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What is This?
Tactical underlife: Understanding students’ perceptions

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Abstract  This article describes one urban classroom and the language and literacy practices jointly constructed by a veteran urban teacher, Lynn Gatto, and her 3rd grade students. Drawing from two ethnographic studies of Gatto’s 2nd–4th grade looped classroom, we argue that Gatto and her students use the interplay between strategies and tactics (De Certeau, 1984) and between disruptive and contained underlife (Goffman, 1961), or what we are calling tactical underlife, to construct their own spaces of resistance to the constraining demands of the standardization and accountability movement.

Keywords  resistance; students’ perceptions; tactical underlife; urban teaching

Introduction

Understanding elementary students’ perception of teachers’ pedagogical practices can provide important insight into classroom interactional processes and their consequences on student learning. Given current standards orthodoxy and increasing accountability and surveillance from US President George W. Bush and State Departments of Education, investigating how teachers and students understand one another and come together to construct meaningful contexts for learning becomes vital in the effort to confront and resist the attempt to normalize teaching. We suggest that the teaching and learning practices described in this article are what will be pushed out by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/). More specifically, urban students who are already undertaught (Delpit, 1995) and under-prepared for new literacies in a global economy will be further ‘left behind’ if educators do not prevent the loss of the kind of practice we present here.
We describe one urban classroom and the language and literacy practices jointly constructed by a veteran urban teacher, Lynn Gatto, and her 3rd grade students. Drawing from two ethnographic studies of Gatto’s 2nd–4th grade looped classroom, we will focus specifically on the students’ articulation of their experiences in this classroom to gain insight into how students perceive the teaching and learning therein. We argue that Gatto and her students use the interplay between strategies and tactics (De Certeau, 1984) and between disruptive and contained underlife (Goffman, 1961), or what we are calling ‘tactical underlife’, to construct a unique space for learning within a restrictive institutional environment and that students perceive this learning context as ‘fun’.

Larson and Gatto have been working together for three years on multiple levels. Larson, in collaboration with research assistant Jacobs, has a long-term ethnographic study in Gatto’s room at the same time that Gatto has been collecting data for her dissertation. The data sets merge at different points. Our analysis here draws on Larson’s study for the children’s interview data, videotaped interaction, and field notes and on Gatto’s study for videotaped interaction and students’ writing. Larson’s study focuses on understanding the tools, decisions, and practices of Gatto as she tries to teach meaningfully in a highly politicized pedagogical context in a struggling urban district. Gatto is focusing on understanding the role of talk in mediating learning and social relations in urban classrooms.

We have previously described the pressure Gatto feels to conform to district mandated literacy instruction (Gatto, 2001) and her emerging, yet conflicting, identities (Jacobs et al., 2002). Furthermore, we have described how she constructs spaces for classroom talk through a curriculum based on what we have termed an inquiry as social practice curriculum (Larson and Gatto, 2003). We realized in year two, however, that we had yet to understand deeply students’ perceptions of Gatto and her practices. Focusing on students’ perceptions will help to provide a rich description of the classroom culture and language and literacy practices and reveal the way in which Gatto and her students use tactics (De Certeau, 1984) to build a meaningful learning community in spite of outside pressures. We argue that Gatto consciously subverts the external constraints and demands to standardize classroom practice by constructing a learning context that relies on transformed social relations, physical arrangements, curricular engagements, and classroom discourse structures that the students understand as ‘fun’.
Research context

The urban district in which this study takes place, Northeast City School District (NCSD), is facing increasing and dramatic problems as it struggles to raise student achievement under the pressure of standardization and accountability. As one of the ‘big five’ urban districts in New York state, this district ranks second after New York City in poorest achieving schools and is under increasing surveillance by the state department of education and the general public. The district is facing serious budgetary problems that have brought about talks of cutting the teaching force, meaningful curriculum programs, and administrative staff. The school board recently fired the superintendent and has struggled desperately to recover a US$40m budget deficit. Current discussions about next year reveal a similar budget crisis that the new superintendent is working to resolve. Local newspapers report substantial political infighting on the school board. Teacher morale is at an all time low as they await word about whether they have jobs in the upcoming academic year, and worry about the possibility of a considerable increase in class size and increased testing pressures, and struggle to understand the new demands of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The district just replaced a third of its building principals to cover a massive retirement exodus, including the principal at Gatto’s school. It is within this externally constraining context that Gatto and her students struggle to make participation in literacy learning meaningful.

Gatto has been teaching in this district for almost 30 years. When she was teaching fourth grade three years ago, New York State’s mandated standardized English Language Arts exam became a political tool to hold fourth grade teachers accountable for students’ scores. Gatto argued that to begin with a group of students in September and expect her to account for their performance on a February test was unacceptable and that she needed an extended time period with students in order to be meaningfully accountable. She successfully negotiated space to implement a looped classroom that spanned from second to fourth grades.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation upon which we base our analyses assumes that literacy is a critical social practice (Barton, 1994; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Luke, 1994; Street, 1995) constructed in everyday interactions, conversations, and narratives (De Certeau, 1984; Gee, 1996; Ochs and Capps, 2001). We draw on the New Literacy Studies to argue that literacy is a more complex social practice than mandated curricula and assessments address.
As Street (1997, 1999) has argued, curricula and assessment that reduce literacy to simple, mechanistic skills fail to recognize, let alone incorporate, the richly complex literacy practices of everyday life. In order for students to learn and contribute to the richness and complexity of literacy practices in contemporary society, we need literacy curricula and assessment that reflect that richness and complexity (Street, 1997, 1999). We argue here that Gatto’s inquiry as social practice curriculum illustrates the complexity needed.

