

CULTIVATING A COMPOSITIONAL FLUENCY IN THE  
ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

By

Cassie Jo Brownell

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education – Doctor of Philosophy

2018

## ABSTRACT

### CULTIVATING A COMPOSITIONAL FLUENCY IN THE ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

By

Cassie Jo Brownell

Despite how the population of elementary school children continues to grow ever more diverse, elementary literacies classrooms are becoming more standardized due to increasing educational reforms. Thus, few young learners are yet provided space to engage their home, cultural, or linguistic practices because such communicative practices not often accounted for or included in mandated curricula. In turn, the number of educational studies that amplify the voices of children, particularly those from continually marginalized communities (e.g., children of color, children from working-poor or working-class families, multilingual children, etc.) remains relatively low. In response to this paucity of research, this interpretive project interrogates a compositional fluency (Shipka, 2016, p. 255)—an expansive skillset of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, material, and modal ways of knowing—as one avenue to foster and sustain children’s cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing while amplifying how children come to know, to be and to be known in the elementary English language arts classroom. This dissertation builds on contemporary critical sociocultural scholarship centering children’s varied and complex communicative practices and data generated alongside urban third grade learners during the 2016-2017 academic year. By nuancing children’s processes and accounting for children’s sophisticated rhetorical moves as writers, findings from this study demonstrate how children flexibly adapted their diverse ways of knowing using a multiplicity of modes in order to create rich and personally meaningful texts.

Copyright by  
CASSIE JO BROWNELL  
2018

In memory of Margaret, Robert, Viola, and Robert.  
And for New Orleans—You have my heart.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey, y'all. It has been something else. And I surely would not be moving forward as the woman I am had it not been for the communities that have supported me from near and far over the past four years. In the opening pages of this dissertation, I take this opportunity shout out everyone that encouraged me with card or care package, provided me a meal or couch to crash on, shared a kiddo to try out a new idea with or to snuggle, or served as an extra set of eyes on some version of a document. I definitely could not have done this without you.

I must begin by thanking the children, faculty, and staff of Community School J. To the children I had the pleasure of coming to know over my five years in Michigan, thank you for welcoming me into your lifeworlds. I look at the world differently because of you. You helped me to see light in moments when everything feels dark and it was your jokes, your hugs, your dancing, your laughter, your songs, your genuine questioning about how I was doing on any given day that carried me through much of this program. Moving forward, I hope none of you ever forget how truly important you are and may you never doubt that your stories are worth sharing.

I must also share my appreciation for the adults at Community School J. Thank you for always welcoming me to participate in your classrooms and other events in your community. A special thanks to Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey—thank you for always engaging my ideas for projects (no matter how odd they seemed!), for promptly responding to my text requests for assistance as I wrote, and for graciously opening your classrooms and yourselves to me.

Thinking with and alongside the two of you has challenged me to be a better researcher, teacher,

and person.

Along with those at Community School J, my academic colleagues, and in particular my dissertation committee, have consistently dared me to think in new ways. April, thank you for sticking with me from year one as a cheerleader and mentor; you have consistently believed in my ideas and pushed me to be better in all that I do. To Django, thank you for giving me gentle and sometimes harder shoves to be myself in the field and in my writing as well as challenging me to always take a more critical look at each of these things. Jen, you have been a tremendous mentor and colleague; thank you for being willing to read with me, to review data with me, and to write on my behalf. Special shout-out to you for being Liam's mom and helping to crack codes related to *Minecraft* and *The Little Einsteins*. ☺ Haeny, thank you for taking a risk on a grad student from Michigan State over and over and over again. You are always willing to say 'yes'—to collaborations like the #literacies chat, the #playrevolution, and many other conference panels as well as to quick chats on the phone or brunch at each conference. I am so glad to have you on my team and cannot thank you for all the ways you have helped to build my confidence as a scholar. Finally, to Amy, thank you. Thank you for creating space for me in your case study class, for agreeing to join my guidance committee last minute, and for making space for me to engage in the kind of critical early childhood and elementary scholarship I wished to pursue. I am so thankful for your mentorship throughout this journey and, in particular, for trusting me throughout. I have learned far more from you about being a teacher, a researcher, and a colleague than I could ever capture here. Thank you.

In addition to my committee members, I must thank the larger faculty at MSU because, although these individuals were not directly connected to my committee, they facilitated my understandings of how to be a teacher educator and researcher. Thank you to all those that taught

me in formal coursework—Jeff Bale, Tonya Bartell, Terry Flenbaugh, Lynn Paine, Corey Drake, Ellen Cushman, Rebecca Jacobsen, Tanya Wright, Kim Maier, Chantel Tetreault, Angie Calabrese Barton, Patricia Edwards, Terah Venzant Chambers, Mary Juzwik, and Avner Segall at MSU and Anne Ruggles Gere at the University of Michigan—your voices and feedback continually run through my head whenever I read and write. To my former advisors, Cheryl Rosaen and Sandra Crespo, thank you both for seeing the best in me and helping me to see that for myself (not to mention sharing boxes of tissues all the times I cried in your offices). To Dorinda Carter Andrews, Niral Shah, Kristy Cooper, Laura Apol, Janine Certo, Lana Brown, Anne-Lise Halverson, Lynn Fendler, Vaughn Watson, Beth Herbel-Eisenmann, Joanne Marciano, and Maribel Santiago —thank you for helping me to grow as a scholar and for your care during my time at MSU. Similarly, I offer must thank the custodial staff within our building for their encouragement each morning when I arrived and the smiles they offered on days I needed it most. A special thanks to our Department Chair, Margaret Crocco, as well as our Associate Dean, Michael Sedlak. Thank you for your continued support of my research efforts and your leadership. Thank you to my RCAH family—Joanna Bosse, Dave Sheridan, and Chris Scales—for indulging my creative side and offering alternative ways to think about teaching and academia. A special thanks to Trixie for allowing me to have standing appointments across the last five years and for providing me with aloe plants whenever I needed them. Most importantly, thanks for giving me Elise (fuck you, Elise).

In addition to the faculty and staff I learned from, I must also thank the members of my cohort as well as other graduate students and junior faculty colleagues I came to know at MSU and in the wider field of education. To Lynne, Kristin, Amanda Smith, Erin, Shannon, Vivek, Ben, Scott Farver, Scott Jarvie, Mary, Tashal, Matt, Mark, José, Amy, Linda, Justin, Davena,

Mandie, Tracy, and the many others I likely forgot to name here—thanks for listening and reminding me to take breaks. To Beth, Allegra, Lynette, Rohit, and Swati—thanks for making me a more critical writer. For Katie, Bernadette (and Dali and Lucy), Kristen (and Andy and the boys), and Elise (and Davey Bear and Bear)—thanks for seeing me through. Y’all are among the strongest and most brilliant women I know (and you somehow also think I am funny). To my #riseandwrite friends—Michael, Phil, and Tran (my #writeordie)—thank you for actually waking up, for giving me a routine, and for being part of my every day. To the crew of alums from Indiana University and Penn that I once admired and now adore, thanks for venturing off the beaten path at conferences and for checking in in-between. And, of course, to Jon. Thanks for being my “ride or die” as a conference husband, collaborator, mentor, and bestie. You have been my best and worst critic from day sixteen (it took a bit to convince you to let me into your “one-man wolf pack”) and I could not love you more for it. Thanks for dealing with my tears, for being my home away from home, and hopefully not killing me before this Boston March blizzard is over.

My appreciation for my family and friends in my other homes of New Orleans (Drake, Lindsay, Mere, George, Karaline, Sarah, Bitsy, Brynn, Jess, Cissy, Melissa, Ryan, and the PFK team), the Midwest (Sarah, Clare, Annie, Beth, Alicia, Courtney, CAM, T, Gretchen, Emily, Matty Rob, Brian, Kevin, Tim, and Tara), Boston (Katie Kate, Brendan, Katie, John, Alexandra, Matty Rob, and Randy), and Montana (Trav, Kaci, Dave, Della, Greg, and Tomi Jo) runs deep. Thank you for believing in me and for keeping me grounded. I feel fortunate to come from a family of educators (Mary, Carol, Chris, Emily, Kathleen, Anne, and Jill) and to have so many more friends that remain connected to schools. I appreciate your willingness to talk through ideas with me or to join into the classes I teach so my students can hear from people who live

education every day. A special thanks to the little people in my life—B, KC, Genevieve, Connor, Joey, and Grace—thank you for giving me hope for the future, for snuggling me, for telling me jokes, and for welcoming me into your worlds of play.

