to feel the fun in it (reading) first” is the way Pat Colfer, an experienced first grade teacher, summarizes a fundamental principle of her instructional practices. This paper examines the practical and theoretical implications of this position for teaching, learning, and what it means to be literate. Observations in Pat’s classroom, interviews with Pat, and conversations with students form the basis of this examination which is then linked to the relevant literature.

During the course of the study we came to understand that Pat’s model of the learner and her approach to management are distinctive, coherent, and most closely aligned with research on play. Her view of what it means to be literate lies within the same framework as her approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of both fun and freedom of choice. The choice of these principles is currently uncommon. It represents a strong political stance which we believe lies at the heart of the premises of a multicultural democratic society. We offer, then, this portrait of one classroom where playfulness, fun, and freedom of choice serve as ongoing principles of literacy instruction and where their expression is to be found in all its complexity.

Let us begin with a description of the context which led to the study. One of the authors in this study had interviewed Pat on several occasions, and had been an observer (with varying degrees of participation) in her classroom on an irregular basis for much of two school years. In February of the second year, he was surprised to find the 26 children busily engaged in basal workbook activities, which had not previously been a feature of Pat’s teaching practice. Pat explained that she would be adopting a child and taking parental leave presently. Believing that her replacement teacher would be taking a much more basal-oriented approach to reading, and would very probably use workbooks, she had decided to introduce the children to them herself in order to soften the transition. She did so in an unorthodox manner which, as we shall see, was in accord with her approach to literacy instruction.

How Pat introduced the workbooks stemmed from her teaching experience the previous summer. Pat had tutored two children from a different district so that they would meet their school's requirements to be promoted. The requirements included completing certain workbooks. In order to keep their interest, Pat had introduced the workbooks as if they were puzzle books of the kind which children might play with at home. The children were allowed to choose their own activities in the book, and Pat would simply respond to what they did. The children had completed the activities with obvious enjoyment and enthusiasm, and asked Pat why it wasn't done that way in school. She had replied that she didn't know, but that she would find out. Her impending parental leave turned out to be her opportunity to find out how such an approach would work in her regular classroom.

The approach was clearly atypical, at least in our experience. We do not wish to advocate workbooks regardless of how they are used and, indeed, Pat, now teaching in a different grade, does not use them. What caught our attention was not the activity itself, nor the student enthusiasm which accompanied it (an enthusiasm seldom found in connection with workbooks, to be sure). Above all, we sensed that an examination of this element of Pat's practice might lead us to an understanding of the coherence of this teacher's overall approach to literacy instruction. The reason she introduced workbooks into her curriculum, and the way she went about doing so, pointed up her extraordinary concern for her students' enjoyment and their sense of themselves as important, autonomous agents in the learning process. We became interested in examining the dimensions of these concerns and were led back to interviews with Pat in which she had stressed the importance of choice and fun in her philosophy of teaching.

We spent the next three weeks, until Pat's parental leave began, in the classroom daily, compiling field notes, taping reading sessions and speaking with Pat and the children. We collected these data in an effort to describe Pat's philosophy in daily teaching and learning activity, and to interpret its importance with respect to literacy development. Our method of analysis involved deriving several themes from the field notes and protocols, constructing a value framework, as discussed by Goetz and LeCompte (1984), and then categorizing all related examples from our notes within that framework.

Pat's Comments on Her Praxis

In formal and informal interviews, Pat showed us continually that she was very introspective about her teaching and about herself and her way of going about life. She continually tied Pat as a teacher to Pat as a learner. And always she was emphatic about the place of fun in her philosophy of teaching and learning. As an example of her statements about the importance of fun, she recounted an incident in the school some years earlier which had made a big impression on her.

We were supposed to come up with one thing that we felt very strongly about in our philosophy of education and submit it to the committee. And the whole school was going to decide of all these things which ones most people could agree with. I said learning had to be fun (laughs), and they tore that apart. It went to shreds. It went to shreds. I couldn't tell you . . . It's like another group of teachers all saying, "It's not fun, it can't be fun. They have to sit down and memorize. And memorizing isn't fun." I'm still entitled to my opinion, but if it's not the school's . . . It's interesting to apply it to yourself.

This comment not only shows the strength of her feelings about fun and how this was part of her uniqueness as a teacher, but the last line is an example of her reflectiveness, statements and examples of which we came to expect.

Play and humor were both prominent in Pat's classroom. In particular, she encouraged and demonstrated fantasy play, and play with the language. Although she did not comment explicitly on these aspects of her teaching, they emerged in our analyses as being central, and related themes were prominent. She did talk about how highly she valued freedom of choice, the perception of which is a defining feature of play. In talking about school policy she said,

If it's a forced issue, it's hard for me to buy it. I have to (laughs) willingly choose it. You know. I may choose to do what's required, and I look like I'm marching to the right tune (laughs), but if I can't make that choice, it's really hard for me to do it . . . the way it . . . the way the mandate would go.

It will become clear that this value was held equally for the children, and that it permeated her teaching practice.

Similarly, she feels that what is critical to her own learning is critical to that of the children. Pat believes that learning never stops, but it is sometimes difficult and requires taking chances and making mistakes, which means that you can't take yourself too seriously or you will be unable to take risks. The following comment captures this:

Have you done anything recently, maybe in the last five years, where you actually sit there and say, "Holy cow, this is really hard." You know, like play an instrument. When I sit down to a new piece at the piano and look at it, my first thought is, "Why do I bother doing this when it's too hard? (laugh) Why don't I just play the ones I know and enjoy the ones I know?" It takes a special effort on my part to pick up a piece that's very difficult and work on it, and I have to remind myself that that's basically what I'm asking them to do. That . . . to . . . that looks really hard, and they have to look really silly at the beginning. I make mistakes constantly when I play the piano, and I make faces so they can see me making mistakes. I don't have to make the faces, but I will probably always make the mistakes. (laughs) You know, it's one of those things. I want them to realize that adults, just because we look big and we dress OK (laughs), and our mommies don't take care of us, we still need to learn things.

That not taking herself too seriously was indeed important to Pat was borne out in her style of clothing (possibly the cause of her laughter at the end of the comment). She wore a wide variety of clothing to school, and it was often deliberately unconventional and even amusing. One never knew what to expect. Indeed, on one occasion she went to the trouble of explaining away a more formal dress on the grounds of a special after-school meeting.

