Balancing play-based learning with curricular mandates: considering the views of northern Canadian teachers and early childhood educators.

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Balancing Play-Based Learning with Curricular Mandates: Considering the Views of Northern Canadian Teachers and Early Childhood Educators


Researchers, and developers of recent kindergarten curricula speak with one voice about the contributions of play to young children’s learning and literacy, social, emotional, and physical development, as well as positive dispositions toward learning (Alberta Education, 2014; Manitoba Education, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, 2007, 2010; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, 2009; Wood, 2007). In play research, as summarized by Wood (2007), “play is regarded as essential to lifelong learning, creativity and well-being” (p. 311). Aligned with this view of play, the curricula for kindergarten in four Canadian provinces direct teachers to: “promote high quality, age-appropriate, play-based learning experiences” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1); “embed intentional opportunities for learning in the physical environment and play activities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 7); “design play-based, developmentally appropriate interactions, relationships, environments and experiences” (Manitoba Education, 2011, p. 1); and “provide support, space and resources for inquiry, play and imagination” (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 69). The underlying assumption across the four curricula, consistent with the summary of play research quoted from Wood (2007), is that “play is the foundation for children’s learning” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). In kindergarten curricula across Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and
Ontario, curriculum-developers have clearly positioned play as an integral part of the learning landscape for children. However, there is no mention of play in grade 1 curriculum expectations.

In this paper we identify challenges that arise as teachers navigate among sometimes compatible, and sometimes competing provincial policies, local cultures and expectations, and multiple prongs of research. We draw on primary teachers’, early childhood educators’ and an administrator’s and a consultant’s responses to interview questions on their views of play. Following a description of the participants and our research methods, we discuss themes in participants’ views in terms of relevant literature and provincial curricula. We conclude with a summary of implications for practice and policy and further questions to guide conversations about play in early childhood learning settings.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The 34 participants, from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, are part of a larger research study exploring ways to enhance children’s oral language and writing through play entitled (we will include the title and website URL in the published version of this paper). We selected these four provinces because they are where we currently or have previously worked as classroom teachers or speech-language pathologists.

Participants are primary teachers, early childhood educators and consultants/school administrators associated with early childhood education. As indicated in Table 1, most participants are K-1 teachers. They are experienced educators, with 26 participants having six or more years of experience working with children as early childhood educators or teachers. All Alberta and Saskatchewan participants are female. One Ontario participant is male and two
Manitoba participants are male. Two of the Ontario participants are First Nations educators, and all other participants are of European background.

The number of participants varies from province to province based on the number of educators who volunteered to take part in the study. Participants in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba work in one northern school division in each province. The early childhood educators work in daycare settings in a town within the school division catchment in each province. The majority of children in the Alberta schools speak English as their mother tongue, with some children speaking Cree and others German in their homes. In the Saskatchewan schools, the majority of children are exposed to varying levels of English, and/or Cree in their home and school environments. In the Manitoba schools, the majority of students speak English as their first language, with some children having exposure to Cree and Salteaux languages in their homes and in the Aboriginal Head Start program. The Ontario teachers work in three different First Nations communities in the northwestern part of the province. In one school, Ojibwa is the children’s mother tongue and English is spoken in the homes of children in the other two schools.

The school divisions were selected randomly within the northern half of each of the other three provinces, and school division superintendents initially granted permission for their schools and teachers to participate in this seven year project. Flyers were sent to schools and daycares in the communities within the school divisions to recruit participants. The Ontario teachers and Aboriginal Head Start teacher expressed interest in the research study after attending a presentation on early literacy and play, conducted by one of the authors of this paper, at a conference hosted by the First Nations Student Success Program. Their community leaders and
Education Director agreed to allow the educators and their students to participate in the research during a visit by the researcher to their communities.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data sources are participants’ responses to six of 14 questions in semi-structured interviews conducted in their schools. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014 by the three authors. Participants’ responses to the remaining questions are data sources for another paper (Authors, under review). The interview questions relevant to this paper are:

1. Tell me about your years of teaching/daycare experience (e.g., number of years K, elementary, or middle school or for ECE – infant, toddler, preschool.