Of course the biggest thanks must go to my mom, Barb/Barbie/Madre/Mom. Thanks for sending me love through the mail and always answering my calls. I learned so much about education from watching you for years growing up and you remain the primary reasons I made it through those first months teaching. Thank you for being you and for loving me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>PROLOGUE.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Assessments and Standardization in the Elementary ELA Classroom .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Embodying Humanizing Literacies.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Pedagogies of Literacies: Writing, Composing, and Compositional Fluency .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Methods &amp; Modes of Inquiry .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Site and Participants .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Data Generation.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Analysis.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter-by-Chapter Overview.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: Tracing Children’s Intertextual Connections in Multimodal Composing ...</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Research Questions.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Framing.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Black Boyhood .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Methods.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Study Context.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>About the Focal Child: Christopher .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Instructional Context .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Data Generation and Analysis.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Findings 1: From Alpha Text to Animation.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Findings 2: Tracing Intertextual Connections in the Final Cut.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Findings 3: Processing Production and Intertextual Tracings.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: Cultivating Contemplative Constituents: A Case Study of Children</b>	
<b>Composing in an Era of (Im)Migration .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>“What do we tell the children?” .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Research Questions.....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Towards a Humanities Classroom Made Whole.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Creating Critical (Multimodal) Texts: An Overview of Scholarship.....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Multiple Practices of a Plural Populace .....</b>	<b>77</b>

<b>Modes of Inquiry .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Contextualizing Teaching and Learning .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Focal Child Participants .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Focal Adult Participants .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Overview of the Focal Unit .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Data Generation and Analysis.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Calling on Congress and Citizens to Act: Exploring Children’s Persuasive Artifacts.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Data Glimpse 1: The Subtleties of Children’s Rhetorical Strategies.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Data Glimpse 2: Reflecting (on) the Refugee Experience .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Conclusions.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>103</b>

<b>CHAPTER 4: What do you do with an Elliot?: Reflection and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research in the English Language Arts Classroom .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>138</b>

<b>CHAPTER 5: (Com)Promising Conclusions .....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>Cultivating a Qualitatively Different English Language Arts Classroom.....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Fostering an English Language Arts Made Whole.....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Extending the Dissertation: Projected Manuscripts &amp; Anticipated Research Trajectory .....</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>151</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Community School J Faculty and Staff Demographics.....	30
Table 2. Coding Example: Gem’s Persuasive Letter.....	99
Table 3. Coding Example: Gem’s Persuasive Letter.....	87



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Ms. Honey’s Classroom Library.....	14
Figure 2. Sample Seating Options in Ms. Honey’s Classroom.....	14
Figure 3. Christopher’s Word Web.....	39
Figure 4. Multimodal Transcript of Christopher’s First Draft (Part I).....	43
Figure 5. Multimodal Transcript of Christopher’s First Draft (Part II).....	45
Figure 6. Stikbot Excerpt: Christopher’s “Chapter” .....	49
Figure 7. Stikbot Excerpt: Camera Angles.....	51
Figure 8. Stikbot Excerpt: Fourth Wall.....	54
Figure 9. Stikbot Excerpt: <i>Are We There Yet?</i> .....	56
Figure 10. Stikbot Excerpt: <i>Goosebumps</i> and <i>Aladdin</i> .....	57
Figure 11. Stikbot Excerpt: Red Bull and YouTube.....	59
Figure 12. Nicki’s Multimodal Informational Book, p. 1.....	89
Figure 13. Nicki’s Multimodal Informational Book, p. 2.....	90
Figure 14. Gem’s LEGO Construction (Part I) .....	93
Figure 15. Gem’s LEGO Construction (Part II) .....	96
Figure 16. Cassie’s Multimodal Reading Response.....	107
Figure 17. Image from <i>Fear of Foreigners...</i> (Warner, 2016).....	112
Figure 18. Image from Pew Research Center Report (Morin, 2016).....	113
Figure 19. 2013 Post Re-Posted by Cassie’s Facebook Friend in 2016.....	116
Figure 20. Elliot’s Written Persuasive Text.....	116
Figure 21. Screenshot of Facebook Video of Trump Tweet Posted in 2018.....	118

Figure 22. Elliot’s LEGO Construction.....	120
Figure 23. 2016 Election Results for Cassie’s Home County (Politico, 2016) .....	122

## **PROLOGUE**

I arrived in New Orleans just three years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city. In the late summer of 2008, I approached New Orleans from I-55 to I-10. Feelings of excitement flooded in my stomach. Exiting onto Carrollton Ave., an eager smile spread across my face as I looked in awe upon the avenue lined with palm trees. After growing up in rural Montana and completing my undergraduate degree in Milwaukee, I had no idea what to expect of New Orleans. Nor did I ever imagine to find palm trees in what I would call my new home.

Full of enthusiasm for what this new city would hold, I quickly learned that the effects of Katrina loomed long after water had swallowed the city whole. Marked by deep potholes, tall grass, and streets dotted with abandoned homes, I later learned the New Orleans streets I walked down were quite different than what they had been before August 29, 2005. Plagued by governmental shortcomings at the national, state, and local level, the city's infrastructure was still under repair and its people were still in the process of healing in 2008. Individuals and communities fought to maintain their homes, their neighborhoods, and their schools while local governmental organizations attempted to create new economic opportunities that would be attractive to folks not native to the city. It did not take me long to realize that despite whatever structures, systems, or institutions appeared as roadblocks to maintaining their community, New Orleanians could withstand unprecedented gale force winds.

August of 2008, the year of my arrival, marked the start of my first year of teaching elementary children and my first mandatory evacuation. After just two weeks with my second-grade students, I, like the 330,000 other inhabitants of the city, was forced to pack up and leave behind the city I was just coming to know. While I recognized the evacuation for Hurricane Gustav and the subsequent hurricane, Ike, in no way compared to the experience of Katrina,

these storms provided me a tiny glimpse into what my students, their families, and the city had come up against in 2005. Throughout the year, these fall hurricanes opened doors for my questions to be addressed by my newfound friends and colleagues. I sought to understand more fully New Orleanians' cultural, material, and modal ways of knowing. I learned the value of dat, bead, and krewe alongside the intricate detailing and creative imagination necessary to bead a Mardi Gras Indian's suit.

During this first year of teaching—as a white woman teaching a class of children from white, Black, and Latino communities, I began to recognize the varied literacies and languages practiced by the children within my school (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Rickford & Rickford, 2002; Smitherman, 1977) that were rarely accounted for, if at all, by the mandated assessments they completed each Friday. Watching the young children in my class on the playground, I learned new clap-games and jump-rope rhymes that I would later draw on as we discussed patterns in our literacy lessons. It would not be until later that I fully realized the strict limitations of the standardized curriculum of the basal in my hands each day (Dutro, 2009, 2010; McCarthy, 2008; McCarthy, Woodward, & Kang, 2013; Yoon, 2013, 2015).

### **Assessments and Standardization in the Elementary ELA Classroom**

As a teacher, I felt tensions between how I came to know who children are as learners and what I was asked to do based on the mandated curriculum I was required to adhere to. These feelings, as I learned in my doctoral studies, were actually quite common (Dutro, 2010; Yoon, 2015). Still, in many classrooms, and especially in those impacted by educational reforms and policies like my schools in New Orleans, literacy remains a gatekeeping mechanism that pre-determines a student's (and teacher's) success based on a checklist of items. As everyday literacies in schools become more standardized due to educational reforms, many children—

especially children of color from working poor communities—are asked only to perform specific task meant to measure the teaching and learning toward a particular notion of success (e.g., white middle-class understandings of literacies). Often what is assessed are technical skills for literacies such as mechanics and conventions (Hesse, 2014). As an educator and researcher committed to exploring accepted/dominant norms with a critical lens, I find mandated curriculum and standardized assessments problematic. Thus, in my teaching and scholarship, I take up such concerns and I forefront systems of power as well as my own privilege towards cultivating greater educational equity and justice.