Clearly, a central feature of Pat's praxis was her rule in providing a safe, threat-free environment so that children can take risks and have fun. For example, she commented:

I don't enjoy the first month of school typically. It's by the second month where they realize that—ah—they're in charge of themselves—I hate that "I'm in charge" business. It's the least fun thing. It takes a while for them to realize that safety is the only thing that I have to be concerned about, and they can take any chances or make any choices as long as I don't have to worry about their safety. And I don't know if it would take another person less or more, but it seems to take a good month before the fun begins.

These themes relating to fun, freedom of choice, and safety to take risks did emerge in our analyses of Pat's literacy teaching activity and her reflection on it, along with further themes of "reponsive openness" and confidence/voice. These themes undergird Pat's literacy teaching praxis.

Pat's Classroom

Freedom of Choice

In her literacy teaching, Pat continually tried to ensure that children were not forced into anything. She offered choice and invitation in matters such as selection of reading material, participation in one another's reading groups, and workbook activity in order to ensure interest. Consider the use of the workbooks described briefly at the outset. Although children had a specified time to use them, it would be better described as a time in which they were encouraged to use them rather than engage in other activities. They chose both which and how many pages to do, whether to work alone or cooperatively, how and whether to complete pages, and even sometimes which workbook to use. Although she was not keen on workbooks, it was interesting to note how Pat capitalized on this concession. Apart from the transition aspect which precipitated their use, Pat felt that the workbooks provided her with information. She noted that if a child completed a page or set of pages accurately, that told her something, just as it did if he/she failed to complete them accurately. She also noted that she learned something if a child consistently avoided particular kinds of activities, thus stressing her interpretation of choice as an aid to understanding the children's learning.

Grouping patterns were also a matter of choice in Pat's classroom. When children were to read to each other in pairs, they chose their own partners. Although they were grouped for reading in the basal reader, they could participate in the activities of other groups if they so desired. For example, she commented one day:

Can I make a little announcement? You're invited to join any reading group any time you're I have plenty of readers, you just pick up that book and come and be in that group. You don't only have to come to the one I think you come to. O.K. Does that make sense? Sometimes you get in a group—that book's stories get a little confusing or something and maybe you would prefer to be in another group. Or maybe you want to visit in a group where the words are harder than where you're really ready . . . I don't care. It doesn't matter to me.

Often there was choice in the reading activities. For example, on one occasion at the conclusion of "Readers' Theatre" (in which a child voluntarily read to the class something of his/her own choosing) she asked the class, "What's the next reading thing you want to do?" Other times, she

would ask particular children where they wanted to start, which story they wanted to read, which workbook they wanted, and so forth. She was inclined to invite participation at the level of the child's choice rather than enforcing it. For example, in introducing a whole class reading of an enlarged text, she said: "Those who want to join in can do so, others can just listen."

The classroom itself offered choice, as well. On first entering it we were struck by the enormous variety of available activities and centers of interest being used by the children. Pat planned for this and was prepared to tolerate a certain amount of clutter in order to have it. This was so prominent that it was essentially the first thing in the field notes on the first day of observations. It turned out that this was standard practice before class, and on some mornings it was extended into class time.

Emphasis on choice had a darker side too. Pat's abhorrence of infringements on personal freedom of choice was the reason for the limited amount of writing done in the classroom. She felt that the administration had "mandated" "process writing" in the district, and on those grounds Pat was reluctant to do it. She noted, however, that when she returned from her parental leave, the initial insistence on writing would have dissipated, and she would probably try it.

Fun

As indicated above, Pat's "bottom line" as a teacher was that learning had to be fun. This attitude was amply apparent in her classroom—in its decoration and furnishings as well as in the activities and interactions that took place there. The walls of the classroom were covered with various attractive displays, pictures, and signs. Some of the signs seemed to have been made, or at least lettered, by the children in the class. A paper monkey had arms labelled "left" and "right," and a large bear in a birthday hat was used to indicate class birthdays. Additionally, maps, books, records, and children's artwork, which seemed to have been given as gifts by individual children to the teacher, decorated the walls and blackboard ledges and contributed to the overall effect of gaiety and expansiveness.

Although the room was not large, areas had been created in it for various activities. The piano at which Pat often sat was placed in such a way that, along with a small bookshelf, it shielded a sunny front corner of the room where children were often found reading. To the rear and other side of the room was a low work bench with a vise, a small loom, a typewriter, a film strip projector, a display of books and tapes of books, a tape player, and a gerbil cage with gerbil. Decorative objects, such as ship models and candles, were found among the books and tapes on the long, low counter that stretched below the bookshelf across that side of the room. The scent of eucalyptus wafted from a few sprigs in a vase. The children were invited to make good use of these areas on a daily basis, and they appeared to have a great deal of fun in doing so. They sometimes brought in objects, plants, and other living things which they had found to add to the clutter, as well.

Pat often encouraged group activities, which were spontaneous in nature and clearly fun for all. For example, after a lengthy group reading session about a monkey who tries to fly, she told them that they could "fly" around the room if they wanted to. Most did so, and she then told them to "fly back" to their seats so that they could begin something else. Similarly, they often moved about the room at Pat's invitation, pretending to ice skate or dance, as she played the piano for them. On one occasion, after they had all sung "La Cucaracha," Jeffrey raised his hand and said that somebody

he knew had a Mexican hat. Pat stood and showed them the Mexican hat dance. When someone else asked if they could do that, she agreed, and the whole class got up and danced. The activity was spontaneous, continuous, and not in the least bit disorderly. Pat had simply taken a child's response to a song and capitalized on it to extend the group's knowledge while having fun. The children seemed to be quite comfortable with doing the unexpected, and they all joined in enthusiastically.

The security and independence in the classroom made it possible for much teacher talk to be other than imperative. This allowed Pat to use her talk in more interesting and complex ways and allowed more student talk. Thus, Pat was able to use Pee Wee Herman's "secret word" routine, which calls for the children to hunt for instances of the secret word in the teacher's or students' conversation and then scream in unison upon its identification. However, most of the humor in the classroom was not of the guffaw variety, but rather a kind of ongoing effervescence reflecting the "fun" which Pat values so highly.