2. What cultural backgrounds do your children come from? What languages are spoken in children’s homes?

3. What makes your school/Aboriginal Head Start program/daycare unique?

4. Tell me a success story where you were able to make a difference with your children. What contributed to your children’s success?

5. Have you implemented play activities in your classroom/daycare/Aboriginal Head Start program? What kinds of play activities do you use and what do you find works best with your children?

6. What do you see as the challenges and benefits of a play-based approach to learning?
Interview responses were transcribed and analyzed inductively (Patton, 2014), as we did not want to impose categories on teachers’ perspectives on the following topics: definitions of play, benefits of play, and challenges of play. We carried out an inductive procedure for analyzing all documents we could find online relating to early childhood education within each of the four provinces to gain a sense of the curriculum perspectives on play across the four provinces. Initially, using the word, *play*, as a descriptor, we found references to play in each document. Emerging themes were then identified from each play description in each document and compared and contrasted themes across the four provinces’ documents.

**Participants’ Views on Play and their Alignment with Theory and Policy**

**Play Ethos**

Participants’ views on play reflected a “play ethos” (Smith, 2009, p. 4), as teachers, early childhood educators, consultants, and principals alike, championed play as an engaging, natural and enjoyable tool for discovery and for supporting children’s oral language and social development.

*Play fosters student engagement*

In keeping with a theoretical view of play as a natural and essential learning activity that children find enjoyable (Crane, 2010), participants in our research all agreed with an Ontario grade 1 teacher that, “children really want to play.” A Saskatchewan pre-kindergarten teacher connected children’s enjoyment to their learning by saying that play helps children to “retain [what they learned] better” because “they are doing what they want to do.” A grade one teacher from the same province furthered this notion by saying that play is “more of a natural way of learning.” Participants have observed children engaged in play activities and feel play is motivational and engaging, as described by a kindergarten teacher:
...the benefits [of play-based learning] are that the kids enjoy school and they love to learn. Instead of being upset because they can’t do something, say if I just gave them paper work, and they don’t quite know how to do it they would probably...get to that point where I think it’s they don’t want to...they don’t like school anymore.. and they don’t want to do the assignment and they will sit there if they can’t do it ..and do nothing. Or wait till they get that support all the time and they only work when you give them help and when you walk away they stop…Whereas with the learning type of activities as they play they tend to be much happier. They are excited about school. And kindergarten is wonderful because they just want to learn no matter what. They think school is the greatest.

This tenet of the play ethos is strong in curriculum documents, as well. For example, the Saskatchewan resource for kindergarten teachers (McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007, as cited in Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009) stated: “Play is a natural mode of learning and the foundation for the kindergarten program” (p. 8). Similarly, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) made the link between play and learning explicit: “Play is a means to early learning that capitalizes on children’s natural curiosity and exuberance” (p. 5). Children’s enjoyment and engagement, linked to the naturalness of play, to their feelings of success when involved in play activities, and to their freedom to choose how they participate in play activities (e.g., Vitiello, Booren, Downer, & Williford, 2012), are important themes supporting the play ethos.

**Play supports oral language, social development and learning**

Underpinning the play ethos is an assumption that there is a link between play and children’s oral language development. Lewis, Boucher, Lupton and Watson (2000), for example, found that symbolic play significantly correlated with the development of the expressive and
receptive language of children from one to six years of age. Participating teachers also identified this link. An Ontario grade one teacher stated, “…I find that when the kids are in play, you hear a lot more oral language. The kids are talking more amongst themselves and it’s nice to hear them talk to each other and ask ‘What are you doing?’…” A language consultant furthered this belief, stating, “It’s certainly a natural way in terms of facilitating language learning.”

In addition to supporting children’s oral language, play-based learning also supports children’s social development, as it is an avenue through which children can interact with peers and build numerous social skills (e.g., Teasley, 1995). Participants highlighted the social nature of play. As one Alberta kindergarten teacher explained, children “are learning to get along with a lot of different kids.” A participating principal elaborated on the link between social development and play:

[Students] develop socialization skills. I think, depending on where you are, socialization skills are really important today. It seems like now there are more technical games and the kids are on the couch and they’re playing all kinds of games and they’re lacking socialization skills. There seems to be less human interaction so I think that through natural play, they will develop better socialization skills, relationships and friendships. That’s important—finding somebody that they can develop a relationship with so that they can fit in. A lot of kids, if they don’t find somebody, it’s very difficult and they’re isolated and then things can start spiraling downwards in a negative way.