Sociocultural and socio-historical learning theory informs our understanding of the social processes of language and literacy learning by describing the child as an active member of a constantly evolving community of learners in which literacy knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems such as the current political pressure to standardize literacy instruction in this district and in the USA (Cole, 1996; Duranti, 1997; Dyson, 1997; Ochs, 1992; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2003; Rogoff, 1994, 2003; Street, 1995; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Thus, to reveal children’s understanding of literacy as a social practice in local classroom contexts, we need to observe and document how language and literacy learning are co-constructed by both students and teachers in interaction in routine, everyday cultural practices such as classroom literacy events. Using Rogoff (1994, 2003), we define learning as changing participation and use this framework to connect our analysis of discourse to literacy learning. We analyze classroom discourse to understand the nature of interaction and to explain how discourse practices mediate students’ changing participation in literacy events.

As a way of connecting our analysis of classroom interaction and the students’ perceptions of their teacher’s practices to larger issues of power and pedagogy we look to De Certeau’s (1984) examination of strategies and tactics and Lankshear and Knobel’s (2002) proposal of a pedagogy of tactics. De Certeau defines strategies as institutional, spatial, and ideological practices used by producers and consumers in the course of everyday life. Strategies are the way the powerful shape space and practices through bureaucratic measures such as standardized assessments and mandated curricula. Tactics, he suggests, are the ways the people who live within institutionalized spaces use, manipulate, and divert the space to which they are assigned. These are not random or accidental acts, but are calculated actions that operate in isolation of one another and take advantage of opportunities. As De Certeau (1984: 18) suggests:

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game (jouer/dejouer le jeu de l’autre), that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn
resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants’ stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining system.

We build on Jacobs’ (2002) conceptualization of De Certeau’s (1984) view of games between producers and consumers to describe Gatto as both privileged and marginalized. She is seen as privileged in the district because of her 30 years experience, her awards, successful grant writing, and reputation. This reputation also marginalizes her. Her teaching practices, her noisy room, and the perception her peers have that her students ‘just play in there’ separate and marginalize her among the other teachers in her building and across the district. However, it is important to note that in society she is indeed privileged. As a college educated, middle-class white woman married to a white, middle-class man, their combined income moves them both into upper-class financial status. Yet, the fact that she is Jewish and married to a non-Jewish Italian Catholic marginalizes her in society on other levels. Thus, as Jacobs (2002) suggests, the interplay between marginalization and privilege appears on multiple levels across multiple contexts in Gatto’s life. In our analysis, we connect the interplay of marginalized and privileged to the use of strategies and tactics in the process of using the cracks in power seen when producers’ imposition of power in the form of strategies becomes visible. In other words, Gatto uses the interplay between strategies and tactics to construct her own space, albeit a contained space.

We link the concept of containment to Goffman’s idea of contained underlife. However, our analysis showed that the space Gatto and her students construct is not simply mapped onto Goffman’s definition. Goffman (1961) defines underlife as the range of activities people develop to distance themselves from surrounding institutions in everyday life. He argues that underlife takes two primary forms: a disruptive form ‘where the realistic intentions of the participants are to abandon the organization or radically alter its structure’ and a contained form in which the participants attempt to fit into ‘existing institutional structures without introducing pressure for radical change’ (Goffman, 1961: 199). As Gutierrez et al. (1995) have discussed, contained forms of underlife activities are most common in classrooms. We found a tension between disruptive and contained forms of underlife in Gatto’s classroom. On the one hand, she does attempt to disrupt existing structures in her use of tactics to construct her own space for meaningful learning. However, this space is always at risk
of discovery and diffusion and is thus tenuous. Given its precarious status, we could describe the subversive space she uses as contained and that she uses containment as a tactic to maintain the space. But, given that this space is not clearly disruptive or contained, rather it exists in the tension between the two, we argue that the term ‘tactical underlife’ better describes this space as it operates in the interplay between strategies and tactics and the tension between disruptive and contained underlife.

We bring together these diverse, yet connected frameworks, to analyze children’s perceptions. New Literacy Studies’ emphasis on complexity of literacy practices, learning as changing participation seen in classroom discourse practices, and the interplay of strategies and tactics and contained and disruptive underlife help us to unpack the nature of power relations and how they shift and are mutually constituted in the social relations in this classroom.

Study design and analytic framework

Data for this article are drawn from two interrelated, long-term ethnographic studies in Gatto’s classroom. In Larson’s project, we interviewed both Gatto and her students over the course of three years, videotaped classroom interaction and took field notes at various times of the day, concentrating on literacy practices. Gatto implements a science-based curriculum of her own design and integrates language arts across content areas throughout the day. However, she routinely uses read-aloud and paired reading every Wednesday and we focused our formal observations on this literacy time. Research questions focused on understanding how the teacher constructs a meaningful context for literacy learning in an increasingly constraining context. In our effort to understand how children perceive this classroom and the literacy practices therein for this article, we asked the following research questions: What is the students’ experience in this classroom? What are students’ perceptions of Gatto as a teacher? What is the students’ understanding of the teacher’s pedagogical practices? What changes in the power relations between teacher and students in this classroom?

The data set for Larson’s study includes 64 hours of observation and coinciding field notes, 48 hours of videotape, 4 hours of formal teacher interviews (transcribed), 2 hours of formal student interviews and 1 hour of focus group interviews (transcribed), emails, and student and teacher writing. Over the course of three years, we have countless informal interviews recorded on video and in field notes. Gatto’s classroom data includes 78 hours of video and 38 hours of audiotape. She has collected students’ daily journals, informal and formal assessment data (including standardized
test scores), and end of year feedback letters. The excerpts we present here are representative of the larger data corpus.

For this article, we analyzed children’s interviews conducted in year 2 of the study as our primary data source. There were 19 students in the class ranging in ages from 8 years 9 months to 10 years 10 months old that year. The class was 69% African American (13 students), 26% White (5 students, 1 of whom recently immigrated from Bosnia), 5% Latino (1 student). There were 12 male (63%) and 7 female (37%) students. In the 2000–1 academic year, 80% of the students qualified for free lunch (a statewide indicator of poverty). Using open-ended questioning, we interviewed each child individually, then clustered them into two focus groups for group interviews: one group consisting of students who had been in the classroom for both years (old-timers) and one group who had been there for one year (newcomers). We videotaped all interviews and used these videotapes for detailed analysis of interview interactions.