In addition to setting the context for and orchestrating most of the fun in her classroom, Pat was a full participant. This was evident in the way that she would giggle along with the class over amusing illustrations they came to in group reading sessions, and in the comments she would add to class conversations about the stories being read. She usually did not have to step out of her role as participant to maintain order in the group. For example, one day the stronger readers in the class started rushing ahead as the class began a new book during a group "big book" reading session. Pat effectively slowed their pace by saying to them, "Now, don't go faster than me, 'cause it's my first time, and I like to kinda enjoy them." On another occasion, she said, "W-a-a-ait for me! If you read without me, I feel left out!"

Reading groups sometimes met under unusual circumstances, depending on the content of the stories being read: during the weeks of our observation groups met under a tent constructed in the classroom when their story was about a tent, and in a large tub when that story was reached. Pat was right there in the tent and in the tub with the others, joining in the fun in an unself-conscious way that revealed the depth of her belief in the importance of fun in the enterprise of learning.

Even when reading groups met at the usual table, there was a marked sense of ease and pleasant expectation. Pat remarked in an interview, "There's no instruction whatsoever in the group. All they do is read to me and then talk about a story." She explained in the interview that she had used the basals only to respond to parents' desire to know what "level" their children were reading at, although she herself did not feel this was necessary. Observation of the reading groups in the class showed that these sessions were relatively free of the anxiety which is often found when children read aloud. Moreover, the focus of the groups' discussions was on the stories at hand rather than on corrections of oral reading or group management. That several children were observed to accept Pat's invitation to join reading groups other than their own further indicated to us that the children found the sessions to be fun.

A large percentage of language arts time in the classroom was taken up by "group reading" and by "Reader's Theatre," both activities which the class did as a group. The "group reading" of large texts is characterized by risk-free, voluntary participation in reading and discussion, as is "Reader's Theatre." Pat would quietly preside without stepping outside the role of participant, as already described. She kept a close eye on making sure that these events remained fun for all by stressing consideration for others as well as enthusiastic participation.

As noted by Bruner (1986), group play sets the context for and enriches individuals' play. The same may be said for fun and enjoyment. In Pat's classroom, individual children were time and

again observed to voluntarily interact with books and workbooks with the same spirit of zestful adventure and involvement to be found in the group reading. Morning snacks would sometimes be left untouched until the last page of a book was turned. On one occasion Andrew was so caught up in rereading "I Can Fly" that he didn't realize his class had lined up to go to lunch. In another example Jamie declined to let us have her workbook one weekend, saying, ". . . It's so fun, I can't bear to part with it!"

"Adventure" and "celebration" are terms which Pat often used. For instance, she asked Jeffrey, "Do you think we're ready to celebrate this book being done? I think maybe." When Jeffrey agreed, and asked for the next book she was planning to give him, she honored his request and the moment itself by consenting to take him right down to the book room to get it. She explains her willingness to follow their lead: "Almost everything they suggest comes out very well because it was important to start with from them not with . . . because it was important to start from me . . . so . . . um . . . we celebrate everything."

In class, Pat sometimes took her cues from serendipitous happenstance, as well as from the children. She welcomed unexpected free moments with the class, such as when a videotape that was supposed to be delivered was delayed. There was at least one instance observed in which Pat momentarily stopped the progress of the events in class to direct the children's attention to an important happening. Pat had been displaying illustrations from *Dr. DeSoto* to the class as they all listened to a recorded reading of the book. One child had a tooth fall out and she showed it to the teacher who responded, "We just had a magic moment, we have to stop." Pat held the tooth up for the class to see. A child remarked, "We were hearing a story about a dentist and her tooth came out." Pat replied, "Yeah! That's great! It's a nice, beautiful white tooth . . ." They then started the recording from the beginning again.

In an interview two months earlier, Pat had provided the rationale for her flexibility:

I like to think of things as adventures—I usually try to plan them so that everybody [in the class] knows that . . .

A lot of times it looks—I would imagine, and administration would say—in fact they have said to me—that I'm just a little too spontaneous and not always planned well enough ahead but—um—I guess it's because I'm trying to respond to them instead of—I hate to be the one to decide what's important for them to want to know. I would really rather their curiosity trigger what the next stirring adventure will be.

It should be clear from these examples that in this classroom fun was central to the flow of activities orchestrated by the teacher, that it emanated from the children's interests, and was characterized by the genuine involvement of teacher and students alike.

Risk/Safety

In describing her own efforts in studying piano, Pat pointed out that she feels risk-taking to be necessary for learning. But by the same token she was acutely aware that particular children may not be ready to take big steps by themselves and might need a bit of extra protection, and also that

risk-taking can only happen successfully in an environment where trust has first been established. In talking about the unusual use of workbooks in her classroom she said:

Say ten of them are—you know—really “involved” and going forward and doing whatever workbook pages they choose—some of them that’s just too loose of a direction. They need to bring their workbook and sit near me someplace and they’ll work beautifully but they just need to have that reassurance of being physically closer to me. They don’t see it as a punishment. They’re just a little less ready to take chances.

She talked about two types of “safety” in the classroom—both physical safety and emotional safety. She saw first graders as being particularly vulnerable to parental insecurity about their school performance. Some of her instructional decisions, such as to use the basal, were made in an attempt to dissipate this tension. Pat also remarked that some children who might have been sent for extra help were not ready to leave her classroom: “The third week he was here he wet his pants—I’m not going to send him for extra help, he’s still got to stay here in my room, he still needs to be protected”

In explaining why she had not yet demanded that two children who were falling behind in their reading groups come to her for extra help she said:

See, I’m always on this emotional level, I probably shouldn’t, I always operate from it. I hate to force them to come for extra help. It should be a privilege to get the teacher to yourself for five minutes. I’m trying to protect his self-image, and Nancy’s, too.

Inviting voluntary participation in extra reading groups was one way she protected the self-image of these children. She was also careful to respond to contributions to class discussions in an honestly appreciative and interested way. Very often, practice in such things as spelling and math facts was accomplished in non-threatening and non-competitive ways such as having the children use the back blackboard in pairs, or spelling out words in sing-song as a group.

