Positioning Play as Abolition

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POSITIONING PLAY AS ABOLITION

A Thesis in the Field of Education

for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

Art of Teaching Program

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

Katie Troutman

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Abstract

This thesis argues that play-centered, abolitionist classrooms are necessary so that all students can thrive. The current American education system disproportionately harms Black students and is inextricably linked to the Prison Industrial Complex. Abolitionist teaching calls for the tearing down of systems of oppression and the creation of new spaces and institutions that center Black joy. Play is abolition because through play, children develop an awareness of the possibility and the right of freedom. This work outlines the necessity of abolition and the importance of play, followed by examples of play as abolition, and concludes with a vision for my own future classroom.

Keywords: abolition, abolitionist teaching, play
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Over the past five years, Sarah Lawrence has become my home, and I’m so fortunate to have had so many incredible mentors who have been so generous with their knowledge, time, and resources. Cassandra, thank you for being my first mentor teacher. It was through seeing you teach that I realized I wanted to be a teacher. Rue, thank you for bringing progressive pedagogy to life in your classes and for always being a source of reassurance when I needed it. Patricia, thank you for creating the best virtual community. Lorayne and Denisha, thank you for your unwavering understanding and support. Jia and Theresa, thank you for welcoming me into your classroom. Thank you to my parents for your unconditional love and support. Thank you to my cohort for cheering me on, for group lunches, for so much laughter—for everything. Most of all, thank you to the many children I have known and loved who inspire me every single day to continue to fight for a better future.
Annotated Outline

1. Remembering play and centering the feelings it creates
   a. Anecdotes about different kinds of play
   b. “We are built to play and built through play” (Brown, 2009, p. 5).
   c. Many schools lack an understanding of the developmental needs of children.
      i. Very young children spend all day sitting in desks and are punished for
         not meeting unrealistic expectations.
      ii. This is not the future we want for our children or our schools.

2. Abolitionist Teaching
   a. Defining Abolition
      i. Simply put, it is “a political vision with the goal of eliminating
         imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating sustainable and
         flourishing worlds for all.” (Education for Liberation Network & Critical
         Resistance Editorial Collective, 2021, p. 2)
   b. Tearing down the current school system while simultaneously building something
      new:
      i. “Abolitionists want to eliminate what is oppressive, not reform it, not
         reimagine it, but remove oppression by its roots. Abolitionists want to
         understand the conditions that normalize oppression and uproot those
         conditions, too. Abolitionists, in the words of scholar and activist Bill
         Ayers, ‘demand the impossible’ and work to build a world rooted in the
         possibilities of justice. Abolitionists are not anarchists; as we eliminate
these systems, we want to build conditions that create institutions that are just, loving, equitable, and that center Black lives” (Love, 2020a, p. 132).

c. Abolitionist teaching is many things, but at its core, it is recognizing that the current education system not only involves but is built upon and sustained by the oppression of students of color, particularly Black students.

d. Idealistic it may seem, Jean Anyon reminds us that, “The utopian thinking of yesteryear becomes the common sense of today” (Anyon, 2005, p 6).

i. Wanting Black and brown students’ basic human rights to be respected is not utopian

3. Why abolition?

a. The “educational survival complex” (Love, 2020b) and “spirit murdering” (Love, 2020b)

i. Traditional schools set Black children, and especially Black children with other marginalized identities, up for failure

ii. Education as we know it in this country was designed by and for white people.

iii. “Racism literally murders your spirit. Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things children need to be educated” (Love, 2020b, p 38).

iv. School-to-Prison Pipeline infographic (ACLU, 2016)

v. “Logics, policies, and practices that treat poor communities, queer students, children with disabilities, children of color, and immigrant young
people as disposable is still an anchor of American schooling” (Anderson-Zavala et al., 2017, pp. 152–153).