The social interaction within play was also valued by participants as a contributor to children’s cognitive learning. A Manitoba kindergarten teacher observed that “[it’s] so interesting to hear the kids talk to each other – the problem solving…it’s a benefit for them to
work together.” Participants agreed with a Manitoba principal that “students learn from each other.”

Links between play and learning also abound in theoretical and research literature. Vygotsky (1967), for example, asserted that dramatic play is “the leading source of development in preschool years. . . The fact of creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought” (p. 6). Indeed, “the imagined situation enables children to function beyond their existing level of competence” (Göncü, Tuerman, Jain, & Johnson, 1999, p. 150). Also supportive of the play ethos, but with the caveat that play has to be recognized as one of many activities in the daily lives of young children that contribute to their development, Smith (2009) explained that a wide body of research “suggests that pretend play is one way of acquiring cognitive (and literacy) skills, and indeed a natural and enjoyable way” (p. 15).

**Criticisms of the play ethos**

The literature is not universally supportive of the play ethos, however. Wood (2007) wrote that “play is not the only means of learning in early childhood, and, in some contexts, is not the best or most efficient way of learning” (p. 321). Furthermore, as critical theorists have pointed out, notions of what constitutes play and ways to participate in play are socially constructed. Some children may be excluded from play opportunities and from the potential learning arising from the play on the basis of their socio-cultural backgrounds (e.g., Ailwood, 2011; Brooker, 2002). Socially dominant children may exclude certain peers, and a socially dominant group of children might establish expectations for *acceptable* play in the classroom that do not include the types of play that other children prefer (Wood, 2007). Additionally, certain types of play that some children prefer, such as that involving play weapons and exuberant rough-and-tumble, might be deemed inappropriate and unsafe in
classrooms/daycares/Aboriginal Head Start programs by teachers and early childhood educators, and/or by the parents who bring their children to these educational early childhood settings (Holland, 2003).

**Open-Ended and Child-centered Nature of Play**

In addition to describing play as being a natural, enjoyable context for children’s learning, participants also characterized play as open-ended activity where children interact with each other and with objects. According to participants, open-ended play involves an absence of formal structures and adult-imposed directions/restrictions on the activity and outcomes of play. An Ontario Aboriginal Head Start educator talked about children “choosing wherever they’re going to play.” In addition, all kindergarten teachers talked about having free play times when children were invited to go to centers, such as sand and water tables, construction centers with blocks or play dough, dramatic play centers, or centers with toys. An Ontario grade 1 teacher gave an example of how manipulating and experimenting with concrete materials was not sufficient to define play. Instead, she felt that “the kids are playing when they control it. Just being hands-on, as we did in math today—to me, that’s not play.” Indeed, a Manitoba principal observed that if teachers controlled activities identified as play, they risked “script[ing] to the point of where it wasn’t really play at all.” These participants’ views of play align with researchers’ definitions of playful behaviour as “an activity in which the process of playing is more important than the end result” (Pellegrini & Van Ryzin, 2009, p. 70). An Alberta early childhood educator provided a metaphor to explain the flexible, child-controlled nature of play: “Rather than saying, ‘Here’s a bag of flour and you can only make a cake,’ you are recognizing that you can make so much more with flour than a cake.” Child-centered play is supported by
teachers who are attuned and responsive to students’ interests and background experiences when planning activities involving play, a view shared by all participants.

**Tensions Created by Bringing Play into Classrooms**

*Competing views on play*

Although all of the study participants expressed that they valued the principles of play-based learning, and were interested in infusing more play into their classrooms, many of them were conflicted about the legitimate role of play in classrooms beyond the pre-school or kindergarten level. This challenge has also appeared in the literature, as Wood (2007) explained: “play has always sat uneasily between the informal approaches that are more typical in pre-school settings and the more formal demands that are made in compulsory schooling” (p. 311).