Using Erickson’s (1986) discussion of evidentiary warrants as a guide, we sought to ensure an adequacy of quantity and variety of evidence. Following each interview we analyzed the transcripts using the constant comparative method of coding (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We open coded transcripts then refined those codes into conceptual categories based on relationships between the codes. Consistent with the constant comparative method, we checked our new coding against previously coded transcripts to further confirm and identify emerging patterns and relationships. Through this analytic process we found that the students perceive the teacher, the curriculum, and their learning as fun. This article will unpack what the students meant by ‘fun’. We contextualize the children’s perception in detailed analysis of classroom discourse gathered on videotape. We used transcription conventions derived from Atkinson and Heritage (1984) to transform video data into text. Transcription of discourse, or the process of inscribing social action (Duranti, 1997), enabled the analysis of how language use among activity participants mediated interaction. We transcribed the talk verbatim and included non-vocal, vocal, and timing features as additional evidence of the nature of the interaction (Ochs, 1979).

The following section outlines our interpretation of the interplay of strategies and tactics we found in this classroom.

**District strategies**

NCSD is typical of most school districts that are mandating standardized curricula, instructional practices, materials, and a strict code of conduct
policy in response to current accountability and security pressures from the US government and the general public. NCSD (2003: 1) Academic Standards and Assessment Policy demands that teachers establish a ‘student-centered, standards-driven, performance-based’ system of instruction. This policy requires teachers to adhere to a locally defined scope and sequence of the mandated basal reading program, use plan book formats that include standardized lesson plans and essential questions, follow expected traditional discourse structures for classroom interaction (Gutierrez, 1993), adhere to externally determined schedules, write academic intervention plans for all students not passing standardized tests (in this district that means 63% of students), administer required district mid-term tests, align assessments with NYS Standards, follow standardized grading guidelines, and report scores from required exams to administration and to the general public. At the same time, the budget crisis has limited teachers’ instructional money to US$10 per child per year. The Special Education system is regularly out of compliance, which results in students not getting the services required by law. It is within this controlling context that Gatto constructs her own tenuous space.

The interplay between strategies and tactics

Gatto is in a position to use both strategies in her role as teacher to run her classroom and tactics to resist and subvert district practices described above. In an earlier analysis, Gatto claimed she is a nonconformist. She pulls from her sense of nonconformity to support her teaching practices as well as to strengthen her willingness to go against the expectations of peers and of district administration (Gatto, 2001; Jacobs et al., 2002). This tension between conformity and nonconformity, or how Gatto negotiates between her beliefs about effective practice and external pressure reveals how she constructs her daily interactions for meaningful learning. Gatto uses tactics in response to outside pressure to construct a robust context for learning in which interaction is privileged.

We found that Gatto cultivates relationships with parents, principals, and district officials that allow her to negotiate the space to get what she wants. She begins each year with home visits, frequently calls parents for updates on their lives, to give good news about their child’s successes, and to discuss problems in ways that do not place blame, but elicit the parents’ help in solving whatever is happening. Parents are always welcome to stop in anytime. Someone drops in at least once a day and/or calls the room to talk to their child. She has an open door policy with administrators, building colleagues, University researchers, pre-service teachers, and news crews. As
a result, her room is frequently filled with visitors. Students take the lead in conducting tours, describing the curriculum, and answering questions. These interactions scaffold students’ participation in multiple Discourses (Gee, 1996) they will need to be communicatively competent in a diverse society. They gain the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) necessary for participation in multiple contexts outside of school.

Winning national awards, such as her recent receipt of the 2004 New York State Teacher of the Year award, and writing successful grants gives her special status in the district that also gives her space. This reputation allows her to ignore or reinterpret directives with little consequence. She does not follow the mandated lesson plan format and turns in her unit plans instead. She uses the ‘circular file’ for the endless stream of what she thinks is unnecessary paperwork that comes out of central office and, in the last ten years, no one has ever come to ask for them. She does not use the textbooks, test prep workbooks are given to parents as gifts for open house, and the spelling, grammar, phonics, and math workbooks are sent back to the book room. She is dually certified to teach students with disabilities, and thus, she rarely refers students to special education while she has them, referring them instead as they move on to the next teacher. Instead, she individualizes instruction to meet each student’s needs in an inclusive setting. Her beliefs about students are captured in the local newspaper’s reporting of her NYS Teacher of the Year award, ‘I don’t teach fourth grade. I teach the kids in front of me’ (Hare, 2003).

Some tactics become strategies Gatto uses in her teaching. For example, she designs and implements an inquiry as social practice curriculum as a structure for student learning. We will detail these strategies in the following section in which we define and describe inquiry as a social practice. Students, in turn, develop their own tactics in response to Gatto’s strategies: (1) they try to negotiate and renegotiate classroom structure, (2) they use avoidance behaviors such as drawing, going to the bathroom, or complaining instead of participating in activities, and (3) they articulate learning in her room as ‘fun’ rather than ‘work’. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the flow of strategies and tactics between the district, Gatto, and her students.

According to Edwards and Mercer (1987), teacher practices, in spite of their philosophical stance, are influenced by external demands (e.g. high stakes testing or this district’s academic standards policy). In Gatto’s case, the external demands have contributed to the construction of her inquiry as social practice curriculum as a form of resistance to these demands.
Students’ experience in the classroom

Gatto’s inquiry as social practice curriculum frames our analysis of the children’s interviews and sets the tone for understanding student perceptions of her pedagogical practices. A detailed description of what we are calling inquiry as social practice provides the context within which to understand how fun is interpreted and used in this classroom. Analysis of
children’s perceptions follows this description. We close with what we consider to be implications of this research.