It was evident that most children in the class felt confident in contributing to class discussions. They were even quite forward in giving their opinions to us as observers. For example, Bruce, in explaining why a certain page of the workbook was hard to do, referred to the rather confusing illustrations as “weirdo pictures.” Had his teacher not encouraged openness and questioning, he may have been reluctant to express this thought.

Pat encouraged risk-taking by making it known that the attempt was more important than the result, in most cases. For example, if a reader misread a word in “Reader’s Theatre,” and the class did not object because they were able to follow the story anyway, she would not correct the reader. She did not score the workbook pages shown to her, but would sometimes simply draw the child’s attention to a page that needed to be looked at again. She often attempted unusual feats herself, such as writing in a child’s workbook upside down rather than take the time to turn it toward herself. “. . . Now, I’m writing ‘excellent’ upside down, so if it doesn’t come out perfect, we won’t get too nervous, OK?” Her speech was laced with honest praise and encouragement, such as: “Excellent! He read all those words, now you’re going to read these, all right? You’ve got nothing to lose, just keep trying” or: “Excellent! You’re the ‘ing’ expert!” or simply: “Terrific!,” “You’re close!,” “Go to it!,” “You’ve got it!,” “Yup!,” “Congratulations!”

Classroom management often risks threatening the relationships between teacher and students and among students, especially when young students are still learning the pattern of classroom activity. These relationships and the trust involved in them is what allows the development of full use and investigation of the language. Pat used humor a great deal to manage the class and individuals within it without exerting dominating power. For example, if they failed to respond to a set of directions because of their involvement in a play activity, she would enter the world in which they were operating (e.g., "Calling all cars") or simply point out that they were involved in the wrong game (e.g., "You look as though you are investigating"). Her use of humor took the edge off correction, and addressed the child positively as Bruner, Jolly, and Sylva (1976) describe:

The great mediator, the astute diplomat [we would add the great teacher], has a light touch in the control of human affairs. He allows transgressions as if they were performed without evil intent. The player is treated as though he were trying out the flexibility of the system. One of the gifts of leadership is to make light of things which ordinarily cause heaviness, moral indignation. Meta-communication here is not just "I'm playing" but "Let's be a bit flexible about the way we look at things." (p. 117-118)

However, Pat was on occasion quite direct about her insistence that the students treat each other in a similarly supportive fashion. For example, on one occasion she rebuked a student with:

Excuse me, Tina. Your tone of voice is aggressive and it makes me nervous and I'm not even near you. You've got to get a softer way.

Pat would use language play to painlessly shift from an unsuccessful activity to a more successful one. For example, one morning Jonathan was reading an alphabet book in Reader's Theatre. His reading had deteriorated and with it his audience's attention. Pat said:

PAT: I'm going to ask you to put your marker in 'O' because I think you [class] need to change your activity. And we will continue with that before the day is . . .

STUDENT1: Out.

PAT: Speaking of O . . .

STUDENTS (all): Over. [lots of calling out of 'O' words]

PAT: Yeah. [as kids assemble for next activity]

Pat's use of humor in classroom management was particularly effective. For example, when she wanted them to clean up she would say things like:

One two buckle my shoe. It's time to clean up!

Since some of the children were playing with their clay whales on that occasion, and she wanted them to put the whales in a particular spot, she said:

Calling all whales to the ocean. We're going to make this the ocean [indicating a desk in the front].

Shortly after, since things were still not completely in order, she said:

I've pushed the patience button and there's no more patience left.

The remaining uncompliant children then went about putting their things away.

On another occasion Pat was explaining to the children about the construction of their mobiles. Part way through the explanation (which focused on free choice) she was distracted by a small group of children who were not attending. She made a brief digression in her remarks to draw their attention, and her use of metaphor is humorous and effective:

When you are thinking of things you want to put on your mobiles . . . Hello? Calling all cars! . . . you don't have to limit it to whales.

Although management and literacy may seem unrelated, there is a deep relationship between them. For example, Pat's use of humor to draw attention, and even to reprimand, provides information in a non-threatening, non-dominating way. At the same time it models the flexible and metaphorical use of language, and carries the metamessage that language is valued and enjoyed enough by this teacher that she chooses to play with it. If most classroom language use were constrained to less inventive management functions, there would be little time for valuing language and for the demonstration of elaborated language use. The language also conveys the basis of authority in the classroom.

Responsive Openness

In class discussions, Pat favored asking open questions. She would be frank about her lack of a correct answer and often candid in revealing her own opinions. In one reading group she asked, "Do you think the rice is cooked or is it raw?" When the children answered variously, she shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know, does it tell you on the page?," causing them to consult the books open before them and come to the conclusion that the answer was not in the story. Later, Pat initiated a discussion of *Alice in Wonderland* by asking if the children liked the story or found it confusing. She then talked about some of her own dissatisfactions with the story, and about the parts she liked. The children gladly responded in a variety of ways, apparently unconcerned about any need to pretend to love the book, or to pretend to hold the same opinion.

In many of the class discussions observed, Pat led the children away from "easy" answers and encouraged them to think imaginatively. Sometimes she used humor or a playfully wondering tone. For example, one morning as Pat was about to read a book, the title of which included "rainbow," she asked the class:

PAT: How many people have ever seen a rainbow? Anybody ever see a double? Did you ever think about if a rainbow ends?

CHILDREN:
(all at once) It's a gold . . .
Gold . . .
No there isn't . . .
Yeah . . .

PAT: I mean, do you think a rainbow really ends? Or does it go and make a perfect circle around the atmosphere?

STUDENT: I believe in the pot . . .

PAT: Do you think the people on the other side of the world are seeing the same—when it goes around—like a halo?

Pat appears to be trying to show the class that she does not have an answer to this and the possibilities are quite open. This responsive openness provides a good deal of safety for the children to take risks with responses and allows the children to consider multiple realities.

As we noted in an earlier section, Pat also made it a point to remain open to the children's suggestions about what to do and how to go about it. For example, she liked to have each year's class put together a play, but she did not want to impose her will:

. . . having them do the scenery, plan the scenery, do the costumes and so on, you know, . . . try to be in control of it really . . . I plant seeds for that all year long but I wait to see what they seem . . . what triggers them.

In order to maintain this openness Pat had to have considerable confidence in the children and in herself and her theory of teaching.