### **Embodying Humanizing Literacies**

I approach my work using a critical sociocultural lens. I am cognizant how, as a white, cisgender, monolingual, American-born, straight woman in higher education privileges me in particular ways. Entering Community School J, for example, was but one concrete way in which my physical appearance and affiliation with a university benefitted me. My whiteness mirrored that of the majority of the faculty and staff at the school (and the wider nation). I have little doubt that it served me well in my initial conversations with the principal about my desire to engage in research at the school. It also likely allowed for me to quickly engage with children as I looked like other helpful adults within the school.

There are many privileges that I can openly list, but there are also specific constraints too. Expressing these in words is sometimes more difficult. In part, the challenge resides in not fully knowing all the ways my privilege has benefitted me while directly impacting my perception and experience in the world. Much like my description of the inherent differences of the evacuations in the opening prologue, my lived experience prohibits me from fully understanding the oppression my participants, my colleagues, my friends, or strangers on the street may regularly

encounter. My perspective then differs from how another individual—a person of color, of a different social class, or one who does life from a wheelchair—participates in the world. Throughout this research project, continual critical self-reflection on how my privileged identities informed my noticings remained incredibly important.

Some research tends to voice the experiences and concerns of teachers while the stories of students are often shared less frequently. For this reason, in my own research, a central goal is always to amplify the voices of children I encounter and situate each child “as a maker of knowledge” (Yancey, 2004, p. 315). In this project and all the work I do, I view children as co-constructors of knowledge. I approached my engagements with students with the understanding that we each have a great deal to learn from one another (Paris & Winn, 2014). With this mindset, I approach research always asking, how can we engage children in research as partners? How can we work *with* children rather than conduct research *on* them? In this dissertation, I take up this approach to explore how children use analog and digital tools alongside print-based writing to cultivate a compositional fluency.

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

*“...formal schooling practices often suggest that one cannot know, or it follows, be known, except through the abstractions of certain varieties of written language,”*

– Shipka (2016, p. 250)

In 2018, standards-based curriculum and assessments remain prominent components of the “official” curriculum (Botzakis, Burns, & Hall, 2014). This seems to be especially true in the elementary English language arts classroom, wherein children must move through the ‘process’ of writing within preset genres and writing prompts (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). At the same time, plethora of educational scholarship and much literacies instruction remains focused on the cognitive “stages” of print-based writing development (Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde, 2013; Kim, Puranik, and Al Otaiba, 2015; Moffett, 1968). Similarly, process-oriented writing (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) endures as a popular approach in elementary literacies classrooms. Further, final products—written in English—that can be readily evaluated (Hayes & Olinghouse, 2015) with rubrics or high-stakes assessments that have been proven as ‘reliable and valid’ (Graham, Hebert, & Harris, 2011) also persist in writing classrooms, despite arguments about the limitations and constraints of such measures (Hillocks, 2002). One likely reason for the continued emphasis on developmental measures as children learn to write alphabetic text is likely connected to the establishment of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). But, the CCSS were written without thought about context (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015), or, specifically, the impact of racial and linguistic diversity on teaching, learning, and identity (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009). Thus, calls for researchers and teachers of elementary writing to engage a sociocultural approach (Woodard & Kline, 2016) persist.

## **Pedagogies of Literacies: Writing, Composing, and Compositional Fluency**

Drawing on my experiences as an elementary educator as well as pilot work exploring elementary children writing, I align myself with sociocultural understandings of writing and literacies (Heath, 1983, Street, 1984; 1995). I conceive of literacies more as ideological positions than a static, autonomous set of skills (Street, 1984). I do not understand literacies to be neutral, especially literacies of the “official” curriculum. I hold that the “official” curriculum disguises cultural and ideological assumptions inherent in literacy. Literacy is *of* and *stems from* cultural communities and, therefore, I argue that a multiplicity of literacies, languages, and communicative modes exist (New London Group, 1996).

This interpretive project interrogates a compositional fluency (Shipka, 2016, p. 255)—an expansive skillset of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, material, and modal ways of knowing—as one avenue to foster and sustain children’s cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing. In turn, this study amplifies the voices of children from continually marginalized communities (e.g., children of color, children from working-poor or working-class families, multilingual children, etc.) as they “challenge[d] the privileged position of the printed word” (Lutkewitte, 2013). In this way, this dissertation builds on contemporary scholarship which centers children’s varied and complex communicative practices (Axelrod, 2014; Genishi & Dyson, 2015; Skerrett, 2013; Souto-Manning, Dernikos, & Yu, 2014; Yoon, 2014) as it demonstrates how children flexibly adapted their diverse ways of knowing using a multiplicity of modes for communicating. Often, children and youth are not provided space to engage their home, cultural, or linguistic practices because such communicative practices not often accounted for within research literature or included in mandated curricula (Brownell, 2017; Kirkland, 2013).



Additionally, because this empirical project charted children's processes as they composed multimodally, it aligns with NTCE's 2016 Statement on *Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing*. In this statement, NCTE (2016) encouraged ELA teachers to scaffold students in learning to produce digital and visual texts alongside traditional 'school' writing (e.g., alphabetic or print-based texts). Yet, children in elementary ELA classrooms are oftentimes still expected to use only alphabetic text as the primary mode of communication. As children continue to be assessed in text-centric ways, the complexity of their communicative practices frequently remains overlooked in classrooms informed by mandated curricula and standardized assessments (Dyson, 1997, 2013; McCarthey, Woodard, & Kang, 2013; Yoon, 2013).

In the new millennium, however, the complexities of children and youth's diverse communicative practices continue to gain traction among critical literacies researchers and practitioners, particularly as related to issues of race (Campano, Ghiso, & Sanchez, 2013; Rogers & Mosley, 2006), language (Baker-Bell, 2013; Paris, 2011), class (Jones, 2013; Thiel & Jones, 2017), and gender (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016; Winn, 2010). For example, Dyson (1997; 2013; 2018) has shared stories of early elementary children engaged in a variety of literacy practices while completing assigned writing tasks. Through her descriptions of young, predominantly African American children, Dyson (1997; 2013; 2018) has highlighted how children negotiate constraints of the "official," or standardized, explicit writing curriculum of the classroom while also negotiating a sense of belonging. Her work has demonstrated the interconnectedness of children's social worlds with "the basics" of the explicit curriculum by centering the stories of young children as they *are* rather than only as they *are becoming* (Dyson, 2013).

Others have also illuminated how early elementary children engage in literacies work, sometimes under the teacher's radar. For example, Wohlwend (2013) described how young boys

shifted between playing with paper ‘eels’ under the supervision of their teacher to battling with ‘lightsabers’ when the teacher turned her back. In my own research, I have described how children playfully tailored their writing to make it personally meaningful, even going as far as to borrow a plotline from a commercially produced text (Brownell, 2018). Literacies scholarship at the secondary level has also called attention ways youth’s communicative practices are overlooked or unheard in school. This is particularly true for youth are historically and continually marginalized (Baker-Bell, 2013; Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2013; Moje, 2000; Paris, 2011; Wargo, 2015). Across these explorations, however, researchers have highlighted how children and youth negotiate tensions and curricular constraints while incorporating their multiple cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing into school literacies.

Building on this research, I used a multiple-case study design (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and a critical ethnographic approach (Britzman, 2000) to explore the following research questions:

1. *How do children in an urban elementary school develop, interpret, and enact a compositional fluency (one that recognizes a variety of communicative practices) in the elementary English language arts classroom?*
2. *In what ways does a compositional fluency, used alongside traditional schooled writing (e.g. writing making use of only alphabetic print and text), construct possibilities for children’s multifaceted ways of knowing to be made visible?*
3. *What rhetorical moves do children make when using analog and digital technologies to compose?*

### **Methods & Modes of Inquiry**

This this empirical multiple-case study critically explored how developing a

compositional fluency informed how children came to know, to be, and *to be known* in two urban third-grade ELA classrooms (Shipka, 2016). Specifically, I explored how children used analog and digital technologies in flexible curricular writing spaces and how, in doing so, they represented knowledge and ways of knowing that may have otherwise been overlooked.