1. Racial disparities in incarceration of youth infographic (Sawyer, 2020)

2. Hope anecdote; security guard called on a Black 1st grader
   a. Canary in the coalmine (Shalaby, 2017)

b. Reform is not enough.
   i. Dr. Gholdy Muhammad frames school reform as a fresh coat of paint over the same rotting walls (Haymarket, 2020).
   ii. The organization Critical Resistance terms these “reformist reforms.”
      1. “Reformist reforms, or reformist change, are about improving institutions so that they can work better. But when an institution is rooted in oppression historically and is designed in order to maintain powerlessness and inequity, making that system work better will increase its ability to inflict harm and violence…The system needs to be completely uprooted and dismantled in order to end its oppressive power over our lives” (Critical Resistance, 2020, p. 11).

c. Ultimately, the current American school system harms the majority of students more than it helps them.
   i. “Why has the enduring classroom norm been to keep lively, vital youngsters sitting still at desks for 12 to 15 years no matter what their interests and inclinations?” (Meier & Gasoi, 2017, p. 14)
ii. “There is that in learning and educating which is immeasurable. The measurable tends to determine what is important in educating and learning. When the immeasurable falls outside the recognized categories of meaning and contexts which fill the educational screen, it tends to slip from view, to be left unspoken, and to sink in value to the level of anecdotal interest” (Carini, 2001, p. 177).

d. We need to act as abolitionists within the schools we have right now.

i. “There is no one way to be an abolitionist teacher. Some teachers will create a homeplace for their students while teaching them with the highest expectations; some will protest in the streets; some will fight standardized testing; some will restore justice in their classrooms; some will create justice-centered curriculums and teaching approaches; some will stand with their students to end gun violence in schools; some will fight to end the prison-industrial complex in and outside of schools; some will fight in the effort so communities can peacefully govern themselves to control their children’s education, housing, healthcare, and ideas about peace, justice, and incarceration; and some will do a combination of all of these” (Love, 2020b, 89–90).

e. Abolition as a tapestry, play as one thread

4. What is play?

a. Infinite forms of play

b. Many theorists have attempted to define play, but it’s difficult to define it because it’s dynamic, expansive, radical, and ever-changing.
i. “Play is a concept that fills our minds with contradictions when we try to think deeply about it. Play is serious, yet not serious; trivial yet profound; imaginative and spontaneous, yet bound by rules and anchored in the real world. It is childish, yet underlies many of the greatest accomplishments of adults” (Gray, 2015, p. 131).

c. Fergus Hughes (1999 p 2) proposed a few defining characteristics of play:
   i. Intrinsically motivated
   ii. Freely chosen by the participant
   iii. Found enjoyable by the participant
   iv. Participant is actively engaged
   v. Non-literal/make believe

d. Play can be singing, dancing, writing, drawing, building, video games, fast-paced chasing games on the playground, experimenting, painting
   i. Examples of dancing, block building, and storytelling as play

e. Children will find ways to play even in a classroom where there is no official time for play
   i. Anecdote—1st graders splashing water in the bathroom
   ii. “Children’s works tell a story, show another side of them, and we lose this when we remove making from the classroom.” (Carini, 2007a)

5. Positioning play as abolition
   a. Play as freedom and liberation
i. “…true play, defined as uninterrupted time to play with open-ended materials and minimal adult interference, leads to freedom and liberation for both children and teachers” (Jones, 2022, pp. 5-6)

ii. “…transformative play as a praxis that involves the liberatory exploration of possibilities that awakens one’s whole being. Transformative play is experiential and can make abstract components of social justice, such as empowerment and political agency, experiences understood by the mind, body and spirit.” (Rangel, 2017, p. 68)

1. Play develops in learners an awareness of the possibility and the right of freedom.

   a. Developing conscientização/critical consciousness

      i. “The term conscientização refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2005, translator’s note, p. 35).

   b. Trusting students and giving them control

      i. “In dramatic play, children also find a sense of confidence in their own impulses. Whatever they do will be good and right. Wherever their impulses lead them, that is the way to follow. This is the freedom children should have in their play, an absence of boundaries and prescriptions that we cannot grant them outside of their play lives. Another important by-product of play is the feeling of strength it yields to the child, a relief from
the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered adult world” (Biber, 2015, p. 48).

ii. Play is healing

c. Play naturally has entry points for every child

i. “When children are given the opportunity to create an authentic foundation for their own existence, they do not fail.” (Taylor, 1993, p. 26)

6. Play as abolition in the ECC 5/6s

a. Their play is valued as much as learning to read or count; their play is who they are and it is the foundation of their time at school. They are so confident that their ideas are worth exploring, that the stories inside their minds are worth playing out. They are given hours to play each day.