School-based participants found that the play ethos is not a widely accepted perspective on play, making it difficult to implement play practices in classrooms. A kindergarten teacher from Manitoba noted that parents of her students had asked questions about how their children would transition from a play-based kindergarten program to a pencil-and-paper-based grade 1 program. She observed: “A lot of parents don’t know a whole lot about it and they didn’t experience it themselves, so for them, they’re very worried.” An Alberta early years consultant made similar observations:

I think one of our biggest challenges, and this is from where I am in my position, is getting our administrators and our parents to realize the value in play, so that our colleagues and our parents aren’t saying that kids are just coming to school to play. I actually have been asked by parents, “Why should I send my kid to kindergarten? All they’re going to do there is play, and they can play at home.” So for me, it’s been a matter of educating those people too, that this is play but it’s very thought out and the
teacher and the adults in the classroom have a big role in the children’s play in classrooms.

A participating Manitoba principal added: “I think some kids don’t have any time to play so they don’t learn the art of play. . . . We have to educate people that there is learning that takes place during playtime and that playtime is a necessary piece.” Wood (2013) provides further evidence of concerns about play-based schooling, stating that parents, and even teachers, often view play in pre-school settings merely as preparation for real school and have expectations that when children enter real school, they will be engaged in the serious acquisition of academic skills.

Curriculum and accountability demands

Grade 1 teachers described their uncertainties and reservations in determining what kinds of play and how much play would be most appropriate for the children in their classrooms. They were particularly concerned with how a play-based approach could link to curricular outcomes, assessment, and accountability. For example, a Saskatchewan grade one teacher explained: “Another one of the challenges is just that with the heavier academic load, it’s hard sometimes to pull the curriculum in and think, ‘How could they learn this through play?’ It really takes some creative thinking.” A Manitoba grade 1 teacher talked about “doing a lot of soul searching in order to give myself freedom to . . . have stations” where children choose among a number of activities. She worried that curriculum outcomes might not be achieved when students had greater control over the activities within the stations.
The grade 1 teachers in particular talked about accountability demands that made it difficult to co-construct curriculum with their students. An Ontario teacher expressed her concerns this way:

If the children control the play, how do you do the learning? You’re kind of like, ‘Here are some things’ and hopefully they’ll kind of go in the direction you’re hoping for. But if they don’t, what do you do? . . . There’s a lot more pressure on us nowadays because of all of the stuff with the Auditor General slamming First Nations schools. And so now they test us constantly and ask, ‘Have the kids made a year’s progress?’

Grade 1 teachers felt that the learning activities, whether play-based or pencil and paper-based, had to lead to measurable outcomes in order to justify the time devoted to them. A Manitoba grade 1 teacher, for example, wondered, “How do you assess play-based learning? What does that look like in comparison to traditional teacher-based instruction? And when do you assess that? . . . And does that mean that they [the children] do no pencil tasks?”

In addition to accountability for the achievement outcomes of play activities, teachers’ apprehensions stemmed from a concern about how to schedule time for play-based learning amongst competing curriculum demands. Participating teachers agreed with researchers (e.g., Rogers & Evan, 2007; Shipley, 2013) that daily classroom routines should allow for extended and uninterrupted play times that encourage deeper involvement in play and more complex play activities, including group play, individual play, constructive play and role play. Longer play periods allow children to explore, to make discoveries, to elaborate on and extend play themes, and to develop symbolic play. However, as explained by an Ontario kindergarten teacher: “There are different literacy activities or math activities and we have to throw art in there; sometimes
time for play kind of gets shortened in the day because you just have so much to do, and I think I need to see if I learned how to incorporate it.” Participants indicated that time for extended and uninterrupted play periods was often in short supply. This was particularly true for a Manitoba teacher working in a multi-level kindergarten-grade one class, who explained: “Because I have a mixed grade level, my biggest challenge is making sure that the younger ones are still getting the play time that they need while the older ones are getting the ELA and arithmetic that they need.”