### **Site and Participants**

**Riverside School District.** At the time of the study, the Riverside School District (RSD) consisted of five schools serving children from Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade. In the past decade, the RSD had undergone several district reconfigurations, the most recent change was the movement of first grade learners from an early childhood center to two elementary schools. Thus, during the 2016-2017 academic year, one school served as an early childhood learning center for all Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten children within the district. Two elementary schools were home for all elementary-aged children (grades one through four), one of which was the research site. Roughly 400 fifth and sixth graders were housed at one intermediate school while all seventh and eighth grade youth attended Riverside Middle School. Similarly, Riverside High School served all ninth through twelfth grade youth within the district.

Following a public vote in May 2013, all RSD schools began to benefit from an \$18.4 million technology bond to be enacted over 10 years. The larger bond was broken into three phases. The goal of the first phase was to update and improve the technological infrastructure of the district. This included updating all buildings to a wireless network and improving security as well as purchasing the first wave of new computers and devices for children and teachers. At the focal school, for example, Chromebooks were one-to-one for students and teachers. During the second phase, classroom sound systems and other audiovisual equipment were purchased. Document cameras and enhanced PA systems were also purchased during the second phase. All

classrooms at the focal elementary school, Community School J, were equipped with the aforementioned equipment and, additionally, there was a shared iPad cart. The final phase of the bond was meant to provide updates for continued implementation of the initiative and to open doors for new technologies to be purchased as they are developed. Although the bond was intended for purchasing and maintaining technologies within the RSD, individual schools were granted freedom to use the funds to purchase other materials as well. Community School J, for instance, used some of the remaining funds to purchase new furniture for every classroom in the school as well as to update shelving and other materials between 2015 and 2017.

In the 2016-2017 academic year, RSD welcomed 40 new employees. All classroom teachers within the district were represented by the local teachers' union, which had a strong presence in the district. At the start of the school year, a contract had not yet been agreed upon by the RSD and the union. With the tumultuous state of the RSD and union's relationship, the academic calendar was released only a month at a time throughout the course of the study. Because a contract continued to be under negotiation throughout the 2016-2017 academic year, activities within the RSD remained tentative.

As in many public-school districts, the teachers' union and the district administration were at a standstill with negotiations as they begin the fourth year of a salary freeze. A majority of the teachers at the focal school were union members, however, only a handful were actively involved in the union prior to the start of the 2016-2017 academic year. Many teachers attributed their increased interest to the pay freeze that was in its fourth year wherein no teachers, even those that had sought additional certification or education, had received any increases to their salaries. Thus, some teachers had found employment in other school districts while others remained open to such opportunities.

**Community School J.** Situated in the broader community of Riverside, Community School J, a public elementary school located near a large Midwestern university, was the primary site for this project. During the 2016-2017 academic year, Community School J served roughly 340 children in grades one through four. Community School J's racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity mirrored the ever-increasing demographic shifts within the local, national, and global communities (Garcia & Cueller, 2006; Taylor, 2014; Wang, 2013). Racially and ethnically, the school's population was reported to be predominantly white (52%) while the remaining 48% were identified as children of color (36% African American, 9% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Other). These statistics from official school reports, however, do not reflect the nuanced ways in which children self-identified. For example, and as outlined in the three chapters, a number of children identified as 'Mixed' or as a part of the Arabic population.

Likewise, in official reports, the children at Community School J appeared to be mostly monolingual with English as their primary language. Conversely, my observations paired with conversations with children, caretakers, teachers, and the administrators at the school suggest that this was also an inaccurate representation of the school's linguistic ways of knowing. In addition to English, children spoke a plethora of other languages representative of the various racial, ethnic, and religious groups present in the school, including Spanish and Arabic.

As noted in the individual chapters of this dissertation, most children in attendance came from working-poor or working-class families. Thus, nearly three-quarters of the school's children received free and/or reduced lunch and many children were provided backpacks each Friday with food for the weekend. The school included a high number of children impacted by homelessness, according the principal. At his previous school, Principal Stuart had been in charge of seeking out families in need of assistance and he therefore remained committed to supporting

children and caretakers impacted by housing

*Writing and Literacies at Community School J.* Standardized test scores for third graders in the 2015-2016 school year indicated that 66.18% of children were proficient in literacy at Community School J. Comparatively, the other elementary school within the district had 71.26% of third graders score proficient in literacy. A primary school goal for the 2016-2017 academic year was to develop and refine writing practices across grade one through four. The teachers strived for grade level alignment and also sought vertical alignment. The end goal was to create common expectations and a consistency in language across the grade levels to support student learning.

This initiative was guided by the principal as well as three teachers, including one of the focal teachers of this study—Ms. Honey. As a team the three teachers modeled the planning and execution of lessons and provided other supports to their colleagues. Across the grade levels, writing instruction was written to aligned with the CCSS for writing and focused on the three genres highlighted within the CCSS (e.g., narrative, expository, persuasive). Writing was therefore a primary focus of the late-start Wednesday professional developments twice each month. During these meetings, faculty and staff arrived to campus at their regular time, but children will not arrive until two hours later. The two hours provided faculty and staff an opportunity to engage in professional development as a collective and in their grade-level teams. I attended each professional development session and, given my own expertise related to writing, I also helped to facilitate additional grade-level planning meetings at the request of the three teacher-leaders and the principal. These experiences enhanced my understanding of the larger research site and provided insights into how the focal teachers planned and implemented writing lessons.

**Focal classrooms.** Two third-grade public school classrooms served as the primary research site for data generation. The two third grade classrooms under study were those of Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey (for detailed descriptions, see Adult Participants). The third-grade classrooms were located a far distance from the front doors of the school that was built in the mid-1900s. After buzzing the front office for entry through the glass doors of the school, all individuals were required to sign in with the school's secretary. More often than not, individuals were welcomed to the school by a sprinkling of children bounding into the office in pursuit of band-aids or holding a freshly pulled tooth. Once signed in, guests of third-grade needed to wind their way past the learning support rooms, the school social worker, the second-grade bay, and the school's open-concept library in order to arrive at the single door to the third-grade bay.

Each of the four third-grade classrooms opened onto a workspace that served as a shared project area. This was a fluid space where children completed work independently, in small groups, or with support personnel. This area also became the primary place where I met with children individually or in small groups for interviews and to try out new technologies such as the stop-motion tool Stikbots, a focal tool discussed in the first chapter. Additionally, the open workspace was where children's multimodal texts were displayed with their peers and where children in Mr. Holiday's class created such compositions.

Thanks in large part to the district technology bond that took effect in the 2013-2014 academic year, both focal classrooms were equipped with a wireless microphone system, an interactive whiteboard, and one-to-one Chromebooks for both children and teachers. While the technologies present in the focal classrooms were similar, each classroom space was marked by the personality and style of the teacher.

Ms. Honey's classroom, for example, was filled with bright colors and star-themed items

to inspire her “superstars” to greatness in third grade and beyond. With a robust classroom library, Ms. Honey encouraged children in her class to read, but in ways that were comfortable to them. She offered a variety of seating options—from yoga mats and beanbag chairs to stools and “adult” chairs. Across the content areas, Ms. Honey engaged her students using innovative technologies, individual whiteboards, and clipboards.



*Figure 1. Ms. Honey's Classroom Library*



*Figure 2. Sample Seating Options in Ms. Honey's Classroom*

Similarly, Mr. Holiday's classroom space was designed to provide children access to various



resources across the content areas. After receiving a grant in the previous year, Mr. Holiday redesigned several elements of the classroom space to accommodate the multiplicity of resources within the classroom; books, math manipulatives, and craft supplies were all placed within reach of his students. Like Ms. Honey, he also provided a variety of seating to meet the needs of all of children in his classroom.