Students’ experience of inquiry as a social practice

Current definitions of inquiry conceive of it as a pedagogical process that uses children’s active effort to find out answers to their own questions (Gallas, 1994; Rogoff, 1996). Liem (1981) describes scientific inquiry as a cyclical model of teaching beginning with a discrepant event that initiates questioning. For Short et al. (1996), inquiry in literacy education is a cycle of authorship in which students are legitimate co-constructors of the curriculum. Wells’ (1999) stance towards inquiry uses children’s interests and ideas to question and understand through collaboration. He views inquiry as ‘an opportunity to establish a firm basis of everyday concepts with which the learning of scientific concepts can connect’ (Wells, 2000: 70). He conceptualizes classrooms as communities of inquiry where an inquiry-based curriculum is the focus for working collaboratively among students and building knowledge through dialogue. All of this work on inquiry uses as its base children’s interests and dialogue, social relations, real-life problems, and questions to guide curriculum (Dewey, 1938). Gatto builds on this scholarship in constructing a classroom where inquiry is defined by transformed curriculum activities, physical environment, questions and problems, and talk and interaction within a classroom community. We argue here that this model constitutes an inquiry as a social practice curriculum and represents Gatto’s strategies for supporting student learning and tactics for subverting the external strategic context.

In Gatto’s model, inquiry is not a cyclical, spiral, or linear process of what the student does, but is instead, a fluid, non-linear interaction among the class members, including her, as they participate with the curriculum, environment, questions, and talk across all subjects which in turn transforms the social relations. At various times, each one of these can become a catalyst for learning within the socially co-constructed inquiry among the students and teacher. The inquiry as social practice curriculum is goal-directed activity (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003) in which knowledges, or multiple literacies, are privileged. The system itself is multifaceted and multi-layered so that a range of complicated learning activities occur simultaneously which themselves inform curriculum, environment, questions, and talk across all subjects.

A key part of understanding inquiry as a social practice curriculum is the nature of the social relations among classroom community members. Gatto and her students construct a classroom social structure that centers on the
The concept of ‘team’. The team concept is a meaningful strategy for managing the classroom in ways that support students’ intrinsic motivation by providing a context that supports children’s autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Her students decide on a team name that the children use for designing and creating stationery, business cards, a spirit chant, and a mascot. They spend a night on a team-building overnight retreat the first week of school every year that reinforces their commitment to the community. The first month of school is spent constructing routines and rituals for equipment and materials use so all team members are responsible and feel ownership for the entire classroom.
environment and for the nature of their interactions. The children analyze videotapes of themselves working together in order to better understand how interaction builds relationships and commitment to learning together. The team concept builds on Delpit’s (1995) argument that educators fail to recognize the importance of human connectedness in communities of color. We found that Gatto’s emphasis on the team concept constituted a shift in power relations in her classroom in that students had significant responsibility for their own learning and for assuming leadership roles.

Power in this classroom is bidirectional, socially complex, learned in interaction, changes over time, and contributes to identity formation (Foucault, 1977; Gutierrez et al., 1995). Gatto relinquishes power as knowledge holder by encouraging a dialogic script (Nystrand, 1997) among classroom community members. The discourse structure constructed by Gatto and her students illustrates how power is defined, shared, and mediated in their classroom. According to Oyler (1996: 4), power and shared authority is the teacher giving the students ‘the opportunity to have choices and respond directly to one another’. Gatto’s use of dialogic script provides for the co-construction of knowledge and affords space for student-initiated ideas for learning activities, questions for investigation, and problems to solve. The children are given opportunities to negotiate rules, discipline procedures, and instructional routines. Simply offering children choice is not necessarily sufficient to transform power relations. We argue that by shifting responsibility for learning to the team, Gatto does more than ‘give’ choice; she asks students to take responsibility for co-constructing their own learning.

The physical environment contributes to inquiry as a social practice by providing the children with a common environment and common experiences for them to think about in relation to their own lives. Sometimes it is the environment that stimulates questions and problems for students to investigate solutions. The physical arrangement of furniture is meant to encourage and facilitate talk among the children. Gatto uses furniture to create spaces for varying kinds of group work and to organize the multitude of materials.

The children’s desks take up a third of her classroom space. They are arranged in one large rectangle, with the children having a face-to-face view of one another. Gatto has a teacher’s desk that serves primarily as a storage area, but she also has a child-sized desk alongside the students in the rectangle. She feels this makes a statement to the children that she is one of the team and contributes to the construction of a shared sense of power in the social relations of the classroom (see Figure 3).

Gatto’s tactic for dealing with curriculum restrictions is to create thematic units of study using the required curriculum, however, not the required
textbooks or scripted district materials. Curriculum activities are centered on a thematic unit that lasts three to four months. Gatto selects the themes based on national standards in all content areas (e.g. NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] Standards for English Language Arts) and her determination about how to best meet the content requirements of her district while maintaining her commitment to construct authentic, theoretically sound learning events. The use of thematic units, supported by extensive field trips, helps her students understand how actions, knowledge, language, and materials in the world are interrelated. Although Gatto selects the topics, the units provide many opportunities for complicated interactions between students, students and teacher, and students and the community that, in turn, feed curriculum development.

Figure 3 Physical environment
Complimentary to thematic curricular engagements, the curriculum activities are based on four key areas: Math Minds, Investigations Time, Writer’s Workshop, and Reading Club. Authentic practices dominate these daily activities. We define authentic as activities in which an answer or goal is not predetermined, one in which the audience and purpose of the activities are real (c.f. Edelsky, 1991; Nystrand, 1997). For example, during a thematic unit on butterflies (Gatto, 2001) the students read about the logging industry’s destruction of the Monarch butterfly habitats in Mexico. They wrote letters to the Mexican government with alternative ideas. Recently, they wrote to the NCSD (Northeast City School District) superintendent requesting a longer school day because they did not have time to complete everything they wanted to during the current school day. Investigations Time focuses on open-ended activities using social studies and science skills so students can connect thematic content knowledge to concepts of self and world. The predictable routine of Writer’s Workshop time allows children to become authors (Calkins, 1994) and incorporate thematic knowledge or experiences in their writing.

Reading Club occurs every day, beginning with a chant the children and teacher wrote together. The helper of the week is responsible for gathering the students for reading club and leading the chant. The chant thus serves to further the team bond and build leadership. Read Aloud begins every Reading Club time and is a time when the children and teacher enjoy, interpret, and make connections to the text and to the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Gatto’s instructional goal during read alouds is to expose the children to a wide variety of genres and authors as an opening to reading, and to co-construct meaning through connections to the text and to each other.