i. The block room, art materials, the treehouse, outside

b. CAPE—C. & A. sitting in the boxes, picture & anecdote


c. “Jackson” anecdotes, pictures, and videos

i. The ways in which he thrives in a play-centered classroom

7. Place as abolition in a 4th/5th grade ICT at the Earth School

a. Pressures of upper elementary

b. Earth School—50 minutes of project time at the end of each day. All of the children come alive during this time.

i. Block building that incorporates movement
ii. Basketball

iii. Anecdote about “Oliver”—Project time gives him a way to excel in school

iv. Worlds out of clay

v. Students are in control; there is no rubric.

8. My future play-centered, abolitionist classroom

   a. Incorporating play wherever I can within the confines of a given school

      i. Free choice/project time

         1. Time to work on things they’re passionate about and to play with each other.

         2. A designated time that happens every day. Never taken away as punishment.

             a. Showing the children that their play is valued as much as any other academic subject.

      ii. Within a more traditional school setting, simultaneously pushing back against oppressive curricula and creating pockets of play and playful elements of other parts of the day.

         1. Making the rest of the day more like project time rather than the other way around.

             a. Centers, book clubs, plays, experiments, time outside

        b. “Now is the time, in whatever ways possible for teachers and the schools, even in these dark days, to create some margins and corners, however small, for children to play, to explore, to experience some delight in learning” (Carini, 2007b).

9. Conclusion
a. Together with our students, we must employ a radical imagination to create freer classrooms, schools, and futures.

i. In a play-centered classroom, children do not fail.

ii. “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way…on a quest day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing” (Roy, 2003, p. 75).
Process Paper

Like so many others, I was drawn to Sarah Lawrence because of the creative writing program. I planned to study writing and only writing, and I wouldn’t have taken classes in other disciplines my first semester if it hadn’t been required. Luckily, I had to branch out, and I registered for Carl Barenboim’s *Child and Adolescent Development* course, which incorporated fieldwork at the Early Childhood Center. At the same time, I got a job as a classroom assistant in a local elementary school. As my first year progressed, I gradually began to envision myself teaching full-time.

At the same time that I was realizing my love for teaching, I was also increasingly struck by the disparity between the two schools I was working in, one private and the other public. I began to wonder about who has access to play-centered education and why. These questions of equity have stayed with me and evolved as I’ve developed my teaching practice. The summer after my sophomore year, I worked at a summer camp that served many children who had experienced trauma. Because of that experience, I began to explore trauma-sensitive teaching. I wrote several papers on the necessity of trauma-sensitive classrooms.

I wondered what I could do as a teacher to disrupt the systems that cause trauma, and that led me to abolitionist teaching, particularly the works of Dr. Bettina Love. I wrote a paper for Dr. Denisha Jones’s course *Children, Families, and Identity* titled *Abolitionist Teaching: Reform Is Not Enough*. When it came time to choose a thesis topic, abolitionist teaching was a natural choice. However, I kept coming back to another topic that appeared frequently in my work which was the very thing that drew me to teaching: play.

The connection between abolition and play felt natural, but I struggled for weeks to articulate it. I had seen theorists frame play as freedom, and I had seen abolitionists call for more
play in schools, but I had never seen play positioned as abolition. I wondered if it was too far of a reach, but my professors, mentors, and classmates assured me that it made sense. In those early weeks, I did a lot of mind-mapping and free-writing to figure out what I was trying to say. Eventually, I came up with a thesis statement I was happy with: *We must employ a radical imagination to create abolitionist classrooms that center play.* I determined the general structure that I wanted to use: *What is abolition?, Why abolition?, What is play?, and What is the connection between abolition and play?*, followed by examples of play as abolition in my student teaching placements, and concluding with my vision for my own future classroom.

This is more or less the structure that I’ve kept, and these framing statements helped me flesh out my outline. As I selected quotes that supported my thinking, I was surprised by how little additional reading I needed to do. I went through my old notes, papers, and syllabi to find readings that I had already done. This helped me elaborate on the connection between abolition and play. My outline helped me tremendously in creating the visual presentation. It was such a joy to curate photos and stories of children playing.