**Child Participants.** After spending several weeks learning alongside the children in each class, I asked them how they self-identified through a self-portrait in a small-group interview. I also asked them to include various words highlighting what they deemed important identity markers; this included their language practices as well as their hobbies. I had used this process in prior studies to garner more information about how children self-identified as well as information about their interests and found it quite helpful in my thinking. As these artifacts were created, I audio-recorded conversations used these transcripts to supplement child participants' illustrations. The demographic markers were an etic, or researcher-introduced approach, but I also noted emic ways child participants participated in and name their life worlds across the course of the study. In this way, children are centered in the stories included in this dissertation. Thus, in each chapter, I provide an in-depth description of each focal child as they are introduced.

**Adult Participants.** The majority of the school's faculty and staff are predominantly white akin to previous reports about the racial demographics of educational workforces (Cross, 2005; Sleeter, 2001; Snyder, 2014). Over the four years I was involved at the site, there was a good amount of turnover for the teachers. Some left the field entirely, others retired while still others left Community School J for more pay and better benefits in other districts. During the 2016-2017 academic year, Community School J was staffed with a majority of individuals who

were hired under Principal Stuart. For a more detailed list of the demographics of the faculty and staff at Community School J, see the table that follows.

Table 1. Community School J Faculty and Staff Demographics

Position	Number	Race/Ethnicity Breakdowns	Gender Breakdown
1st Grade Faculty	3	3 white	3 Female
2nd Grade Faculty	4	3 white 1 African American	3 Female
3rd Grade Faculty	4	4 white*	2 Female 2 Male
4th Grade Faculty	3	3 white	2 Female 1 Male
Specials (e.g., technology, art, music, physical education, library) Faculty	5	5 white	4 Female 1 Male
Support Staff (e.g., custodial, cafeteria, social worker, academic specialists, administrative)	12	8 white 3 African American 1 Asian American	9 Female 3 Male

\*1 white International

*Focal Teachers.* The homeroom teachers for this study—self-identified as Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey—were also participants. Throughout my three years working with and alongside these teachers at Community School J, they both described a desire to continue to develop their skills as classroom teachers, particularly related to writing. Additionally, I asked Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey to serve as participants in this study because of my history working and learning with them in the two years prior to the study. For instance, the pilot version of this study was completed two years prior and Mr. Holiday was the focal teacher. As an educational colleague,

he always appeared eager to try new processes for facilitating instruction. Similarly, Ms. Honey was the focal teacher in a study I completed the previous year that stemmed a new question raised in the pilot study. She, like Mr. Holiday, always willing engaged in conversations about my noticings in her classroom, including observations related to issues of race, class, and language. Thus, our long-standing history provided us a level of trust and understanding from which to continue to build our working partnership.

As white, cisgender, middle-class individuals, Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey were representative of the majority of the school's faculty and staff, who were predominantly white. With five years of experience teaching fourth grade, the year of the study was Mr. Holiday's first year teaching third grade. Ms. Honey, on the other hand, brought twelve years of experience to the classroom. The 2016-2017 academic year was her fourth year teaching third grade at Community School J. Given their past successes in meeting standardized measures of achievement on measures like NWEA and Aimsweb, their principal granted them greater freedom than many of their peers to deviate from the mandated curriculum as they deemed it necessary.

*Researcher.* I adopted the role of an "attentive adult friend of children" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 52) for this study. To do so, I negotiated this positioning with the focal teachers as well as the administrators, other faculty members, and staff. This was consistent to the role I held in my previous years at the school as I continued to dress more casually than the other adults in the school typically did. For example, I often wore a MSU sweatshirt paired with jeans and seasonal shoes that allowed me to engage at recess in the same way the children did. I sat where the children sat in the classroom, in the cafeteria, and in the library. I entered this project aware that my physical presence (e.g., age, size, and status as an adult) posed specific limits for

my complete involvement in the field, but I attempted to minimize these differences as much as possible.

Like Corsaro (2003), I adopted a “reactive” stance; I participated with children as they engaged me. I did not simply observe the children at Community School J, but I also worked to establish meaningful and reciprocal relationships with children. In other words, I shared my own stories and participated in conversations, composing, or play with children in order to cultivate reciprocity. Throughout the course of this study, I sought to enact practices like these that aligned with descriptions of humanizing researcher (Paris & Winn, 2014).

### **Data Generation**

I generated data in a number of ways. This included: a) weekly field notes from participant observations (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011); b) one-on-one and small group active interviews with children and teachers (Holstein & Gubrium, 2001); and c) in-class artifacts (e.g., child work samples; teacher planning materials, etc.). Data was also generated across two writing units during the 2016-2017 academic year. The first unit was focused on personal narrative and occurred in Mr. Holiday’s class between October and February. This was followed by two weeks of a composing unit in which children used analog and digital tools to retell their story. The second unit, a persuasive writing unit, took place between April and June in Ms. Honey’s room. In the following section, I explicate the data sources.

**Participant Observation.** I participated in classroom routines during the ELA blocks and engaged with children across the unstructured recess and lunch periods in an effort to generate a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). I joined all participants in school assemblies, class parties, and grade-level field trips as applicable. Observations began in the days leading up to the co-planned units and four days per week during each unit. Additionally, I attended bi-monthly

professional development meetings hosted at the school and the weekly grade level planning meetings the focal teachers participated in as often as possible.

*Field notes.* When possible, I created jottings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) in the moment. However, when carrying a notebook would have inhibited my participation in the activities children were engaged in, I preferred to dictate audio notes using my phone when I arrived back to my car. I also used photographs and/or illustrations to capture other observations. Field notes were also supplemented with daily audio recordings so that I did not have to worry about word-for-word transcription in the moment. Rather, field notes were generated to capture time, space, participants, and activities in a descriptive way.

**Audio recordings.** Audio recordings occurred in every visit. Depending on the circumstances of the lesson, audio recordings often were created both for large group settings (e.g., writing mini-lessons) and small groups and/or individual work. I typically used several audio-recorders during a single observation so that I could capture conversations of small groups or pairs during independent work time. In the case I was unable to make an observation, Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey recorded the lesson for me. I transcribed whole-group lessons and small group conversations as necessary prior to and during analysis.

**Video recordings.** I also video-record classroom happenings several times a week. Video recordings served as an important component of data generation insofar as video allowed insights into embodied power relations (Parks & Schmeichel, 2014) and also provided me the chance to follow focal children, even if I was not participating alongside them. As with the audio-recordings, I transcribed key events that seemed particularly relevant at the close of each week. This assisted in the writing of analytic notes and with data management. I increased the number of cameras used during the composing block when children used multiple analog and

digital tools to produce a text. I used a standing camera to generate video recordings during class sessions and during the composing block. Additionally, and as highlighted in Chapter Two, I used alternative recording devices (e.g., Go-Pro) to capture the allowances and constraints of particular materials available to children. Children also had access to digital tablets and handheld cameras during the composing block and, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, these videos were also used in my analysis.

**Child Interviews.** Child interviews (Holstein, & Gubrium, 2002) occurred as needed throughout the year, but all children were interviewed to discuss 1) their response to “Why I Write,” 2) how they self-identified, and 3) their final multimodal composition. All interviews were video- and audio-recorded.

*Individual Interviews.* Artifactual interviews were facilitated using an adapted version of the *process* interview used by Graves, Calkins, and Sowers. An active interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 2001) format, used in the latter part of the interviews, included questions like, *Where did you get the idea for this piece? What do you plan to do for your next piece?* As illuminated in across each chapter, I also adapted the work of Prior (2004) and Hsueh, & Karasawa (2009) to illuminate children’s decision-making process as they composed and once they had completed a final product.

**Teacher Interviews.** Preliminary interviews with the teachers occurred in early fall with follow-up interviews, including teacher-researcher debriefs, occurring throughout the academic year as necessary. All interviews were video- and audio-recorded. Following each interview, I used key point transcription to denote important conversations.

**In-Class Artifacts.**

*Writing samples.* I collected copies of written artifacts—drafts and otherwise—or

scanned written texts throughout the academic year. After I digitally scanned in artifacts, I stored them on my computer and an external hard drive. All artifacts were date-stamped. Example of writing samples I collected included the following: a) journal writings, b) draft materials, and c) revised and/or published writing samples.