Apte (1985) has noted that humor involves "a cognitive, often unconscious experience involving internal redefining of sociocultural reality" (p. 14). This requires of students and teacher an acceptance of the possibility of alternative frames and realities. Hyland (1984) has discussed this "responsive openness" as being central to what he calls "the stance of play." All of the threads in Pat's teaching activity which we have separated out and identified above drew us to the conclusion that she valued responsive openness.

Self-Confidence and Voice

In order to be open to multiple possible realities and the diverse ideas of children, it seems that both teacher and student must be secure, and be good listeners and observers. It became evident to us that Pat is a confident teacher. Indeed, she often expressed her feeling that this confidence is rooted in being a careful observer in her classroom, in statements such as, "I wait to see . . . what triggers them" and "I listen to incredible amounts of information."

Pat showed us that she “listened” to outcome information such as test scores, for example, only within this context of confident knowledge. In one interview, Pat discussed her reaction to her previous class’s CAT scores. She said the scores were “average to better,” which she had expected, as she had felt confident that all of the children could read and write, although she hadn’t used the workbook with them. When asked what she might have done had the results not been as positive, she responded:

I would have had to rethink and start over, I think. They did not test well in vowel sounds. But that didn’t make me change anything this year because I don’t care how they test in vowel sounds. The district might care how they test in vowel sounds but . . . When we’re given our test results for the last year’s class, we’re supposed to go through them and see where they fell short, what their strengths and weaknesses were, and then to make an adjustment to our program to respond to the need. And I wrote in my response that they tested lower in vowel sounds, but that I would not change anything because in my opinion that didn’t affect their comprehension of anything, and it didn’t affect their enjoyment of reading. It didn’t keep them from reading. I couldn’t see why I should spend more energy or time. I don’t ignore them. I don’t avoid them. But I’ve spent years where hours a day would go by on vowel sounds and they didn’t learn them any better than when I did them incidentally.

It became apparent to us that Pat was trying to help the students develop this confidence in their personal knowledge. In demonstrating to the children that she valued their knowledge, opinions, and experience, and that she was interested in giving them a forum in which to be heard, Pat was enabling the development of “voice” in her students. She was teaching them to value their own knowledge and experience, just as she herself had come to do in her professional life.

In the classroom, it was evident that Pat constantly attempted to listen to individual children, and to have them listen and respond to each other. She often made comments such as “I’m listening about Crossgates!,” “I haven’t heard Peter yet,” and “Excellent! I can’t wait to hear it later!” She referred to class discussions as “conversations,” and by her reluctance to break off the discussions she demonstrated to the children that she valued the ongoing exchange of knowledge. For example, “I’m going to stop there, but that doesn’t mean we have to stop talking about whales or sharing what we know about them.”

Most probably as a direct result of Pat’s example, by the time of our detailed observations in March, the children had acquired the habit of continuing to think about a particular theme over a period of time and from a variety of perspectives. This became apparent one day as the class was watching a whale documentary on the video. The field notes read as follows:

Lights off, most kids sitting on desks, VCR on in front of room, showing a documentary on the Great Whale—they have been studying and discussing whales all week. There are three whale books propped up on the board in front, two magazines pinned open to whale stories, two cutout whales on board, blue clay whales made by class.

The class is absolutely quiet, watching the documentary, occasionally making quiet comments to themselves. Nantucket sleighride was explained, and Jeffrey(!) turned and chuckled.

Pat is explaining her spelling program to me. Kids are getting more vocal as they listen [to the VCR]—I walked around the room and every single conversation overheard was about whales.

The above excerpt illustrates that this class had come to think of themselves as “knowers” with experience and knowledge that was worth talking about and worth listening to. Furthermore, it shows that the class was able to operate as a knowledgeable community.

We have already described many situations in which Pat encouraged the children to work cooperatively, and to listen to each other carefully. Here we include one more such description, this one from Pat’s perspective:

The last half hour is playtime—they like to call it that—I try to keep my ears open during that activity time. I try not to socialize with them—I try not to referee, I try to encourage them to figure out their own problems and resolve their own issues as they come up, rather than come to me. They need a lot of encouragement that they have the power to do that. They would much rather drop it on my desk and say it’s your problem. I encourage them to talk to each other instead of me about it.

By encouraging negotiation independent of the teacher, Pat demonstrated confidence in the children. Her language demonstrated this, as well. For example, she used the word “people” rather than “children” or “boys and girls” to refer to the class. She would describe the beginning part of the morning as the “business meeting.” Also, she often called on children as “experts,” such as in consulting her former students in second grade to learn how well prepared they felt they were, and to learn what they felt was important for her present class to know about second grade. In other words, she conveyed to the students the importance of their own ideas, giving them confidence in themselves as knowers.

Through all of these means, and more, Pat encouraged the development of self-confidence and “voice” in her students. Rather than elaborate further with isolated examples, we present as an appendix an annotated discussion which evolved around a shared reading of a story *Why Can’t I Fly?* (Kent & Golden-Gelman, 1970).

The example illustrates many of the points we have made so far such as the choice, the fun, the safety, and the responsive openness which characterized Pat’s teaching. In addition, however, it brings out Pat’s emphasis on intertextuality—the connections between texts and between individuals’ experience and the text. In drawing out these relationships, and organizing sharing among the community members, she helps the children at once to personalize their reading, to extend their knowledge, and to extend their narrative skill. By providing an interested audience, she helps the children to develop an awareness that they have something to say, that their experience is important and will be listened to, and hence helps them to develop voice. In the example, Pat not only draws their attention to the children’s “real world experience,” but also to their imaginative experiences, and helps them consider multiple possible realities. We also see examples of humor involving paradoxes among versions of reality.

Discussion

The point of this paper has not been to glorify this teacher, although we are not opposed to helping teachers feel the dignity of their work. We simply found a remarkable coherence in her praxis and wished to explore the implications of that praxis. We do not wish readers to think that Pat never erred or that all activities were fantastically successful in everyone's terms. Indeed, our interviews with the children as they busied themselves with their workbooks suggested that those workbooks engaged the children in cognitive activities which were only tangentially related to being or becoming literate. Several had deduced the structure of certain types of pages and could respond correctly, for example, to a "sequence" page containing a substantial amount of print, in about ten seconds reading very little at all. We have numerous stories of the ingenious ways in which children generated responses to these activities.