The process of developing my thesis was at times stressful, but overall rewarding. I feel that my master’s oral truly captures the work that I’ve been doing and everything that I’ve been thinking about, both during my time in the Art of Teaching Program, as well as the 5 years that I’ve spent at Sarah Lawrence as a whole.
Bibliography and References


Meier, D., & Gasoi, E. (2017). *These schools belong to you and me: Why we can't afford to abandon our public schools*. Beacon.


Thank you all so much for being here today for my Master’s Oral Presentation. I’m so excited to share what I’ve been working on with all of you, and I appreciate you taking the time out of your days to be here. My thesis is not only representative of my time in the Art of Teaching Program, but really the culmination of what I’ve been working on and thinking about over the 5 years I’ve spent at Sarah Lawrence College.

My thesis is titled “Positioning play as abolition,” and I am going to talk to you today about the necessity of creating play-centered, abolitionist classrooms. But before I get started outlining this and defining abolition, I want to take a moment to enter the world of play. I invite you all to take a few seconds to think of a memory of playing from your own life, either as an adult or in childhood, and remember how it felt to truly play. (pause)

As adults, it can be hard to remember what play felt like, and so I want to center those feelings today as I talk about play—that sense of accomplishment; satisfaction; competence; freedom; pure, unadulterated joy—feelings produced organically and abundantly by play. It is my hope that positioning these feelings front and center will emphasize the unique value of play.
These next few slides show children hard at work, playing, completely immersed in tasks and activities of their own creation.

On the left, a 4th grader poses with snap circuits which he assembled. A siren sounds whenever the wires touch water. The teachers in the room held our breaths, terrified at the prospect of wires touching water, but he was confident. He knew what was doing, and sure enough, the siren wailed when the wire detected the water.

On the right, I am holding a telescope made of construction paper steady as a kindergartener secures it with tape. As you can see by my expression, this child has invited me into her world of play, and I am captivated by her vision.
These photos show two groups of kindergarteners playing, one indoors and one outdoors. In the indoor photo, several children have created a dinner table that is bustling with activity. There are baby dolls, dishes, and even a blanket repurposed as a tablecloth. In the outdoor photo, three children are creating a world only known to them out of a cardboard box. They are busy decorating the box with chalk and further creating their scene.
On the left, two fifth graders smile beneath their masks as they pose with a game of whack-a-mole they created out of cardboard. On the right, a fifth grader spins on the playground, taking flight, enjoying an early spring day.

As Stuart Brown writes, “We are built to play and built through play.” I wanted to begin my discussion of abolitionist teaching with these images of joy to center what we are working towards and the future I envision for all children. These are two special schools that recognize the necessity of play, but, unfortunately, schools like these are far and few between. In the vast majority of American schools, even very young children spend hours a day sitting in desks, completing mandated, rote tasks designed to prepare them for standardized tests. Many schools lack an understanding of or ignore the developmental needs of children and are then surprised when their students do not meet these unrealistic expectations or resist them in various ways—refusing to do the work, disrupting the lesson, co-opting the content and materials to make it more engaging, leaving the classroom, etc. In response, schools utilize carceral consequences—shaming, threatening, and excluding, to name a few, which all disproportionately affect students of color, especially Black students. These responses feed the school-to-prison pipeline.
Abolitionists envision a different future than the one I just described, not just for education, but for society as a whole. As defined by the Education for Liberation Network, abolition is “a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating sustainable and flourishing worlds for all.”

Dr. Bettina Love writes, “Abolitionists want to eliminate what is oppressive, not reform it, not reimagine it, but remove oppression by its roots...Abolitionists, in the words of scholar and activist Bill Ayers, ‘demand the impossible’ and work to build a world rooted in the possibilities of justice. Abolitionists are not anarchists; as we eliminate these systems, we want to build conditions that create institutions that are just, loving, equitable, and that center Black lives.”