*Multimodal artifacts.* In developing a composition fluency, children were asked to generate and participate in a composing block as described in Chapters Two and Three. During the composing block, children had access to digital tools such as tablets, video cameras, digital still cameras, audio recorders, and their Chromebooks. In addition to these digital tools, other technologies—from markers and staplers to fabric and drills—were also provided to children.

*Lesson plans.* All lesson plans from the two focal writing units were also collected. The personal narrative unit was planned with the whole of the third-grade team and all four teachers implemented it. Meanwhile, the persuasive unit was planned by Ms. Honey and myself; Ms. Honey's class was the only one to complete this unit. In addition to the focal lesson plans, I collected original or copies of the curriculum guide used by the teachers as well as materials from professional development sessions they attended. Newsletters, correspondence from the teachers or administration, and school flyers were also collected. Each of these items helped to contextualize the study and my understanding of the classroom and school. I also photographed bulletin boards and other signs or symbols as they related to the study.

## **Analysis**

As outlined in each of the three chapters, data analysis varied greatly. The individual chapters highlight specific theories, techniques, and modes of analysis that I used as I deemed necessary. Thus, in this introduction, I provide only an overview of analytic tools I used while

engaged in the field and refer readers to the specific chapters for additional details about my analytic processes.

*“Key point” transcription and analytic memos.* I transcribed “key points” of the audio- and video-recorded data (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Like Ochs (1979), I recognize that even in selecting what to record and to transcribe, I was engaged in the process of analysis. I drew on Ochs (1979) to forefront the verbal language and non-verbal actions of children in my transcripts derived from the audio and video recordings. I paired these transcriptions with appropriate field notes and classroom artifacts (e.g., writing samples, multimodal artifact). Combining these elements together, provided opportunities for data crystallization (Richarson, 2000).

*Coding.* After completing my time in the field for each unit, I read through the corpus of the field notes and/or analytic memos that I generated during the time period. I started with initial or open codes to see what themes emerged and then engaged in more focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) that was descriptive of the communicative practices and rhetorical strategies children used.

### **Chapter-by-Chapter Overview**

In Chapter 2, I build on early childhood and elementary literacies scholarship that has long-attended to how children incorporate elements of popular culture into their schooled writing. Specifically, in Chapter 2, I extend the work of Dyson (1997; 2013) and others to cultivate a fuller narrative of children’s intertextual practices using a variety of communicative tools. I outline how one third-grade child, Christopher, weaved together stories from diverse media to adapt his written personal narrative into a multimodal, stop-motion animation video. Through closely tracing his process, I illustrate the sophisticated strategy the child employed to curate an intertextual final product. Because the field is only just beginning to explore how



children use digital tools to do write, findings also expand understandings about what counts as literacies as I discuss the complexity of the child's composing processes as he intentionally worked across several digital tools.

Drawing on data generated with Ms. Honey and her students, Chapter 3 interrogates how developing a compositional fluency alongside an understanding of what it means to be civically engaged, might foster and sustain children's identities. Through stories of two multilingual and multiethnic third-grade girls composing persuasive texts for their legislators, this study illuminates how using a variety of digital and analog tools can construct possibilities for children to engage in critical literacies and civic action. The findings from this study highlight the rhetorical moves children made as they engaged in critical conversations about refugees and (im)migrants. In turn, the findings in Chapter 3 demonstrate the ways in which children *can* critically engage with political issues locally and globally.

Unlike Chapters 2 and 3 which are written as traditional research papers, in Chapter 4 I take a less conventional approach. In this Chapter, I interrogate the reflexive nature of research and the tensions within scholarship that explores critical issue. This section of the dissertation takes a step away from writing empirical findings; instead, the findings are infused with my lived and current hi/story.

Across my three-year partnership with the teachers, I have developed more questions about how more monomodal practices might overlook the richness within student communication as I outline in the conclusion. In an era of increased accountability, I remain interested in how prescribed assessments inform how children participate in literacies. As I have described elsewhere (Brownell, 2017), the standardized curriculum on which literacies are measured often feel far removed from the needs and interests of children and teachers on the

ground everyday. Through this dissertation, then, I highlight how developing a compositional fluency both reinforces and reproduces injustice *while also* disrupting inequitable hierarchies of power and troubling what ‘counts’ as literacies or valued ways of knowing and communicating.

While assertions (Erikson, 1986) from case studies like those found in the three chapters are not generalizable to other populations, they can provide insights into larger issues shared in many particular local situations and contexts. In the same way, the focal children in each chapter are representative of the racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the larger school community and of the U.S. more broadly. As you read, you will also note how the personal backgrounds and multiple communicative resources of the children informed my project. Across each of the three chapters, this takes a different form. For example, Christopher, the focal child in Chapter Two is an example of a Black child that is both successful with traditional writing as well as digital composing. Likewise, in Chapter Three, two girls, Gem—a recent refugee of Southeast Asian descent, and Nicki—a Mexican American child, illuminate how children employed sophisticated rhetorical strategies in their written and multimodal texts. Finally, I use the story of Elliot—a white boy, to outline how my personal background was also always getting in and out of the way. Together, the stories of these children, their teachers, and their peers helped me to better understand how children drew on their multiple ways of knowing at school.

## REFERENCES

## REFERENCES

- Axelrod, Y. (2014). "¿Tu te acuerdas de ganchulinas?": Longitudinal research with young emergent bilinguals. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 15(2), 94-108.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2013). "I never really knew the history behind African American Language": Critical language pedagogy in an Advanced Placement English language arts class. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 46(3), 355-370.
- Bloome, D. (Ed.). (2008). *On discourse analysis in classrooms: Approaches to language and literacy research* (Vol. 6). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Botzakis, S., Burns, L. D., & Hall, L. A. (2014). Literacy reform and Common Core State Standards: Recycling the autonomous model. *Language Arts*, 91(4), 223.
- Britzman, D. (2000). "The question of belief: Writing poststructural ethnography" In E. A. St. Pierre and W. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 27-40). New York: Routledge.
- Buchholz, B. (2016). Dangling literate identities in imagined futures: Literacy, time, and development in a K-6 classroom. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 65(1), 124-140.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5), 585-614.
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (2001). *Discourse theory and practice: A reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Cabell, S. Q., Tortorelli, L. S., & Gerde, H. K. (2013). How do I write...? Scaffolding preschoolers' early writing skills. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(8), 650-659.
- Campano, G., Ghiso, M. P., & Sánchez, L. (2013). "Nobody knows the...amount of a person": Elementary students critiquing dehumanization through organic critical literacies. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(1), 98-124.
- Calkins, L. M. (1986). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2003). *We're friends, right: Inside kids' culture*. Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press.
- Dutro, E. (2009). Children writing "hard times": Lived experiences of poverty and the class-privileged assumptions of a mandated curriculum. *Language Arts*, 87(2), 89-98.
- Dutro, E. (2010). What 'hard times' means: Mandated curricula, class-privileged assumptions,

- and the lives of poor children. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 44(3), 255-291.
- Dutro, E., Selland, M. K., & Bien, A. C. (2013). Revealing writing, concealing writers: High-stakes assessment in an urban elementary classroom. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 45(2), 99-141.
- Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2013). *Rewriting the basics: Literacy learning in children's cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. & Genishi, C. (2005) *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press and the National Council for Research on Language and Literacy.
- Dyson, A. H., & Smitherman, G. (2009). The right (write) start: African American language and the discourse of sounding right. *Teachers College Record*, 111(4), 973-998.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I. & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Garcia, E. E., & Cuéllar, D. (2006). Who are these linguistically and culturally diverse students? *Teachers College Record*, 108(11), 2220-2246.
- Gee, J. P. (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(1), 15-39.
- Genishi, C., & Dyson, A. H. (2015). *Children, language, and literacy: Diverse learners in diverse times*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Goodwin, M. H. (1990). *He-said-she-said: Talk as social organization among black children* (Vol. 618). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2015). *Common Core State Standards and writing*. *The Elementary School Journal*, 115(4), 457-463.
- Graham, S., Harris, K. R., & Hebert, M. (2011). It is more than just the message: Presentation effects in scoring writing. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 44(4), 1-12.
- Graham, S., & Sandmel, K. (2011). The process writing approach: A meta-analysis. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 104(6), 396-407.
- Hayes, J. R., & Olinghouse, N. G. (2015). Can cognitive writing models inform the design of the Common Core State Standards?. *The Elementary School Journal*, 115(4), 480-497.
- He, Y., Vetter, A., & Fairbanks, C. (2014). Reframing literacy practices for culturally and