**Play becomes more teacher-directed in grade 1**

The need to engage children in more formal teacher-directed learning activities led most participating grade 1 teachers to define play less as a child-initiated activity, and more as an activity involving small groups of children using concrete materials to support problem-solving and inquiry or to scaffold writing. Some grade 1 teachers used the concrete experiences generated in play activities as starting points for writing and reinforcement to consolidate curriculum learning. An Ontario grade 1 teacher, for example, talked about a student in her class “who is obsessed with cars. So he’ll play with cars and then write about the car because he can see it, he can feel it, he can touch it.” Other grade 1 teachers described games intended to develop literacy or math knowledge and skills, and specific activities where literacy, mathematics and subject-area curricula played a central role in the play. Manitoba and Saskatchewan grade 1 teachers listed play activities in the classroom as “playing with pattern, dice and card games,” inquiry projects, music and dance, “puzzles you’re putting together for compound words,” and sequencing parts of a story. Ontario teachers talked about dramatic play, sometimes using puppets, arising from the teacher reading or telling a story or the children’s favourite movie, playing with magnets and other science materials, playing outside, either at recess or games during physical education classes, and going on field trips to explore underneath
a stone or to search for tadpoles. A Manitoba language consultant encouraged teachers to find dramatic play opportunities in learning activities across the curriculum. She gave the example: “if you’re doing an experiment, can you pretend to be scientists?”

**Classroom management can be challenging in play settings**

Some participants identified inappropriate student behaviours and social interactions as a feature. For example, a grade one teacher shared: “…the swearing and the fighting. I find that a challenge, trying to get them out of it. ‘Not allowed to fight at school.’ Anytime. Yeah, [at] play time too!” A school principal commented on the potential hazards of rowdy play, stating,

Well, I think what I’m learning in my experience as an educator is that there is that element to be physical. Some kids are involved in rough play - a lot of physical activity, and they’re bringing it to school. They consider it play, rough housing or wrestling but what happens often is that one thing leads to another and the next thing you know, somebody gets hurt.

A second year teacher in a grade one classroom reflected on her management challenges by saying, “Especially as such a young teacher, just figuring out how to let them play, but also to keep control in the classroom, so they won’t go off track.” A related issue an Ontario kindergarten teacher raised was the need for children to value and respect their play environment and the materials in it, sharing: “Sometimes, I have to stop activities, like when I’m seeing pieces of puzzle being thrown across the room. And that's a hard thing to teach them, you know, because they’re so used to things being…well, they’re here, they’re ours.”

**Principles for Enhancing Children’s Learning through Play**

Participants identified three principles for making the most of the learning that comes from play: (1) adult scaffolding enhances student learning in play settings; (2) play requires
appropriate space and resources; and (3) play must be culturally appropriate. These principles are elaborated below.

**Adult scaffolding enhances student learning**

In Aboriginal Head Start programs and in classrooms, participants felt it was necessary for adults to scaffold children’s learning through one-on-one interactions. In some cases, as voiced by an Ontario grade 1 teacher, the interactions took the form of “expanding [children’s] horizons” by encouraging them to engage in more than one particular free-choice activity or center. Most frequently, however, teachers talked about asking questions and talking one-on-one with a child about the topic at hand in order to extend the individual child’s knowledge. A Manitoba grade 1 teacher gave an example of a time when she met with a child playing with a toy cow and asked the child, “What sound does a cow make? What are the colours of your cow?” Her goal in asking questions was “to deepen the play or to extend it.”

Participants in Manitoba and Ontario said that providing the needed scaffolding requires having educational assistants working alongside teachers. For example, a Manitoba grade one teacher stated:

Well, the challenge I would think, is in a perfect world you would have another adult in the room too. Because for many interactions, to keep that play learning focus, you need an adult to kind of comment and guide you along - if you had the support and then also if there is another person with the play based learning, it’s a way to document it or a way to just to show that you have proof of whatever that skill may be that you’re assessing, whether it is oral language or whether it is manners or conversation. Vygotskian theorists, Bodrova and Leong (2009), support the principle that adult interactions are important to scaffold children’s learning through play by explaining that adults’
questions and interested conversation raise the level of the play toward more abstract mental representations. This principle is elaborated in the Saskatchewan kindergarten curriculum (2010), which provides specific forms of adult-child interactions in play settings, such as: asking authentic questions, offering ideas that extend the play, and introducing vocabulary. Participants advise that the benefits of adult scaffolding can best be realized when teachers and early childhood educators have the time to interact one-on-one with children.

