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Meier, Deborah.; Engel, Benda S. & Taylor, Beth. (2010). *Playing for Keeps: Life and Learning on a Public School Playground*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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Reviewed by Stephen Woolworth
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When I pick up my six-year-old son Isaiah from our neighborhood elementary school, I often ask him how many recesses he had that day. His answer typically serves as a barometer for how he felt about that day's school experience. If Isaiah had three trips to the playground, then he had a great day. Two tells me it was an average day, but should weather or an amended schedule restrict his playtime to just one recess, then I know to anticipate some irritation or disappointment. Thankfully, our neighborhood school has continued to invest in the educational value of children's play time. Unfortunately, many other schools — even some within the same district — have restricted, minimized or eliminated formal and informal opportunities for children to explore and discover, invent and create, compete and collaborate, and

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self-organize into groups, teams or independent endeavors of one kind or another on the school's playground.

These playground experiences take center stage in *Playing for Keeps: Life and Learning on a Public School Playground* by Deborah Meier, Brenda Taylor and Beth Engel. The featured playground is at Boston's Mission Hill School, a K-8 "pilot school" that grew out of mid-1990s reforms adopted by the district to develop more flexible and autonomous schools in response to the newly adopted state charter school law. Opened in 1997 by Meier, the founder and leader of the successful Central Park East schools in New York City, along with Taylor, Engel and others, the Mission Hill School is organized around many of the same "old progressive educational ideas" (p. ix) as Central Park East like, for example, the focus on five "habits of mind" (e.g., evidence, viewpoint, etc.) that underlie and support both academic and nonacademic activities. The Mission Hill School, like the Central Park East schools, is also an affiliate of the Coalition of Essential Schools founded by the late educational reformer Ted Sizer.

Playing for Keeps is an outgrowth of three years (1998-2001) of Beth Taylor's playground observations and field notes, which were featured in a column in the school's weekly newsletter entitled, "Notes from Outdoors." These columns included direct transcriptions of children's playground talk and detailed descriptions of their activities. The columns captured "children's lives on the playground — their imaginative play and games; their wonderings and discoveries about nature; their social relationships, physical feats, and competitions (p.1)." Over time the columns became an expression of the school's view of learning and, once reorganized and revised for the book, an opportunity for the authors to reassert their "convictions about the value of play — its meaning to growth, education, and life in a democratic society" (p.3).

The book is short; only 127 pages. It is organized into nine chapters in addition to an introduction, epilogue and an appendix that contains both a condensed school history and a copy of the school's newsletter. Scattered throughout the book are photos of the school and playground, children's illustrations, a hand-drawn map of the school's playground, and examples of children's

written work. Shortening the narrative even more are the streams of raw data from Taylor's playground observations that run through most of the chapters. These include quotes from children's playground talk ("I am a baby squirrel," p.23), descriptive observations of play ("Children dug for worms. There were arguments about what to do with them..." p.44) and brief commentary or wonderings about children's activities ("What prompts change in play and groups? Some children tend to be together most playtimes, but others enter and leave the groups, and new groups form for a day or two..." p.86).

The book is divided into two main sections. Part I covers "Sources of Play," which includes the thematic areas of children's play. These range from family life and relationships — what the authors call "Domesticity" — to "scary stuff," including predator and prey roles and death and catastrophes like the sinking of the Titanic, to explorations of the natural environment of the playground (rocks, trees and insect and animal life) to the way children dramatize aspects of the school curriculum on the playground. Part II addresses "Aspects of Play," which includes the way educators at the Mission Hill School set about "creating an ethical, safe, educationally worthwhile context for play (p.65)." Chapters in this section are devoted to subjects like preparation for democratic life, how age, gender and race influence the social organization of the playground, and the impact of the popular media on children's development.

Overall, Meier, Engel and Taylor carry the torch well. Like many before them, they make a compelling case for the importance of play in the lives of children. The book's strength, ironically, is that it is completely out-of-step with the dominant discourse of school reform. In the midst of debates over accountability systems linked to student learning, teacher quality and school funding and performance, the authors direct the reader's attention to the myriad ways in which children think, explore ideas, construct meaning, work with raw materials and express their curiosity about everything from life and death to fairy houses, snakes and butterflies. By doing so they elevate children's voices to the forefront of their discussion about learning, and demonstrate how and why the playground at the Mission Hill School is a vibrant and fertile learning environment. The result is a humanistic

book that revitalizes the spirit of child-centered progressive education against a backdrop of institutional standardization.