Abolitionist teaching is one part of the broader abolitionist movement. Abolitionist teaching is many things, but at its core, it is recognizing that the current education system not only involves but is built upon and sustained by the oppression of students of color, particularly Black students. If eliminating the current systems and building new institutions seems like a massive undertaking, it’s because it is. An abolitionist education system will not materialize overnight. This will take years, maybe even generations. But abolition is the way forward, as idealistic as it may seem. I invite you all to practice a “radical imagination” with me, the kind of imagination that children use in play to turn boxes into rocketships and buckets of
mud into delicious meals. Jean Anyon reminds us that, “The utopian thinking of yesteryear becomes the common sense of today.” And wanting all students’ human rights to be respected is not utopian.
The fact of the matter is that education in this country was designed by and for white people. Dr. Bettina Love terms the current education system the “educational survival complex” because for Black students, every day is an act of survival in a racist system. Traditional schools set Black children, and especially Black children with other marginalized identities up for failure. Dr. Love writes, “Racism literally murders your spirit. Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things children need to be educated.”
These are just a few of the innumerable ways in which Black students are pushed out of schools and into prisons. Zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect Black students—Black children. You can see here that in 2016, Black students made up only 16% of public school enrollment, as opposed to white students’ 51%, but they made up 42% of students who were suspended multiple times, as opposed to white students’ 31%. Black students represented 31% of school-related arrests. They were suspended and expelled 3 times more than white students. And students who are suspended or expelled are three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system in the next year. This is barely a snapshot of the many-headed hydra that is the school-to-prison pipeline, but it demonstrates a few clear ways in which Black children are targeted by it.
While Black students are the most disproportionately affected by the school-to-prison pipeline, Indigenous students and Latinx students suffer from carceral disciplinary practices, too.

This chart shows that per 100,000 Black youth, 136 are in juvenile detention centers, as well as 88 of every 100,000 American Indian youth, 43 of every 100,000 Hispanic youth, and 31 of every 100,000 white youth.

Anderson-Zavala writes, “Logics, policies, and practices that treat poor communities, queer students, children with disabilities, children of color, and immigrant young people as disposable is still an anchor of American schooling.”

I used to work as an assistant in a traditional first grade classroom in Yonkers. I was 18, a freshman in college, and this was my first job in a school. There was a student who I’ll call Hope. She was a Black six year old girl, and she was what the abolitionist teacher and writer Carla Shalaby would call a canary in a coal mine—a child who felt the danger first and was trying to warn the rest of us in her own way—through refusing to be silent and hide her feelings. One day, something happened, although I don’t remember what, and Hope began to cry and yell and throw things. The teacher told me to go get the security guard—to go get the security guard to deal with a 6 year old who was having a hard time!! Thankfully, the security guard was on her lunch break, and so Hope and I walked up and down the halls together until she felt better
and then she went back to class to do her busywork. But how telling is it that this white teacher’s first instinct was to call the security guard on Black first grader?
Many people respond to alarming stories and statistics like these with calls for reform—better policies, body cameras for school resource officers, more funding. And yes, these might do something, but they are not enough. The organization Critical Resistance terms these “reformist reforms.” They say, “Reformist reforms, or reformist change, are about improving institutions so that they can work better. But when an institution is rooted in oppression historically and is designed in order to maintain powerlessness and inequity, making that system work better will increase its ability to inflict harm and violence...The system needs to be completely uprooted and dismantled in order to end its oppressive power over our lives.” Dr. Gholdy Muhammad frames school reform as a fresh coat of paint over the same rotting walls.
Ultimately, the American school system harms the majority of students more than it helps them. In *These Schools Belong to You and Me*, Deborah Meier and Emily Gasoi question, “Why has the enduring classroom norm been to keep lively, vital youngsters sitting still at desks for 12 to 15 years no matter what their interests and inclinations?” All students suffer under our current educational model. Those who seem to thrive do so in spite of, not because of the education they receive.

Patricia Carini writes, “There is that in learning and educating which is immeasurable. The measurable tends to determine what is important in educating and learning. When the immeasurable falls outside the recognized categories of meaning and contexts which fill the educational screen, it tends to slip from view, to be left unspoken, and to sink in value to the level of anecdotal interest.”

Play cannot be tested or standardized, so it is confined to 20 minutes of recess or eliminated completely.
As we work towards a better future, we must act as abolitionists within the schools we have right now. There are so many different ways to be abolitionist teachers.