**Play requires sufficient physical space and resources**

Research on preschool children’s play environments (Smith & Connolly, 1980) indicates that the ideal size for indoor areas ranges between 30 and 50 square feet of usable space per child; physical environments that are smaller than this may lead to increases in aggression and in unfocused behaviours among the children. Furthermore, Rogers and Evan (2007) conclude that limited indoor space appears to have a greater negative impact on boys than on girls. Participants generally agreed that space is an important factor in planning for play-based activities, with a participating Saskatchewan teacher observing that, “A big challenge is space, honestly, because I just don’t have room. I’d love to have a lot more things in there but I just don’t have anywhere to put them.” Adequate resources and materials pose another obstacle, as an Ontario teacher observed: “I’ve tried, but we don’t have a whole lot of resources in regards to play. So right now, I have a block centre that the kids really enjoy, and some puppets.”

**Play must be culturally appropriate**

Participants, particularly those working in Aboriginal Head Start programs and First Nations schools, identified a third principle for deepening children’s learning through play: creating culturally appropriate play contexts. Ontario participants gave examples of how they put this principle into practice. For example, they provide opportunities for outdoors play, link
play to community activities (such as hunting and cooking), and use storytelling as a starting point for dramatic play. A Manitoba Aboriginal Head Start early childhood educator explained that children in her program “play the drum as they are learning. [They] even say ABC’s to the drum.” The importance of the principle of cultural appropriateness is evident when considering that “children’s play varies from one community to another depending on how children’s communities are structured, how play is defined, and the kind of significance attributed to children’s play in their communities” (Göncü, Tufermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999, p. 162). When planning play activities, particularly in non-mainstream communities, it is important for teachers and early childhood educators to gain an understanding of community members’ beliefs about the value of play and how these beliefs are conveyed to children.

**Issues for Future Investigation**

Early childhood educators, teachers, administrators, and consultants spoke with one voice in support of the play ethos (Smith, 2009). They agreed that play supports young children’s oral language, social development and learning, and is motivational and engaging for children. However, grade 1 teachers told us that achievement of curriculum outcomes influences their use of play in classroom activity. Feeling pressured to teach mandated curriculum, they are concerned that the concept of play as a child-controlled, open-ended activity has to be rethought for grade 1 classrooms, particularly given that there is no explicit mention of play in grade 1 curricula across the four provinces. Grade 1 teachers voiced the “struggle with educational and policy-centered versions of ‘purposeful’ play, as well as ideological versions of free play and free choice” that has remained “a consistent theme in research and practice” (Wood, 2013, p. 13). As such, our research emphasizes the need for educators, curriculum developers, policy makers, and researchers to place high priority on addressing this issue.
Participants also agreed that play must be culturally appropriate, taking into account the local community’s cultural expectations about many factors, including what is considered to be play, what types of play are appropriate within and outside classrooms, ways in which adults interact with children in play activities, and the allocation of space for play. They described particular play practices that aligned with cultural practices in their communities, underscoring a view, espoused by researchers and theorists (e.g., Chen, Masur & McNamee, 2011; Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011), that children’s play is influenced by cultural, social and historical factors and must be understood as a culturally and contextually-situated practice. Their observations indicate a need for further exploration of what counts as play across diverse communities and implications for integrating play into kindergarten, grade 1, daycare, and Aboriginal Head Start daily activity and curricula.

This paper has brought together the perspectives of early childhood educators, teachers, consultants and administrators to identify issues that will guide our ongoing NOW Play research. We hope that this paper will be helpful to inform research and conversations among stakeholders, such as those participating in our research, as well as parents and curriculum and policy developers, as we strive to address issues that, although recognized in previous literature, endure in the everyday lives of early childhood practitioners in northern Canadian communities.
References


Table 1: Participants’ Years of Experience and Teaching Contexts

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