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Play and Imagination in Children with Autism, by Pamela J. Wolfberg.

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Book Review

Play and Imagination in Children with Autism, by Pamela J. Wolfberg. Teachers College Press, 1999; 208 pp. $22.95 paperback

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The principles of social constructivist theory would appear to be of significant promise for improving the practice of early childhood special education (e.g., Mallory & New, 1994). Viewed as a related but distinct theoretical framework from earlier conceptualizations of Piagetian constructivism, social ecology, ecobehavioral theory, and the contemporary field of cultural psychology, social constructivist approaches have gained much currency in early childhood education (e.g., Berk & Winsler, 1995). However, the articulation of social constructivist theory within the historically eclectic, atheoretical, and too often reductionist/behaviorist world of early childhood special education remains a significant challenge. In fact, both practitioners and researchers in the field have rarely situated their work within explicit theoretical models (for further discussion, see Mallory & New, 1994). What has been missing up to this point is a grounded, contextualized inquiry that could illustrate the tenets of social constructivism through the lived experiences of young children with significant educational disabilities.

Enter Pamela Wolfberg's *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism*. Using the methods of ethnographic case study (which are detailed in a highly useful appendix), Wolfberg offers a balanced and carefully wrought explication of the classroom lives of three children who have been diagnosed with autism. Teresa, Freddy, and Jared, who grow in the course of the book from 7 to 11 years old, are members of the "Integrated Play Group" established by Wolfberg and her colleagues in a northern California elementary school. The purpose of the play group is to support the guided participation of young children with disabilities as they engage in reciprocal play (social and symbolic) with more socially competent peers. Emphasis is placed on the enhancement of social and communicative competence through systematic observations, scaffolded interactions, and the creation of play environments that reflect natural settings, materials, and activities. What is constructed within the play groups is what Wolfberg, appropriating from Scandanavian practice (Selmer–Olsen, 1993), refers to as a "play culture," char-

acterized by progressively complex social interactions with peers, transformations in play, and transformations in words and pictures. Wolfberg seems especially intrigued by play culture as "children's living folklore, something children produce and pass on between themselves to the exclusion of adults" (p. 29). Her interpretation of this child-directed culture is consistent with Corsaro's (1985) earlier descriptions of the role of play in establishing and fostering peer cultures. Further, this notion that children are constructors as well as carriers of the cultures they live in is reminiscent of the work of Bruner and further embeds the text in the tradition of such cultural and educational theorists as Vygotsky, Rogoff, and Gardner, all of whom are central sources for Wolfberg's analysis.

Joined with this theoretical model of play and learning is a strong interest in the social characteristics and competencies of children with the label of autism. In Chapter 2, Wolfberg offers a brief treatise of autism as one form of pervasive developmental disorder, adopting the standard DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. While she notes the diverse interpretations of autism in the 20th century, from Kanner to Lovaas to Frith, and recognizes that it is actually a spectrum disorder with various manifestations, Wolfberg conveys a noncritical stance toward the prevailing diagnostic paradigms. She appears less interested in interrogating the use and consequences of the medical label than in describing the individuals to whom the label is applied and how they participate in the social world.

Although this lack of a critical stance might be cited as a shortcoming of the book, Wolfberg's ability to take apart the particular social and communicative difficulties associated with autism, especially in the context of children's play, is redeeming. As revealed in Part I of the book, her comprehensive knowledge of contemporary research on the relationships among play, communicative competence, social and cognitive development, and theories of mind serves as a foundation for the ethnographic inquiry that is reported in Part II. Most of Part I is focused on framing play in three ways—as a universal phenomenon with characteristic features subject to description and interpretation, as a cause and effect of children's development (with specific implications for children with autism), and as a vehicle for supporting inclusive classroom practices. This material is concise, well-informed, and clearly written. Its primary contribution is the integration of literature on play (e.g., Bretherton, Garvey, Sutton–Smith) with that on sociolinguistic and cognitive development (e.g., Howes, Vygotsky), the psychosocial characteristics associated with autism (e.g., Baron–Cohen, Sigman, & Ungerer), and effective approaches to inclusive classroom practices (e.g., Guralnick, Strain, & Odom). The result of this integration is a tight conceptual framework that equips readers from diverse fields to accept the rationale for the child-focused ethnographies and analyses of Part II.