Dr. Bettina Love writes, “Some teachers will create a homeplace for their students while teaching them with the highest expectations; some will protest in the streets; some will fight standardized testing; some will restore justice in their classrooms; some will create justice-centered curriculums and teaching approaches; some will stand with their students to end gun violence in schools; some will fight to end the prison-industrial complex in and outside of schools; some will fight in the effort so communities can peacefully govern themselves to control their children’s education, housing, healthcare, and ideas about peace, justice, and incarceration; and some will do a combination of all of these.”
Each teacher, curriculum, and school is a part of something bigger than themselves. I imagine abolition as a tapestry made up of a multitude of threads. The thread of abolition I want to focus on today is *play*. 

Abolition Is a Tapestry

Diedrick Brackens “The Cup Is a Cloud”
But first, what is play? There are so many different kinds of play—we often think of one kind of play, sociodramatic play, in which multiple children engage in imaginary play together, but there are infinite ways in which play presents itself. Many theorists have attempted to define play, but it’s difficult to do so because it’s dynamic, expansive, radical, and ever-changing.

Peter Gray tells us that, “Play is a concept that fills our minds with contradictions when we try to think deeply about it. Play is serious, yet not serious; trivial yet profound; imaginative and spontaneous, yet bound by rules and anchored in the real world. It is childish, yet underlies many of the greatest accomplishments of adults.”
Fergus Hughes outlined several characteristics of play: it’s intrinsically motivated, freely chosen by the participant, found enjoyable by the participant, the participant is actively engaged, and it’s non-literal or make believe. The “make believe” aspect can be straightforward when a child is pretending, but it is also present when a child is exhibiting a kind of playfulness that allows them to think “what if” — “What if I crocheted a scarf?” “What if I combine baking soda and vinegar?” “What if I make this free throw?”
Play can take countless forms--singing, dancing, writing, drawing, building, video games, sports, experimenting, painting—the list goes on and on. On the left, a student in the 5/6s dances to her favorite song, “Bumblebee” by the Laurie Berkner Band. She’s blurry, mid-movement, completely caught up in the music. In the center, three 5th graders pose with an unbelievably intricate and symmetrical block structure. And on the right is a kindergartener’s account of her weekend adventures. It reads, “Over the weekend, I was playing outside with my mommy. Then we went back home to get groceries from ShopRite. Then I saw a real astronaut at ShopRite. He was handsome and he married me.” These are just a few examples of the many, many ways in which children play in classrooms where the teachers value and set aside time for play.

I have also worked in classrooms where there is no official time to play, but without fail, children of any age still create unofficial ways to play. A lightsaber made of markers stuck together; a song hummed under their breath; silly faces exchanged with a classmate; toys hidden in desks.
In the same traditional 1st grade classroom I mentioned before where a security guard was called on a 1st grader, there was no designated time for play except for recess. These children were desperate for play; for a 6-year-old to sit in a desk all day and speak only when called on is to suppress—oppress—everything that makes being 6 so fun. Some of the students would take extended bathroom breaks with a friend and come back with wet shirts because they would splash each other with the sink water. They found any outlet they could to giggle, to get out of their desks, to speak freely without an adult controlling them, to play. Patricia Carini says “Children’s works tell a story, show another side of them, and we lose this when we remove making from the classroom.” Play is a right and a necessity for all children.
Play belongs in schools. Play is liberation; it develops in children an awareness of the possibility and the right of freedom. Play that is uninfluenced by adults goes by many names—free play, true play, or transformative play. Nicole Rangel says, “[Transformative play] involves the liberatory exploration of possibilities that awakens one’s whole being. Transformative play is experiential and can make abstract components of social justice, such as empowerment and political agency, experiences understood by the mind, body and spirit.”

And Dr. Denisha Jones writes, “true play, defined as uninterrupted time to play with open-ended materials and minimal adult interference, leads to freedom and liberation for both children and teachers.”
Play helps learners develop *conscientização*, or critical consciousness. As defined by Paulo Freire, “The term *conscientização* refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”
“In dramatic play, children also find a sense of confidence in their own impulses. Whatever they do will be good and right. Wherever their impulses lead them, that is the way to follow. This is the freedom children should have in their play, an absence of boundaries and prescriptions that we cannot grant them outside of their play lives. Another important by-product of play is the feeling of strength it yields to the child, a relief from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered adult world.”