After read aloud, a variety of activities may follow. Some days, children work in literature circles in which discussion occurs in teacher-selected groups, self-selected groups, author study groups; or expert jigsaw groups study literature. Children may respond to theme-related literature by making predictions, analyzing text connections, or determining character or author motives. They might also use role-playing, perform a play or puppet show, or write a script to portray character personalities, events or new endings.

Three days a week, Reading Club ends with Silent Sustained Reading. Once the classical music begins, the children retrieve their book boxes and begin to read for 25–30 minutes. The book boxes contain three to four books each student selects him/herself. While students are reading, the teacher conducts individual reading conferences, completes running reading records, or works with students in small groups on guided reading/strategy/skill sessions or reads her own book. Silent Sustained Reading time is just about the only silent time in Gatto’s classroom. Twice
a week Reading Club ends with Partner Reading. During shared reading partners, children share and discuss their reading selections with assigned partners.

**Fun as a key component of tactical underlife**

Our analysis of interview data described here reveals the children experienced Gatto’s inquiry as social practice curriculum and personality as ‘fun’. When we transcribed the first set of interviews, we found that a majority of the students (79%) described Gatto and the classroom as ‘fun’. In the weekly response journals, 55% of students described various classroom activities as fun. As we began our second set of interviews and the focus interviews, we focused specifically on unpacking the children’s reference to ‘fun’. We found that students define fun as: the teacher being nice, going on field trips, being treated fairly, feeling valued, feeling listened to, and being able to talk freely about what they know. We immediately noted a connection between fun and classroom talk. Twenty-one percent of students interviewed spontaneously brought up the topic of talk in the classroom as one of the ways in which the class is fun.

The connection of fun and talk emerged when they discussed ‘talking about books’ during Reading Club. In a focus group with newcomer students, the children were asked how Gatto’s classroom compared to their last year’s classroom. Two students, who came from the same class, responded by saying:

Excerpt 1

Alan: It was- other classroom wasn’t that fun
LaTiesha: Cause we couldn’t talk about our books that we read and ( ) do we have to be quiet all day long

Students perceived talking about books as fun. To unpack what this meant, we analyzed a reading partners activity that was a consistent part of the classroom routine that we regularly observed and videotaped. The following excerpts provide a glimpse of what ‘talking about books’ looked like in Gatto’s room. Alan and Carl were discussing a joke book they found in the classroom’s collection.

Excerpt 2

Alan: (Shifts gaze to Carl)=
Carl: =it ( )
((pokes forehead with right index finger))=
make=
As the segment begins, Carl is sitting upright in a very teacher-like pose. He is using his index finger to further articulate his point. He is the animator of teacher discourse (Goffman, 1981). Carl's explanation of the joke is very smooth and coherent and he is the only one telling it. The roles begin to shift when Alan challenges Carl's stance. When Alan says 'don't make sense' he creates a problematic event and begins a counter-narrative. Carl attempts to hold onto his role as teacher animator, but Carl presses his counter-narrative by repeating his stance in a louder tone. This is the point where we can begin to see the shift in participation roles. We see that Carl shifts his gaze from Alan to the book, and then abandons his earlier teacher-like stance and agrees with Alan. He even matches Alan's volume. In other words, it now takes two of them to figure out what the book means. Understanding the joke is no longer smooth and coherent. This shift to one of co-tellership (Ochs and Capps, 2001) is also signaled by the change in Carl's body language as we see below.

Excerpt 3

Carl: ((leans back over the book))=

=cause he ca tell you what it means
((begins to straighten legs behind him))=
=Or wi with us him not tellin us

Alan: ((looks back at wall))

Car: ((completes stretching out and ends up on stomach, facing Alan, the book in front of him on the floor.))=

[it doesn make sense]=
As they begin to discuss the role of the author in meaning making, Carl abandons his upright, teacher-like position and joins Alan stretched out on the floor. At this point we can also look at the student’s use of pronouns to see how Carl shifts from a ‘you and me’ stance to an ‘us’ stance. They also begin constructing an understanding of the author’s role in meaning making. We suggest that the shift that accompanies the meaning making is made possible by a classroom structure where the students were free to move around and see reading as fun.

After seeing the emergence of fun as central to the children’s perception, we reviewed the literature to find what previous research has revealed. While there has been some work on curriculum as ‘fun’, we found that the definition of fun in the literature did not capture all that we were finding in our analysis. Fun is commonly understood to be anything that provides the feeling of pleasure, amusement or enjoyment and is often aligned with play. Play is considered frivolous, while work is serious and important. Play includes active participation, pleasure, control, intrinsic motivation, and symbolism (Fromberg, 1992). When a group of students were asked to clarify their definition of fun in relation to Gatto’s instruction, the children had this to say:

Excerpt 4
Larson: Well, let me ask that question about fun again. What does it mean?
Student: Because we went outside
Student: Cause
Zack: No that’s not
Student: we an play
Zack: we always go outside
Student: We go outside to
Zack: we have fun while she teaches

The children explain fun means having daily recess (Gatto is only one of the two teachers in the school who provide a daily recess time for their students) on the playground. However, one child tries to disagree (‘No that’s not’), then agrees that recess is fun (‘we always go outside’). He asserts later that the fun is related to learning (‘we have fun while she teaches’). When this child was individually interviewed he further elaborates on how learning is fun.

Excerpt 5
Zack: Like we do fun stuff but it's learning stuff
Larson: Fun stuff but it’s learning still.
Zack: Yeah. Like learnin but fun. Learning and having fun.
Larson: How does she make it fun?
Zack: Like most classes have when they study um animals they’re learning to like read books but Mrs. Gatto would like have us draw pictures and diagrams like one time we got- dissected a fish we studying about fish.

This child directly links fun to the literacy activities (‘draw pictures and diagrams’) that Gatto uses to assist children in understanding concepts and making connections. In addition, this child considers the hands-on nature of the investigation activities (‘dissected a fish we studying about fish’) as fun too.