- linguistically diverse students in US schools. *English Education*, 46(4), 327.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hillocks, G. (2002). *The testing trap: How state writing assessments control learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hesse, D. (2014, October). *What if the Common Core actually works? For college writing, partly cloudy with a chance for rain*. Paper presented at the Maryland Conference on Academic and Professional Writing, College Park, MD.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (2001). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holstein, J., & Gubrium, J. (2002). Active interviewing. In D. Weinberg (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods* (pp. 113-126). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Horner, B., Lockridge, T., & Selfe, C. (forthcoming). Translinguality, Transmodality, and Difference: Exploring Dispositions and Change in Language and Learning. Digital Monograph. Enculturation Intermezzo.
- Hull, G. A., Stornaiuolo, A., & Sahni, U. (2010). Cultural citizenship and cosmopolitan practice: Global youth communicate online. *English Education*, 42(4), 331-367.
- Jones, S. (2013). Critical literacies in the making: Social class and identities in the early reading classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 13(2), 197-224.
- Kim, Y. S., Puranik, C., & Otaiba, S. A. (2015). Developmental trajectories of writing skills in first grade: Examining the effects of SES and language and/or speech impairments. *The Elementary School Journal*, 115(4), 593-613.
- Kinloch, V. (2010). *Harlem on our minds: Place, race, and the literacies of urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2013). *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lutkewitte, C. (2013). *Multimodal composition: A critical sourcebook*. New York: Bedford-St. Martin's.
- McCarthy, S. J. (2008). The impact of No Child Left Behind on teachers' writing instruction. *Written Communication*, 25(4), 462-505.
- McCarthy, S. J., Woodard, R., & Kang, G. (2013). Elementary teachers negotiating discourses in writing instruction. *Written Communication*, 31(1), 58-90.

- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Moffett, J. (1968). *A student-centered language arts curriculum, grades K-13: A handbook for teachers*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Moje, E. B. (2000). "To be part of the story": The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 102(3), 651-690.
- National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]. (2016). Professional knowledge for the teaching of writing. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teaching-writing>
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Washington, DC.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60(1), 60-92.
- Paris, D. (2011). *Language across difference: Ethnicity, communication, and youth identities in changing urban schools*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy?: A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100.
- Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (2014). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Parks, A. N., & Schmeichel, M. (2014). Children, mathematics, and videotape using multimodal analysis to bring bodies into early childhood assessment interviews. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(3), 505-537.
- Rickford, J. R., & Rickford, R. J. (2002). *Spoken soul: The story of black English*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rish, R. M. (2011). *Engaging adolescents' interests, literacy practices, and identities: Digital collaborative writing of fantasy fiction in a high school English elective class* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest. (Ohio State University).
- Rogers, R., & Mosley, M. (2006). Racial literacy in a second-grade classroom: Critical race theory, whiteness studies, and literacy research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(4), 462-

- Sarroub, L. K., & Pernicek, T. (2016). Boys, books, and boredom: A case of three high school boys and their encounters with literacy. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 32(1), 27-55.
- Scollon, R. (2001). *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice*. London: Routledge.
- Shipka, J. (2016). Transmodality in/and processes of making: Changing dispositions and practice. *College English*, 78(3), 250-257.
- Skerrett, A. (2013). Building multiliterate and multilingual writing practices and identities. *English Education*, 45(4), 322-360.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America* (Vol. 51). Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice* (Vol. 9). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Souto-Manning, M., Dernikos, B., & Yu, H. M. (2014). Rethinking normative literacy practices, behaviors, and interactions: Learning from young immigrant boys. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 14(2), 163-180.
- Taylor, Paul. "The Next America." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 10, 2014). <http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/>
- Thiel, J. J., & Jones, S. (2017). The literacies of things: Reconfiguring the material-discursive production of race and class in an informal learning centre. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 17(3), 315-335.
- Wang, H. L. (2013, June 13) Census shows continued change in America's racial makeup. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/06/13/191266414/census-shows-continued-change-in-americas-racial-maketip>
- Wargo, J. M. (2015). "Every selfie tells a story...": LGBTQ youth lifestreams and new media narratives as connective identity texts. *New Media & Society*, 19(4), 560-578.
- Winn, M. T. (2010). 'Betwixt and between': Literacy, liminality, and the celling of Black girls. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(4), 425-447.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Dilemmas and discourses of learning to write: Assessment as a contested site. *Language Arts*, 86(5), 341-351.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.



- Wohlwend, K. E. (2013). Playing Star Wars under the (teacher's) radar: Detecting kindergartners' action texts and embodied literacies. In V. M. Vasquez & J. W. Wood (Eds.), *Perspectives and provocations in early childhood education* [National Council of Teacher of English Early Childhood Assembly Yearbook] (pp. 105-115). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Woodard, R., & Kline, S. (2016). Lessons from sociocultural writing research for implementing the Common Core State Standards. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(2), 207-216.
- Yancey, K. B. (2004). Made not only in words: Composition in a new key. *College Composition and Communication*, 56(2), 297-328.
- Yoon, H. (2013). Rewriting the curricular script: Teachers and children translating writing practices in a kindergarten classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(2), 148-174.
- Yoon, H. S. (2014). Can I play with you?: The intersection of play and writing in a kindergarten classroom. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 15(2), 109-121.

## CHAPTER 2: Tracing Children's Intertextual Connections in Multimodal Composing

*The word in language is half someone else's.*

*~Bakhtin (1984, p. 293)*

### Introduction

“But, also, can I also tell you something?” Christopher<sup>1</sup>—a self-identified Black boy attending an urban public elementary school in the Midwestern United States—asked me as we reviewed his final stop-motion animation composition.

“Yeah, for sure. You can tell me anything,” I replied with a smile.

“What I tried to do with this story, I tried to mix it up with a bunch of movies I've seen before,” Christopher stated before elaborating on this point. “Because this was supposed to be like a little mini-movie of what happened on my trip to Tennessee.”

At 9-years-old, third-grade student Christopher had intentionality woven together a multiplicity of stories and techniques from other sources to create an intertextual final product. Yet, when children's work is evaluated, adults often overlook and/or discount intertextual strategies like those Christopher used because these sophisticated storytelling skills are hardly, if at all, measured by standardized curricula in literacies classrooms (Dutro, 2010; Yoon, 2015). Still, my conversation with Christopher confirmed my understanding that children's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) are not confined to the walls of the classroom, and his composing demonstrated how children draw on experiences from across their lives to create new, personally meaningful communications. As he explained during our encounter, Christopher intentionally borrowed content and strategies from other media to produce his stop-motion animation using the tool of Stikbots.

---

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms self-selected by participants.

Although early childhood and elementary literacies scholarship has long-attended to children's composing processes and how they incorporate elements of popular culture into their schooled writing, the field is only just beginning to explore how children use digital tools to do so. In this paper, I argue that digital technologies are one avenue for sustaining children's diverse communicative practices (Paris & Alim, 2014). In doing so, I challenge perceptions about children's abilities by detailing how Christopher combined content and techniques from diverse media, and I call for adults to recognize children's sophisticated and strategic approaches to storytelling. Simultaneously, through the story of Christopher, I specifically call for a reimagining of Black boyhood that more fully accounts for the brilliance of Black boys (Wright & Counsell, 2018) and I suggest that a pedagogy of compositional fluency (Shipka, 2016, p. 255)—an expansive skillset of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, material, and modal ways of knowing— “creates spaces for Black boys to construct and experience robust childhoods” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 27).