But even amidst such "messiness" we noted the depth of involvement in the activity, the responsibility which they demonstrated in response to the teacher's trust, and the cooperative efforts involved. Children often began these sessions working alone, but quite quickly many became cooperatively engaged in the activity. As a child finished some part, or for some other reason got up to move around, another child would call him or her over to assist them with something they were stuck on. Eavesdropping on these sessions often showed teacher-like behavior from the supporting party. Rather than giving the answer outright they often would try to lead their partners to work out the answer. In our estimation, this interaction was the most profitable part of the exercise and at the same time prevented considerable frustration. The literature on cooperative learning (e.g., Slavin, 1984) suggests that this might be time well spent. Approximately one-third of the time spent engaged in the workbook was spent cooperatively involved, an outcome which is unlikely in a more competitive context, and one which has implications for the children's view of knowledge, expertise, and literacy.

We hope that our discussion has not suggested that Pat has a laissez faire approach to literacy instruction. Quite the contrary. The coherence in her teaching and between her teaching and her description of her philosophy suggests very careful and reflective practice. Her confidence in her teaching stems from this reflectiveness about her own activity and her commitment to her view of how people learn and what it means to be literate.

The themes of fun and freedom of choice most evident in Pat's teaching are of considerable importance to theory and practice. Richard deCharms (1983) has noted that there are essentially three types of activity, which he calls Types A, B, and C. Type A is instrumental activity, and is engaged in in order to attain something of value. Type B behavior is epistemic, or learning related, and Type C is fun. He comments that we know a lot about Type A behavior, not very much about Type B, and virtually nothing about Type C except how to turn it into Type A. Pat Colfer helped us to examine some of the parameters of Type C activity or fun in the classroom. Accountability testing in the district ran the risk of making teaching more instrumental than fun, but Pat minimized this possibility. In one early 50 minute interview, she related the rhythms and highlights of her teaching day and year without mentioning tests at all. What was clear was her interest in and enjoyment of the process of teaching.

We use "interest" here in the sense in which Dewey (1913) used the term. He noted that: The root idea of the term seems to be that of being engaged, engrossed, or entirely taken up

with some activity because of its recognized worth. The etymology of the term inter-esse, "to be between," points in the same direction. Interest marks the annihilation of the distance between the person and the materials and results of his action; it is the sign of their organic union. (p. 17)

We believe that the nature of the activity in which Pat was engaged, along with her reflection upon it, allows some conclusions to be drawn about the nature of the "results" (literateness) and the "materials" (learners) which guide, and are a part of her teaching activity.

The themes which we found in Pat's teaching suggest a view of learners and learning which is very compatible with the research on play (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Hyland, 1984; Pelligrini, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, safety for taking risks is central to play, as Bruner (1986) points out:

Play implies a reduction in the seriousness of the consequences of errors and of setbacks. (p. 77)

Hyland (1984) has discussed "responsive openness" as being central, along with "fun," to what he calls "the stance of play." Csikszentmihalyi (1981) points to the perception of freedom of choice as the critical distinguishing feature of play.

Freedom of choice allows students to engage in activities in which they have genuine interest. When Pat talked of choice she talked of interest at the same time. It was reminiscent of Dewey's discussion of interest and its accompaniments. Dewey (1913) had chastized educators for looking "for a motive *for* the study or the lesson, instead of a motive *in* it" (p. 61). This appears to be related to Pat's choice of words when she described how important it is that children "*feel* the fun *in* it [reading]." Dewey tied this to his characterization of play and the reduction of concern over the outcome of the activity:

There are cases where action is direct and immediate. It puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond. It satisfies in and of itself. The end is the present activity, and so there is no gap in the mind between means and end. All play is of this immediate character. Purely aesthetic appreciation approximates this type. (p. 21)

He noted that the self is concerned throughout such activity. The activity is unified or seamless, leaving no space for such things as ego defense to wedge apart means and ends. We believe that it is important that Pat's approach to teaching is very much aligned with her view of learning. It is also significant that she presents herself as *being* a teacher and *being* a learner. That is, she describes her activity as being very much part of her *self*. This perspective contrasts with a view of teaching which separate teachers from their behavior, and both from the students. For example, we still have researchers engaging in intervention studies which require teachers to teach the same course to two different classes in the same day using different "methods" or switching methods semester by semester (e.g., Brophy, 1987).

Pat's teaching activity also reflected her view of what does and does not constitute literateness. It does not reflect the view of literateness espoused in basal readers or tests which require acceptance and storage of *the* (approved, standardized) *meaning*. Nor does it reflect an "information

processing” metaphor. It is more compatible with the view of literacy advanced by Smith (1985) and Bruner (1986a) who describe literate activity in terms of “creating worlds” and being able to view things from the perspective of another’s world. Pat’s view of being literate appeared to echo Czikszentmihalyi’s (1981) definition of wisdom which:

does not lie in becoming mesmerized by that glimpse of reality our culture proclaims to be ultimate, but in the discovery that we can create various realities. (pp. 18-19)

Pat’s use of metaphor and humor also fits with this view of literacy. Both are “world creating” communicative events which contain paradoxical images or messages. Both allow the world to be experienced from an alternative perspective (Schwartzman, 1982). Her emphasis on diversity and personal involvement rather than accuracy of representation is also in line with Bakhtin’s view (as cited in Todorov, 1984):

True understanding in literature and in literary studies is always historical and personal . . . [in the human sciences]. The criterion is not the accuracy of knowledge but the depth of the insight. (p. 23)

Symbolic play was clearly evident in Pat’s classroom, both in the “play time” and in the ongoing playfulness. Pellegrini (1985) has described the value of fantasy play and ritualized social play in literate development in terms of the understanding and flexibility of role appropriate behavior, motives, goals, actions, and narrative sequences. Christie and Johnsen (1983) have also noted changes in emotional and cognitive perspective taking contingent on increased pretend play. Development in these areas is certainly relevant to the understanding and production of literature.

In pursuing the children’s experiences with respect to text, Pat expanded their understanding of intertextuality and of the importance of making personal meaning from the text. In moving from this to fantasy and back, she helped children understand the possibilities of multiple realities and, along with her humor, reframing and paradox. Similarly, language play at the various levels allows children to split language from its everyday use, and examine it as an object of study in itself. It is this that helps children develop metalinguistic and metatextual awareness (Cazden, 1974; Johnston & Fleming, 1986).