In some ways *Playing for Keeps* reads like an ethnography of place — an interpretation of the playground culture produced, sustained and endlessly transformed by its youthful participants. And while the lengthy streams of observational data may frustrate some readers not accustomed to qualitative analysis, the observation notes lend credibility and credence to the authors' claims about the educational value of play. In fact, it is through paying close attention to children's ideas captured in the field notes that the authors deliver the book's most significant and timely claim: Contrary to accepted views of "free time" as wasted departures from the formal school curriculum, the authors demonstrate that it is when children are often the most engaged with reflecting upon and applying the curricular lessons of the classroom. Learning and play, in other words, are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing.

In one of the most engaging sections of the book, the authors reveal how a school-wide study of ancient Egypt became a powerful source of play. Taylor's field notes show how "new information, ideas, and vocabulary derived from the curriculum were integrated into imaginative play" (p.61), from digging for the jewels in King Tut's tomb, to examining worm tunnels in a tree trunk as if they were hieroglyphics, to trying to reproduce the ancient Egyptian method of moving large stones for pyramid construction. Further evidence demonstrates how, for example, children's fascination with buried rocks and the digging of a large hole on the playground — an activity that for different reasons attracted children of all ages — provided experience with the concepts of "leverage, resistance, inertia, gravity and balance," which when studying physics will provide students with the experiential foundation needed to "understand the meaning of terms like *fulcrum* and *mechanical advantage*" (p.42).

Playing for Keeps also illustrates how children's participation on the playground constitutes preparation for democratic life. This is evidenced in how children negotiate notions of fairness in games and activities, how they work out "social rules and relationships" (p. 72) and

how, with and without adult assistance, they succeed or fail at developing solutions to social problems. What's more, through enacting the "habits of mind" in their playground endeavors, children learned to weigh evidence, consider other viewpoints, assess relevance, conjecture about hypothetical scenarios, and determine the significance of new experiences and knowledge. When we leave "no time or space in education for children's 'playful' efforts to make sense of the world," the authors observe, we risk "the future not only of poetry and science but also of our political liberties (p. 68)." For the "habits of playfulness in early life are the essential foundation," the authors conclude, of a K-12 education that "would foster, nourish, and sustain" a self-governing society (p.68).

Despite the compelling presentation of evidence and Meier, Engel and Taylor's thoughtful explanation of it, *Playing for Keeps* could be strengthened. The authors, for instance, miss opportunities to situate their case in a broader policy context. For example, there are several references to the "loss" or "disappearance" of play in society — at one point referred to as a "growing national threat" (p.105) — but these allusions are rarely grounded in specifics, instead giving way to speculation about the harmful influence of the commercial media (e.g., "scripted play") or the continued rhetoric of competition regarding school improvement (e.g., "race to the top"). Connecting their work more firmly to research in the fields of child development and media and family studies would not only help the book reach a wider audience, but also support and build upon their concerns about the social conditions of childhood. Moreover, attention to specific reforms and policies connected to the decline of recess and playtime in schools would sharpen their critique and perhaps open the door for more concrete policy prescriptions in furtherance of a more progressive educational vision of children's learning, growth and development.

At a time when the welfare and well being of children are rarely mentioned let alone discussed in the deafening drumbeat to "hold schools accountable," *Playing for Keeps* demonstrates that preparation for democratic citizenship in schools occurs every bit as much on the playground as it does in the classroom. In doing so, the book reminds — if not inspires — readers to preserve and protect the "playful

work” of children. At stake is not just the freedom required for deep and meaningful learning, but quite possibly the foundation of democratic life itself.

About the Reviewer

Stephen Woolworth serves as the Associate Dean in the School of Education and Movement Studies at Pacific Lutheran University, where he teaches advanced cognition and learning, educational and community studies, and instructional leadership. He has published in the fields of teacher learning, education and public health history, community and cultural studies, and social policy. Stephen currently serves on the Governmental Relations and Advocacy Committee of the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE).

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