The characteristics of fun have been described as ‘situational, relative, voluntary and natural’ (Bisson and Luckner, 1996: 109). Glasser (1996) claims that all human behavior is driven by four needs: (1) sense of belonging, (2) freedom, (3) power, and (4) fun. Dewey (1910: 218) believed the perfect mental condition was ‘to be playful and serious at the same time’. Fun in classrooms, however, is viewed by many teachers as when there is ‘loss of control’ (Rea, 1999), entertainment (Mann, 1996), or a lack of learning. For Gatto’s students, not only does fun mean belonging, freedom, and power, but fun also means they count as literacy learners, which they articulated as fairness, in ways they have not experienced so far in school.

One child articulated his understanding of the connection of fun and literacy when describing his experiences in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 6

Larson: So what do you mean when you say fun? What makes a fun?
Damon: It’s exciting cause we um like cause we read it and we find different things from it that we like very much. And we have to write it down on the paper and and see um what is about it

According to Damon, fun in Gatto’s classroom means exciting literacy activities (‘read it and write it down’). He also includes reading for meaning (see um what is about it) and making personal connections as fun (‘we find different things from it that we like very much’). Damon’s perception is different from when students in traditional classrooms that are rooted in cognitive models describe reading and writing as work.
Students’ description of Gatto as fun and nice reflects research on important components for school success in underachieving students (Howard, 2001; Parish and Parish, 1989). According to Howard’s (2001) research of culturally relevant teaching, students were motivated to learn with teachers who made learning fun in a humorous and dramatic sense. Nieto (1999) found that students defined fun lessons as imaginative and exciting. Fun teachers were viewed as entertainers or performers. Gatto’s students moved beyond seeing her as an entertainer by their understanding of her curriculum as experiential (‘she lets us go on tons of field trips’). Delpit (1995: 37) quotes an African-American student’s interview from Foster’s dissertation where he describes a good teacher from his past school experiences, ‘she was fun, but mean’. Delpit explains that ‘mean’ relates to the teacher’s ability to control the class and her expectations for each child in the class to learn. Gatto’s students have a clear understanding of who is in charge. At the same time they see her as fair.

Students’ description of Gatto as fair below reveals their previous experience at such a young age of not being treated fairly and equally by other teachers. In the following example taken from one of the focus group interviews, students articulate what they thought people should know about Gatto.

Excerpt 7

Larson: So tell me what would be the most important thing you would want people to know about Mrs. Gatto and being in this classroom.

Victor: She’s fun

Jackie: She’s a nice teacher

Victor: She’s um, she’s nice, she lets us go on tons of field trips.

LaTiesha: She treat people fair.

Victor: And she lets us go outside

LaTiesha: treat other people, especially won’t treat other people mean.

Student: sometimes ( )

Larson: That’s what it means to treat people fair?

Student: She not

Student: She treats equal

Fun and nice to them means counting as people, counting equally among their peers. We connect students’ perception of fairness to Gatto’s tactic of individualizing instruction based on students’ needs in spite of district, state, and federal mandates to standardize instruction in a ‘one size fits all’ manner. Students articulated feeling valued in their journals: ‘I like how I get alot of help. I don’t raell get my work worg in this classroom this year. I reall! Love this classroom’; ‘I feel grat on your teem.’ These comments and
the previous excerpt provide evidence of the transformation of the social relations in this classroom that emerges in the space of tactical underlife as students come to understand they are valued members of the teaching and learning team.

Students’ journal entries reveal further references to their experiences in the classroom: ‘The video conference was fun’; ‘I hope the zoo be cool tonight. It is going to be fun at the zoo’; ‘Can I stay after school like you said I hope it will be fun.’ Field trips in particular emerged as meaningful experiences for students. One child explains in an interview that the field trips are fun. He predicts that the three-day field trip to the Boston seacoast as part of their ocean unit will be a fun learning experience.

Excerpt 8

Carl: She teach like a fun projects and we’re going to learn science by Boston we’re gonna go to the aquarium and we’re gonna have a little fun. Like we’re gonna have a pool party and we’re gonna go to McDonalds. But I think the best part is learning in the aquarium

This child links the fun projects to the science they are going to learn in Boston. It is fun to have a pool party and go to McDonald’s, but ‘the best part’ is the learning constructed during the aquarium visit. Another child wrote in her Boston field trip journal that a visit to a museum will be fun. She associates the museum visit to learning history:

Excerpt 9

Everything that I saw at the Farmer’s Museum was that you can learn history in a fun kind of way to look and to have fun with history cause it could be fun.

Gatto uses field trips as a tactic to move beyond the constrained spaces defined by the school district. Due to budget limitations, there is no district money for field trips and parents cannot afford to contribute. As a result, Gatto and her students do intensive fund-raising to pay for the trips they take. In addition, Gatto has recently had to develop tactics to circumvent the new restrictive policies about field trips under recent security rules raised by September 11 and the war in Iraq. For example, for the recent trip to Kentucky, Gatto held a parent meeting and rallied the parents to write letters to the superintendent requesting he override the US government’s alert policy and let them go. He ignored the letters and she took the kids and parents anyway.

Many teachers strive to make learning fun through game-like activities and the use of technology (Burmeister, 2000; Tapscott, 2000). When a
group of kindergartners were asked how they perceived fun they responded
by using the dichotomy of work and play. They defined ‘play as fun’ and
‘work as boring.’ Any quiet activity that involved holding a pencil or crayon
was identified as work (Holmes, 1991). After transcribing the interviews,
we were surprised to find that some students could not articulate when they
were ‘doing science’ or what their favorite subject was. This was especially
surprising given that Gatto implements a science-based curriculum. ‘Work’
was defined quite differently in this classroom. One student described it as
follows;

Excerpt 10
Larson: So I’m asking all of the students what it’s like to be with Mrs. Gatto
Damon: It’s fun. Be because we play games and we play games and you
don’t even notice its work.
Larson: hmmm. So when did you notice it was work?
Damon: Um when she told us.