Pat’s responsive openness and choice of questions encouraged extensive use of oral language and hypothesizing by the children. At the same time, the nature of the children’s dialogue was constantly shaped in terms of the literate community. Pat encouraged the continued pursuit of topics of discussion, not just as isolated school subjects, and she encouraged the students to listen to and rely on one another, and yet be independent. In other words, she set a context for an understanding of literacy in terms of interdependence and cooperative understanding. She encouraged and modeled questioning and wonderment in her readers.

Pat conveys several important metamessages through her approach to the children and to literacy. By example, she shows the joy of literacy, and by her trust and lack of force she shows that she believes that they all will become literate, and that she is not anxious about it. Her provision of choice of activities at once allows her to observe who does and does not choose literate activity, and to convey the message that it is so obviously fun that the children will naturally choose it.

In our description of Pat's teaching we have tried to make it clear that, as with all teachers, she bases her activity on personal, and fundamentally political, beliefs. In Bruner's (1985) words:

There is no completely naturalistic way of resolving the question about what model of the learner we want to enshrine at the center of our practice in education. For there are many ways of encouraging different forms of learning with different ends in view. At the heart of the decision process there must be a value judgment about how the mind should be cultivated and to what end. (p. 5)

From our perspective, Pat's values with respect to literateness lie at the heart of the premises of a multicultural, democratic society. Her model of the learner and hence her approach to management is most closely aligned with that portrayed in the literature on play, and her view of literacy is completely compatible. Playfulness, fun, and freedom of choice may not have been taken seriously enough by researchers in the field of literacy instruction. The complex role of these values and their classroom expressions is unlikely to be made apparent through current assessment procedures which are short-term and support a relatively trivial definition of literateness. Indeed, recent advances in classroom research directed toward those ends have resulted in altogether too much earnestness in the classroom. Through analysis of the activity in this classroom we hope that we have advanced the case for levity and play for helping children to become literate.

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APPENDIX

A Shared Reading of “Why Can’t I Fly?”

This transcript represents approximately 40 minutes from an audiotape recording of the morning of February 2 in Pat’s classroom. On the transcript, as on the tape, the reading activity proceeds without interruption. We have indicated throughout many responses that should clearly illustrate the teacher’s encouragement of fun, freedom of choice, and responsive openness while she provides a safe environment for the children to take risks in expressing themselves and developing confidence. In addition, her emphasis on intertextuality as a bridge between the text and students’ experience is noted.

These responses are indicated in the right hand margins by means of bracketed abbreviations. Although the abbreviations are self-evident, we provide the following key:

[CHOICE]	Freedom of choice—here, mainly in contributions to discussion.
[SAFETY]	The provision of an emotional ‘net’ to encourage participation and risk taking in putting ideas together.
[FUN]	Spontaneity and anxiety-free participation by all, characterized by a sense of adventure and celebration.
[R.O.]	Responsive openness: encouragement to consider alternative frames and open ended questions.
[VOICE]	Self-confidence and voice: the development of trust in one’s own powers of observation and expression.
[INTERTEXT]	Intertextuality

As they begin, Pat says: “Don’t go faster than me ‘cause this is my first time and I like to kinda enjoy them,” setting the tone for an orderly adventure on which she is embarking along with the children.

Very soon a student interjects a comment between pages:

STUDENT:	“Sure” looks kind of tricky ‘cause it has s-u-r-e.
PAT:	I would certainly agree with that.
STUDENT:	And it sounds like shhh.

PAT: It looks as if it should be something besides shhh—yeah— [VOICE]
good observation.

Pat laughs out loud with the kids a lot and savors the punch line pages during the reading. At one point the book says, “I sing all the time, I sing low I sing high.” Pat says, “Sing low [all do], sing high [all do]—we’re not flying yet!” Then they [FUN]
go on with the book. When the group collectively errs in their reading, Pat allows them time to self-correct then simply says, “Oops” and they go back and correct [SAFETY]
themselves.

At one point in the story, the monkey trying to fly lands in a duck pond and the picture shows a duck nearby. Pat comments:

PAT: At least the duck doesn’t look at her and laugh. It’s curious. [SAFETY]

STUDENT: Like Curious George. [INTERTEXT]

PAT: Is that like Curious George?

KIDS: Yeah.

PAT: You know—she’s reminding me a lot of Curious George because he gets into some mixes too. Can you think of another character from another story in another place that wanted to fly?

STUDENT: Oh, I got a book and there was an egg somewhere and some birds picked it up and they were sitting on it and then when it cracked it was a alligator—and then they kept on feeding it and then it tried to fly and he went flop.

PAT: Mmm, just like this one.

STUDENT: I can bring it . . .

PAT: I’d love to see it.—Jake?

STUDENT: I have this book where this boy wishes he had wings so he could fly.

PAT: Really? Oh yeah?

STUDENT: I have that one too.

PAT: Oh, you have that one too?

STUDENT: And this guy says, "I wish I had wings" and the next day he had wings growing out of him.

PAT: [laughs] There's all kinds of stories about people who wanted to fly—real famous stories—but I'm just going to stop the conversation for one second so I can send my computers down. [Pat lists off the names of the group and sends them off] Now we can talk. - Bob?

BOB: [describes Winnie the Poo going after the honey by floating on balloons.]

PAT: [enthusiastic] Oh, I remember that story. [others join in] Susan [has her hand up].

SUSAN: Ummm. [forgets what she was going to say]

PAT: Are you thinking? Do you want me to come back? OK, [SAFETY] keep thinking. Tina?

TINA: [tells about Thumper wanting to fly]

PAT: Oh, I don't remember that and he's one of my favorite characters. Did he want to fly?

TINA: Yeah. He said, "I wish I could fly."

PAT: Was it when he saw the butterflies?

TINA: No. When he saw the birds flying.

PAT: Do you remember how he named things funny names at the beginning?

[general discussion]

PAT: There's one more character that flew and I thought everybody would just say, "Oh yes, this is exactly like it." I'll give you a clue - circus - circus.

STUDENT: Dumbo?

PAT: Yeah.

ALL: Oh yeah. I've got that [etc.]

PAT: Did Dumbo want to fly or did Dumbo kind of get stuck flying?