—Barbara Biber, *Play as a Growth Process*

These big concepts start small. By trusting children and giving them control of their own play, they trust themselves and learn what they are capable of. Barbara Biber writes, “In dramatic play, children also find a sense of confidence in their own impulses. Whatever they do will be good and right. Wherever their impulses lead them, that is the way to follow. This is the freedom children should have in their play, an absence of boundaries and prescriptions that we cannot grant them outside of their play lives. Another important by-product of play is the feeling of strength it yields to the child, a relief from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered adult world.”

Play is healing, too. Of course, teachers are not therapists, but play serves as children’s natural way of working through problems and ideas. Play has the potential to counteract the spirit murdering that students may have already experienced.
“When children are given the opportunity to create an authentic foundation for their own existence, they do not fail.”

—Denny Taylor, From the Child’s Point of View

It is no accident that play provides a space for every single child to thrive in the classroom. Denny Taylor reminds us that, “When children are given the opportunity to create an authentic foundation for their own existence, they do not fail.”
Now I want to pull forth some examples of play as abolition in the classrooms that I have worked in over the past year. Last fall, I had the pleasure of being the assistant teacher in the kindergarten and first grade classroom, referred to as the 5/6s, at the Early Childhood Center, or ECC, and I've been fortunate enough to continue working there one day a week this spring. In the 5/6s and at the ECC as a whole, children’s play is valued as much as everything else they do; their play is who they are and it is the foundation of their time at school. They are so confident that their ideas are worth exploring, that the stories inside their minds are worth playing out. They are given hours to play each day, and many spaces in which to do so.
Play happens everywhere in the 5/6s, but it takes center stage in the Block Room. The children have a plethora of blocks to choose from, as well as other materials well-suited for imaginary play, like dishes, blankets, rocks, and dolls. Their block structures grow in complexity with each passing day, with some of the students even opting to use a step stool to make creations that reach for the sky, like the one shown here. The small table pictured in the middle often serves as a gathering place for pretend meals, but just as often it is a doctor’s office, a home for dinosaurs, or a star wars ship. And here on the right is the treehouse, which affords the children privacy, a place to hide, a room within a room, a fort, a space that belongs only to them.
The children in the 5/6s have many other spaces in which to play, but I’ll mention just two more. The children can paint, draw, cut, glue, and collage in the art area without asking permission from a teacher; they are free to follow their own creative instincts. They also have about an hour a day to play outside, which is not recess, but rather a deliberate part of the curriculum. In this picture, they’re enjoying lunch outside, but most of their outdoor time is spent climbing, hiding, digging, chasing, concocting, and exploring. Often I have found a child nestled behind a tree or rolling in mud, uninhibited, free.
In December, the students were able to participate in a CAPE, or a Community Adventure Play Experience. To explain briefly, a CAPE involves providing children with many recycled materials and inviting them to explore and play with minimal adult interference. This is a snapshot of the joyous building and experimenting that took place that day. The children ran around the yard, exploring different materials, figuring out how to attach ribbon to cardboard, stomping on old plastic containers and enjoying the satisfying crunch under their feet, and cramming together in large boxes. But the children I want to draw attention to are actually not shown in these photos.
These two children spent probably the better part of 40 minutes sitting next to each other in these boxes, rarely speaking. At first glance, it might look like they’re not playing. But most of the time when I looked over at them during the CAPE, I could see a far-off, focused look on both of their faces. They were somewhere in another world in those boxes, completely captivated by their own imaginations. I never asked them what they were pretending, because to interrupt them would have been an intrusion of my own adult need to name and talk about things. Their remarkable ability to engage with the stories in their own minds reminds me of a quote from “Bad Guys Don’t Have Birthdays” by Vivian Paley: “I pretend, therefore I am. I pretend, therefore I know.”
I want to pull forth one more example of play from the 5/6s. “Jackson” is a 5 year old who is one of our most ambitious block builders. On the left is one of the first bridges he made back in November, and on the right is a structure he made more recently in March. As a sensory-seeking Black boy with a lot of energy, I worry that in another school, he would be punished and excluded for, like many 5 year olds, sometimes dealing with his frustration by pushing another student or knocking over their block structure. I’ve watched in awe many times as the lead teacher skillfully helped Jackson address the harm he had caused, for instance, by asking the other student what they needed in order to feel better. But his teacher never takes away his playtime. Children make mistakes, and play is how they process and learn from their mistakes. Jackson is respected by his peers for his creativity and big ideas. To take away his ability to play, through time out or through suspension, would be taking away who he is.
In this video, Jackson is using mud as cement to attach large blocks to each other. He’s so knowledgeable about construction and the properties of mud that allow it to work as glue. Play allows us to see how much he knows.
The 5/6s have Dance class every week with the Dance Movement Therapy graduate students, and Jackson thrives during this time. In this video, he and another student are dancing to “We Don’t Talk About Bruno” from “Encanto.” (show video) Both of them are so at ease in their bodies. I’m moved by their confidence, joy, and lack of self-consciousness. There’s something so moving about the way that Jackson is holding himself in this video, the pride with which he moves. This is what 5 year olds are meant to do!