The book's greatest strengths are to be found in Part II, which weaves the three ethnographic case studies within the texture of Wolfberg's progressive conceptualization of play. The presentation of each case study is rich with transcripts of classroom dialogue, excerpts from observational notes, and samples of Jared, Freddy, and Teresa's writings and drawings (which are not very well reproduced). Chapters 6 through 11 follow the chronology of each child's development within the classroom culture, moving from the initial "phase" (her term) of "uncharted

territory" through "beginning to explore," "entering play," "guided participation," "embracing play," and "an unending journey." Superimposed over these progressive stages like a matrix are the developmental foci of the play culture referred to earlier—social relations with peers, transformations in play, and transformations in words and pictures. Each of these chapters concludes with a brief "interpretative summary" and the entire section ends with a discussion of the implications of these interpretations for theory and practice. Here Wolfberg reiterates the social constructivist underpinnings of her analysis by discussing the "social construction of imagination," the role of more capable others, and the influence of norms in peer play culture.

While Wolfberg's interpretations are clearly presented and well-grounded in her observations, she moves surprisingly close to a discussion of a stage-based theoretical framework in the concluding chapter. The inductive schemata put forward in this chapter is structured in such a way as to suggest that the six forms of play she observed developed in a stage-like manner. Although she generally does not refer to stages per se (using the term "passages" instead), one of her final conclusions argues that, "It is possible that these three children developed within the symbolic dimension of play at different rates in a relatively consistent sequence corresponding to normal patterns of development" (p. 160). This sounds remarkably traditional for a text that otherwise offers new integrations and interpretations with respect to play and children's development. But Wolfberg is also a cautious scientist when she warns us in the same paragraph that, "It would be important to ascertain whether the experiences of Teresa, Freddy, and Jared speak to those of other children with autism, represent rare and unusual cases, and correspond to subgroups within the spectrum of autism" (ibid).

Wolfberg's description of the development of three children with the label of autism within a neo- and post-Piagetian, cultural framework is much needed within the field of early childhood special education. The field as a whole persists in its reliance on older models of sequenced and stage-related development. Of course development is progressive, and the role of biogenetic influences is undeniable. Yet the use of cultural models has helped the larger field of early childhood to question the notions of predictable and fixed sequencing. And our growing understanding of both cultural and developmental differences in children has been a major influence in expanding definitions of what is normal and predictable. Further, we recognize now both a "culture of childhood" and a "culture of play" that enable us to suspend adult conceptions in favor of the interpretive and narrative. Wolfberg transcends the difficulty of stages and sequenced development by turning to the work of Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the widely respected early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy. She quotes Malaguzzi's use of the analogy of *path,* which is quite different from predictable stages or passages:

> Creativity is a kind of continuously evolving fantasy, and you don't know when a child will grab at that fantasy. What we like to do is to accompany the child as far as possible into the realm of the creative spirit. But we can do no more. At the end of the path is creativity. We don't know if the children will want to follow

the path all the way to the end, but it is important that we have shown them not only the road, but also that we have offered them the instruments . . . that sustain the hope of arriving at moment of joy (p. 161, cited in Goleman, Kaufman, & Ray, 1992, p. 83).

This evocation of the path calls to mind the title of a book of conversations between Myles Horton and Paolo Freire (1990)—*We Make the Road by Walking*. Such an orientation suggests infinite possibilities for the social construction of knowledge, experience, and culture. Wolfberg's text makes an important contribution to our understanding of those possibilities, especially with respect to children whose development and behavior are markedly different judged by most normative measures. This book continues the level of quality and utility associated with Teachers College Press' special education series. It deserves to be read, critiqued, and expanded upon by those who work with, think about, and care for all young children.

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