ALL: Stuck [etc.]

PAT: His mother was sad about it, wasn't she?

ALL: [lots of discussion]

PAT: Brian's hand is up, so let's hear him.

BRIAN: Well, I have a book and it's good timing 'cause I got it from the library and there's this bear that wants to know how to fly . . . [VOICE]

PAT: [laughs] Really?

BRIAN: . . . and this friend bird and she says that she wants to know how to be big. So first big comes and then they're trying to fly works too, but it only works when they - the one when they want - when they go to fly - was when they made a kite and put a picture of him on - and then when the bird wanted to be big, they found a pumpkin - and you know how pumpkins are big and round - and they put a picture of the bird on the pumpkin and he felt big.

PAT: Boy, they really solved that one. Did you read that book or did Mom or Dad read it with you?

BRIAN: [indignant] No! I read it all by myself!

PAT: [enthusiastic] Alright! That's excellent. How many people here have ever tried to fly? Do you remember being tinier than you are now - like younger? - you're not so tiny anyway - you're big guys now. What kinds of stuff can kids do or people do when they want to feel like they're flying? Tina? [VOICE] [R.O.]

TINA: Go in an airplane.

PAT: Yes. OK. If you're in an airplane you are in the air and you are flying. But can you feel it? When I was in an airplane I felt that I was just in a room.

TINA: I felt like I was flying.

PAT: You did? Well, maybe you just had a different way of feeling it. So what else can you do to make yourself feel like you are flying? [SAFETY] [CHOICE]

STUDENT: Daydream.

PAT: Yeah. You could daydream. Your imagination could take you on a soaring trip. [R.O.]

STUDENT: On a rocket.

OTHERS: [various possibilities]

STUDENT: When I jump I feel like I'm flying.

PAT: Yeah, 'cause you're off the ground for a while, right? What if you were on the top of a platform and then you jumped and on the way down you would feel like flying.

STUDENT: Or you could make a diving board.

OTHERS: Yeah - I've done that [etc.]

STUDENT: I jump on my bed . . .

PAT: Oh. I'm sure your Mom likes that. [laughing]

STUDENT: No.

OTHERS: [lots of talk and laughter]

PAT: My father said about that - my father said kids are supposed to do that to beds - that's why they made beds. [FUN]

ALL: [discussion]

PAT: But I can't hear Jason. Excuse me, I need to listen to Jason.

JASON: [finishes far fetched story] [speech plus sound not clear]

PAT: OK. Is this real?

JASON: Yeah.

PAT: Is this really real?

JASON: I did that once when I was dreaming.

PAT: Ooh. So that's a fun way to dream, isn't it? Scotty? [SAFETY]

SCOTT: Once when I was jumping on my bed I hit my head and had to go to the hospital.

PAT: Not fun, huh?

STUDENT: Once I got my first bike I had and I made like this little ramp and I drove up it and my bike went flying into the air.

PAT: Well, that's a time when you leave the ground. You know what I do when I drive on a hilly road? You know when I told you that I went skiing and I broke my leg?

ALL: Yeah?

PAT: And how I was kind of afraid to ski again? But my whole family loves skiing, so . . .

STUDENT: I skied on the hardest hill at the . . .

PAT: But this is my turn, OK? So there I am now and when I'm driving down on a road that goes down - a hilly road that keeps going down - in my mind I imagine I'm on my skis and I'm looking and I drive like this and I drive like that. [R.O.]

ALL: [laugh]

PAT: It's not true - it's just kind of a dream.

STUDENT: Well, if you want to pretend that you're flying - like what I usually do is when I'm over at my friend's house who has other real neat stereo with like a receiver and an equalizer and

like tape deck one and tape deck two - well, it's really nice and all that stuff - and on tape deck two it has like a counter — I mean an electronic one that lights up. So I usually pretend that I'm going back in time and then that the ship blows up and I jump down and that's just like some way I'm flying.

PAT: [going uhhuh and mmhm throughout] OK, so you can use machines to help you imagine too, can't you. Did anyone see "Back to the Future"? [VOICE]
[INTERTEXT]

ALL: [much discussion]

PAT: OK. Since we've spent so much time on the floor, before you go back to your seats, you can imagine flying back. [FUN]

ALL: [laughter and commotion and lots of airplanes]

PAT: I want to see some nice different sorts of birds - you know, you've got some birds that flap flap flap flap flap and there's some that glide and soar and there's some [lost in commotion - about 20 seconds]. OK, fly back. [CHOICE]

Could you please take out your readers? If you've got more than one take out both. [CHOICE]

Can we just discuss it before we decide what's to happen next? I have some people who just started a new book yesterday. I have some people who have several books. [quiet laugh] I have some people who are in more than one group. [quiet laugh] OK. So it doesn't get too confusing, let's think about how we can get it organized, OK? I think that Kathy's group has got a real fun one to do—it's a rhyme-y fun thing in a tub and we made a joke about we're going to get in the tub today and scrub each other—who's in the tub? OK, I think it might be kind of fun if we try to fit in a tub. What do you think? Would you like to have some fun with it? [FUN]

GROUP: Yeah.

PAT: If the kids are together who are in the tub, I'll get the tub out.

STUDENT: Mrs. Colfer, won't we need a bigger tub?

PAT: OK, maybe we could take turns. Did you ever take a bath with anybody else?

ALL: Yeah [discussion, 5 seconds].

PAT: OK. That's the plan for my tubbers. Now, who else have I got? I've got - the group that has a story left in the new book [aside—OK, I can only talk to one person at once, OK?] OK, Scott—what's your decision. Do you want to finish *Finding Places* or do you want to start *Moving On*? [CHOICE] It's up to you.

SCOTT: *Moving On*.

PAT: OK. Park *Finding Places* back in your desks and we'll start *Moving On* today. This is called Scott's *Moving On* group right now. Alright. What's the first story in *Moving On*?

STUDENT: "Show and Tell."

PAT: OK then, that's your assignment if you're in Scott's group. OK, now I have to go to another group. You're in the tub. You're in the other *Moving On* group?

STUDENT: Yep.

PAT: What's your assignment?

STUDENTS: "The Bike." "The Bike."

PAT: "The Bike" - that's your assignment.

One group is already reading aloud in unison. Pat goes to the tub to begin reading group.