By providing Jackson with an environment that meets his needs to build and to move, he is able to flourish. How often do teachers and schools focus on changing the child rather than changing the environment to meet their needs?
This spring, I had the pleasure of student teaching in a 4th and 5th grade class at the Earth School, which is an ICT, or Integrated CoTeaching classroom. In most schools, by 4th and 5th grade, all traces of time to play have usually vanished, pushed out by more and more academic instruction as middle school looms, with the lone exception of recess, and sometimes not even that!

At the Earth School, the students have project time for about 50 minutes at the end of the day, and it’s most students’ favorite time of day—and mine as well. It’s absolutely invaluable to see students who struggle during other portions of the day come alive during this time. Students who never raise their hands, who leave the room during lessons, who fall asleep, who take long trips to the water fountain are suddenly full of imagination, talkative, joyful, creative, problem solving, and leading others—they’re in their element. Play provides entry points for every single student.
One of the arguments for eliminating play from the classroom is that students, especially students from so-called “disadvantaged” backgrounds, need to focus on academics. In this video, a group of 4th and 5th graders has created a block structure that actually moves. (show video) As you can see, what they built is deeply mathematical. They’re demonstrating their knowledge of physics. What’s more academic than that?
Students are also able to play basketball during Project Time. The students who
regularly choose to play basketball during look forward to it for the whole day. It’s a
time where they feel confident and capable doing something they love.
The student standing next to me in this picture, who I’ll call “Oliver” taught us to make the tissue paper flowers that we’re all posing with. Oliver is a talented artist, and he is extremely generous with his knowledge, always happy to pause what he’s working on to help someone out. During other parts of the day, Oliver struggles to meet the standards in reading and math that 4th graders are expected to meet. But Project Time gives him a chance to shine, to show both the teachers and his peers what he is capable of. His classmates seek his expertise in a wide variety of artistic modes—clay, fashion designing, and building with cardboard, just to name a few. Without time to play and be creative and artistic, he might not have a part of the school day where he feels skillful and knowledgeable.
This is an in-progress photo of an amazing clay and construction paper world created by some 4th and 5th graders. There is no rubric for play—students are in control. They get to decide what they work on and when they want to move on to something else. They get to follow their own instincts. The confidence and trust in themselves that comes so naturally in early childhood is chipped away at by the educational survival complex as children progress through school. Keeping play in classrooms preserves children’s ability to see themselves as creators, dreamers, and changemakers.
I want to shift gears a little bit now and talk about what I envision in my own future play-centered, abolitionist classroom. While ideistically I would like to reserve the majority of the day for play, realistically my goal is to incorporate play wherever possible within the confines of a given school, while simultaneously pushing back against the policies that limit time for play, as well as finding support and organizing within broader abolitionist movements.

I plan to have a designated time—or two—each day for students to play and work on things that they’re passionate about. In order to show my students that their play is valued as much as any other academic area, this time will not be taken away as punishment. If I teach in a school that does not value play, I can still create pockets of play and playful elements of other parts of the day, such as centers, book clubs, plays, experiments, time outside, and providing students with choice as much as possible.
“Now is the time, in whatever ways possible for teachers and the schools, even in these dark days, to create some margins and corners, however small, for children to play, to explore, to experience some delight in learning.”

—Patricia Carini “The Bigness of Education”
In conclusion, in a play-centered classroom, children do not fail. Together with our students, we must employ a radical imagination to create freer classrooms, schools, and futures. As Arundhati Roy writes, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way...on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”
Thank you!