Students’ perceive what they are doing as playing games and therefore fun.
One child was observed smiling and saying, ‘she has a mysterious way of
teaching’ They do not notice the carefully constructed curriculum Gatto
implements based on her conception of inquiry as social practice. One
student’s journal entry illustrates her understanding of the curriculum as fun,
‘I can’t wait intill we do our choclite unind. It’s going to be Fun.’ Gatto
constructs and implements the curriculum in order to bridge outside require-
ments and her understanding of learning as changing participation (Rogoff,
1994, 2003). Additionally, she uses her inquiry as social practice curriculum
as a tactic in the construction of a tactical underlife within which meaning-
ful learning occurs, even if the students don’t realize they are learning.

The role of talk in subverting disciplined spaces into fun
spaces

Gatto deliberately encourages responsive/collaborative script (Gutierrez,
1993) or dialogic script (Nystrand 1997) as a tactic to facilitate the
‘interpretation and collaborative co-construction of understandings’
(Nystrand, 1997: 17). Many of her students want to talk and overlapping
turns happen frequently, their voices can become raised, and interruptions
occur. When many side conversations occur, Gatto listens and then repeats
important points for the whole class. She also serves as scribe for many of
the class discussions. In this language rich interactional process, children
realize that what they know and have to say are important to the learning
going on in this classroom.
Tension or ideological conflict is also important to creating a dialogic script (Mercer, 1995; Nystrand, 1997). Gatto emphasizes to the students that no topic is taboo. The thematic content of the curriculum and the social organization of the classroom allow them to pose questions about whatever comes to mind and express opinions about controversial issues. Gatto uses this space for talk as a tactic that values student voice. She defines student voice as their opinions, feelings, experiences, and questions that draw on who they are as people both in and out of school.

During the conclusion of a Reading Club lesson, Gatto explained the practicing of a retelling for homework with the puppets made earlier in the day by the students. One child was complaining he could not do the homework because he did not have a puppet theater like the one used in the classroom at home. The class proceeded to spend about five minutes offering the child solutions for creating a puppet theater. Jacobs noted in a field note that ‘It is here the children are doing real life problem solving and also learning the skills of listening and speaking, but for very real purposes’ (Field notes, 10 October 2001).

Gatto often lists student questions and ideas on chart paper or posts them on sentence strips. Often a child’s question or posing of a problem will stimulate a social or political action on the part of students (e.g. a letter to a local politician, editor of the city newspaper, principal or superintendent) or teacher (e.g. a lesson change). Their questions, too, are used to make personal and previous knowledge connections to new understandings of content. The following excerpt from a female student age 9 years 1 month illustrates students’ understanding of Gatto’s instructional goal of valuing student talk:

Excerpt 11

Larson: What will you miss when you go to your next classroom?
Jackie: Well I’ll miss, I’ll miss all of my friends and I’ll miss like- I’ll miss all the adventure and how she lets us talk all the time. She thinks that (it’s) important for kids to like- to like- listen to what kids say. Other teachers will be like, oh kids don’t know anything- that it’s- I- that needs to say something so the kids listen but Miss (Gatto), she listens to the kids too and sometimes it um, she says it important like to someone if one kid is talking and all the others should be- should be um listening to that cause maybe it’s important.

Students in this classroom feel their opinions, ideas, questions, etc. count as valuable contributions to the classroom community and to the direction of the learning.

Students are able to use their own ideas as they and Gatto co-construct...
knowledge and, as a result, consider this process ‘fun’ (Oldfather, 1993).

One student expressed his experience of a sense of belonging in his journal this way, ‘When I first came to school, I was very shy. Then I came in Mrs Gatto’s class it was fantastic and very very fun.’ Students in the newcomer focus group articulated their understanding that Gatto values talk as follows:

Excerpt 12

Alan: It was—other classroom wasn’t that fun
LaTiesha: Cause we couldn’t talk about our books that we read and—do we have to be quiet all day long
Jackie: Teacher didn’t think it was important for kids to talk, let us talk
Larson: And Mrs Gatto lets you talk
Jackie: Oh yes
Student: yes
Mark: Yeah, like last year we wasn’t, we wasn’t a team but now we’re like—we’re here we are a team

In addition to illustrating the value of talk in this classroom, the excerpt above shows that students have internalized Gatto’s team tactic. Combining the value of talk with the concept of team constitutes a shift in power relations because each member of the classroom community counts equally in the learning process.

Power relations are asymmetrical in that the teacher remains the primary leader and the person responsible for the curriculum, but asymmetry does not preclude a sense of fairness. As Excerpt 12 illustrates, the students realize that they have some power or ‘say’ in the direction of their own learning and behavior that is often manifested as the student tactic of negotiation. Thus, power is a shared, inter-subjectively negotiated process among classroom community members.

Microanalysis of the space for talk

As she viewed the videotapes of the read aloud segments, Gatto noticed a certain kind of talk going on among the participants during read aloud. Analysis revealed that this discourse pattern was more like everyday conversation, which Goffman (1981: 41) describes as ‘talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks . . . everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as listen and without reference to a fixed schedule’. She encourages children to
speak to each other as ‘adults do in meetings’ and expects that children will
talk to each other. They are explicitly instructed to speak without raising
their hands, and ‘wait for an opening’. She also encourages eye contact and
responding directly to one another. Conversation is not a surprising result;
however, there was something different about some conversational events
she began to notice. She described these events as simultaneous over-
lapping conversation, or SOC (Gatto, 2002).

We describe SOC events we observed during the daily read aloud sessions
as eruptions of conversation. During these eruptions, the children spon-
taneously break into small groups and converse excitedly among them-
selves. This happens about 5 to 7 times within a 25 to 30 minute read aloud
period and each one lasts no longer than a minute. During these short
moments, the children shifted their positions and changed the framework
of their participation (Goffman, 1981). Children turned from one group
and jumped into a conversation with another group. Not all children
participated verbally; some just made eye contact with speakers or turned
towards varying groups. The children always stayed on topic, but the noise
level increased dramatically. A few children called over the heads of others
to converse with someone sitting a bit further away. Others gestured with
their arms and some stood up while someone jumped up and down. Many
children laughed and smiled. Everyone’s speaking turns were short, brisk
bursts of talk.

Some of the research on students’ talk in small group or cooperative
group instruction has defined a pattern of ‘noisy talk’ (Tannock, 1998).
Tannock describes cooperative groups of students, sometimes led by the
teacher, as breaking out into response and story chaining sequences along
with their topic focused conversation. Laughing, overlapping talk, increased
volume, and excitement describes moments of noisy talk. Although the
description of noisy talk is similar to simultaneous overlapping conversa-
tion, it is off task or not topic related. In SOC, students’ talk is related to the
topic and activity at hand.

The following example is one of six occurrences of simultaneous over-
lapping conversation that occurred in one 24 minute read aloud session of
Chocolate Fever (Smith, 1978). In response to one student’s predictive excla-
mation, ‘That means the po: lice!’ a SOC event erupted when another
student responded to the story with the declarative, ‘Police have (mean
dogs).’ Excerpt 13 is the interaction that followed:

Excerpt 13
Devan: [ARRRRR]
Jamal: [I was ( )]
The students’ reaction to the initial reference to police dogs drew from events in their everyday lives. Most of the students have seen police activity in their neighborhoods and their reaction may index common beliefs about police non-white urban residents have in the larger society. Students erupted in talk and interaction as they animatedly exchanged stories about personal experiences with the police. Although not every child verbally participated during this SOC event, they all participated non-verbally by using eye contact and facial expressions and changing body positions to face speakers, that is, they were actively participating as ‘overhearers’ in the interaction (Larson, 1999). This vibrant interactional space afforded multiple forms of participation in literacy events to occur on a regular basis.

Simultaneous overlapping conversations allow each student to ask his or her own questions, discuss a point of view, share a personal narrative, or give opinions. The students bring their informal conversational discourse from outside of school to form a new discourse structure that includes their cultural and linguistic practices (Ball, 1995). Students use their own vernacular, raise their voices, animate their gestures, and manage their own turns, all while staying focused on a school related task. SOC produces speech events that are spaces for content rich, deep conversation among students as they co-construct knowledge and constitutes one space where students and teacher can interact meaningfully in literacy events that students perceive as fun. Lankshear and Knobel (2002: 19) suggest that a pedagogy of tactics requires ‘the ability and willingness to recognize learner tactics where they occur and to build creatively and constructively upon them’. We suggest that Gatto used the student tactic of wanting to have fun to build a meaningful
learning community within an institutionally constrained space. Together, Gatto and her students construct a tactical space within the prescriptive space of school in which traditional power relations are transformed and all languages, literacies, and knowledges count.

Conclusion

In this article, we argued that Gatto uses both strategies and tactics to construct a new space for learning we call tactical underlife that builds on Lankshear and Knobel’s (2002) concept of a pedagogy of tactics to resist standardization. We interviewed students to learn what their perceptions were about Gatto and the learning they do together. The students perceive this vibrant learning context as fun, not work. They do not see the strategies Gatto uses to structure the learning as oppressive or constraining, but rather see what she does as valuing who they are and who they can be.

We suggest that teachers who are facing similar demands and constraints may use the space of tactical underlife to construct their own spaces of resistance. Teachers are leaving the field in frustration because they feel helpless in the face of standardization and de-professionalization. We are concerned that the most experienced, dynamic, and engaging teachers are leaving the field. We propose that Gatto’s use of strategies and tactics may be an alternative to quitting.

So what do students get out of all of this? Our analysis revealed that students learn how to engage material so that it is integrated and meaningful, they learn how to be a member of a working team, and how to negotiate social relations in diverse settings. Gatto’s inquiry as social practice curriculum teaches students how to cross Discourses (Gee, 1996) through participating in new experiences with people outside their neighborhood communities, and by solving real life problems. One way children gain an analytic framework for understanding their own interactions is by watching videotapes of themselves in the classroom. This framework helps them to see for themselves how their actions affect the social relations in the community.

In this classroom, children do not learn to follow instructions without question, fill in blanks or bubbles. They learn to question everything and to take action when they see a need for change. At the beginning of this summer, Damon called to ask if there was a grant he could write that would pay for better food at his summer camp. To Gatto, this is what it’s all about.

Notes

1. The No Child Left Behind legislation mandates testing and other accountability measures designed to raise standards of student achievement in the USA and to
close the achievement gap between white and non-white students. Curriculum and assessment are mandated to use federally defined research-based materials. Federal funding is attached to raising test scores.

2. One male student was not interviewed because he had just arrived in the class and had not yet signed consent forms.

3. See Larson (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion of field trips in this classroom. During this study, field trips included overnight zoo and camping trips, restaurant trips, attending plays and musical performances, travel to Niagara Falls, Boston, and Kentucky, monthly trips to a local park for documenting tree and plant life and to a nursing home for community service, as well as every museum in the city.

4. The following transcription conventions, adapted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984) are used in the examples given: Colons denote sound stretch (“gu::y”); Brackets indicate overlapping speech; Degree signs indicate quiet talk; Underline indicates speaker emphasis; Equal signs indicate closely latched speech, or ideas, for example:

   Carl: °It makes sense [to me.]=°
   =((points to chest, gaze remains on book))

   Alan: =[SOME] OF DER JOKES DOAN MAKE SENSE

   Intervals of silence are timed in tenths of seconds and inserted within parentheses; short, untimed silences are marked by a dash when sound is quickly cut off (‘got-’) or with a period within parentheses (.). Rising intonation within an utterance is marked with an arrow (‘forgo!=t’); Falling intonation at the end of an utterance is indicated with a period (‘anymore.’); Descriptions of speech or gesture are italicized within double parentheses (‘((pokes forehead with right index finger))’); Single parentheses surround items of doubtful transcription; and boldface indicates items of analytic focus.

5. The following section describing talking about books was originally written by Jacobs (Larson et al., 2002).

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JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY 4(1)

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LARSON & GATTO: TACTICAL UNDERLIFE

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