Through a close tracing of Christopher's composing process as he developed a stop-motion animation video, I highlight the intertextual connections (Bazerman, 2004; Brownell, 2018; Fairclough, 1992) children make using multiple modes of communication and the affordances of multimodal tools (Ranker, 2007; Shanahan, 2013). Given the increasing presence of digital technologies within schools and society (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010), examining digital multimodal tools is especially important because the texts children consume in 2018—and those they produce—are not only based in alphabetic print (Mills & Exley, 2014; NCTE, 2016). Therefore, I trace how Christopher made intertextual connections to content from a vast array of media while also outlining specific storytelling techniques he incorporated into his stop-motion movie. I also illuminate particular instances of

how and when Christopher infused elements of Black culture into his Stikbot animation.

## **Research Questions**

Educational scholarship has long reported on the complex ways young children connect their composing to other texts and media including superheroes (Dyson, 2003), Disney princesses (Wohlwend, 2009) and Star Wars (Wohlwend, 2013; Yoon, 2016). This critical qualitative study (Britzman, 2000) builds on these bodies of scholarship that have considered the intertextual properties of early writers' print-based texts (Dyson, 1997; Kamberelis & de la Luna, 2004; Newkirk, 2002; Ranker, 2007) to explore intertextual tracings (Prior, 2004; Wynhoff Olsen, VanDerHeide, Goff, & Dunn, 2018) in Christopher's multimodal composition. Building on the aforementioned literature, and with the understanding that "writing is now no longer the central mode of representation in learning materials" (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 166), this inquiry was guided by the following questions: 1) *How and in what ways did a Black boy in an urban school use analog and digital technologies to compose in personally meaningful ways?* 2) *How, if at all, did composing with multiple communicative practices make visible a child's intertextual connections to media, culture, texts, and experiences?* 3) *What techniques did a child use to make intertextual tracings across compositions?*

In what follows, I first detail my guiding theoretical frameworks. Next, I outline the study design and analysis, including a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the context for Christopher's composing. I then present the three findings related to the research questions. In closing, I describe how the story of Christopher might trouble what is considered writing for young children by literacies researchers and practitioners. I then emphasize how digital tools and tracing children as they develop a compositional fluency might be useful avenues for explicating their composing processes and the intertextual connections they make to other media, culture,

texts, and experiences. This manuscript is also written with an asset-based understanding about Black boys and, as such, it is situated to contribute to a growing body of scholarship which challenges dominant perspectives on perceptions of Black boyhoods (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Wright & Counsell, 2018).

### **Framing**

I take a sociocultural approach to my understandings of literacies as shaped by an assemblage of social, cultural, material, historical, and individual factors (Prior, 2006). With the perspective that literacies are situated (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), I conceptualize them as a series of ideologies rather than a set of autonomous skills (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Literacies, therefore, include not only final products, but also the diverse cultural tools individuals used to mediate personal goals and possibilities (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Wertsch, 1991).

The call to redefine what ‘counts’ as literacies is not new in either K-12 scholarship (Collins & Blot, 2003; New London Group, 1996) or post-secondary composition classrooms (Palmeri, 2012; Selfe, 2009). Yet, few English language arts classrooms account fully for children or youth’s diverse communicative practices in either their daily assignments or assessments (Baker-Bell, Paris, & Jackson, 2017; Genishi & Dyson, 2015; Kirkland, 2013; Moje, 2000; Wargo, 2015). I join Mills (2012) in challenging educational researchers and practitioners to reimagine the ways in which we evaluate young children’s writing. How might alternative assessments make visible the sophisticated, intertextual strategies children employ throughout the process of composing? I also emphasize how, even for Christopher—a child viewed as a strong writer in his classroom and the wider school, having a multiplicity of communicative tools available more fully accounted for the intertextual connections he strategically made (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010).

Bazerman (2004) defines intertextuality as “the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary, and potential future texts” (p. 86). Building on his definition, I engaged intertextuality as a lens in this inquiry to consider how Christopher re-used previous texts in new communicative texts towards a new goal. In doing so, I qualify intertextual connections as instances wherein content from one text was explicitly present or named in Christopher’s final text. Additionally, I refer to the borrowing of techniques or style from another text as intertextual tracings (Prior, 2004; Wynhoff Olsen, VanDerHeide, Goff, & Dunn, 2018).

While much scholarship considers intertextuality in/of written texts or oral communication (Bazerman & Prior, 2004), I align myself with others (Lensmire, 1994; Shipka, 2011; Stornaiuolo & Hall, 2014; Syverson, 1999; Wertsch, 1991) to consider how intertextual connections are always already present in compositions as writers reach forward and back across time to connect people and places. I emphasize this point through showcasing the complex intertextual chains of Christopher’s final composition as he moved public language to the private domain (Fairclough, 1992) as demonstrated in the findings section.

## **Black Boyhood**

The schooling experience of successful young Black boys has not been adequately documented (Cabrera, 2013; Howard, 2013) and it is “as if what we know about older boys and young men is sufficient or even appropriate to use as a guide in designing interventions for young children” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 30). Dumas & Nelson (2016) suggest that this lack of research is “merely a symptom of the broader *unimaginability* of Black boyhood,” (p. 31). In response to this call and through a close examination of Christopher, I explore how his creativity and joy might disrupt “a world in which Black boys cannot *be*” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 28). In turn, this manuscript is written to contribute new understandings about and imaginings of

Black boyhood in a humanizing way by telling the story of one Black boy in the present rather than in relation to what his academic or economic standing may be later. This is an intentional decision on my part insofar as I, like others wish to push back on deficit-oriented discourses (Ferguson, 2000; Harper, 2010) in order to reimagine schools as “sites of discovery and joy for Black boys” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 39) while also listening to children, continually seeking to amplify their voices and experiences and emphasize their capabilities as the people they are in the present (Wright & Counsell, 2018).

## **Methods**

### **Study Context**

This study<sup>2</sup> took place in an urban public elementary school (grades 1-4) in the Midwestern United States. With roughly 340 early learners, Community School J (CSJ) was one of three elementary schools and one that I had been actively involved with for three years at the time of the study. As a resource-limited school, nearly three-quarters of the children received free and/or reduced lunch. Families and teachers used personal funds to supplement classroom materials.

A teacher for six years (four at CSJ), Mr. Holiday—a 31-year-old man that self-identified as cisgender, white, and gay—was viewed by his peers as an energetic, caring, and thoughtful teacher. In the wider school district, Mr. Holiday had a reputation for creating engaging lessons that used of a variety of technologies. During his short tenure in the district, Mr. Holiday had often had colleagues from both CSJ and other schools visit to observe his teaching.

CSJ’s racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic demographics were representative of national trends (Taylor, 2014). The children in Mr. Holiday’s class were representative of the broader

---

<sup>2</sup> This study was completed with approval from the institution’s human subjects review board.

population of CSJ. A total of 22 children (10 girls and 12 boys) were enrolled in Mr. Holiday's class. The children racially self-identified in the following ways: 8 white, 7 Brown/Black, 2 African American, 1 Puerto Rican, 2 Mexican, and 2 Asian.

### **About the Focal Child: Christopher**

This paper is focused Christopher, a child I described in the introduction, as I traced his use of digital composing technologies and the ways he made intertextual connections to other media, culture, texts, and experiences. I was intentional in my decision to center Christopher for two reasons. First, Christopher held status in CSJ as a recognized author of print-based and I had previously seen him compose using other modalities. My choice to focus on Christopher was also informed by my desire to disrupt commonly held stereotypes about who Black boys are, what they are capable of, and who they are to become (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Wright & Counsell, 2018).

Christopher often carried his writing with him to recess and on the bus. On the playground, he sometimes could be found with a clipboard on his lap, crafting an alternative ending to a class read aloud. Christopher also told me that he wrote story adaptations based on the book series—*Diary of a Minecraft Creeper: An Unofficial Minecraft Book* (Books Kid, 2016)—with his best friend, George, a white boy in another third-grade class. His stories rotated through the library's "Community School J Authors" display. Because he was given constant attention for his skills as a writer, Christopher was quite confident in his abilities, telling me during a small group interview in the latter part of the year, "My special skill is making a story [...] And did you know I probably will become an author when I grow up? I'm actually more of thinking of becoming a writer, because my stories are like, *epic*." Although Christopher enjoyed composing, he also enjoyed spending time with his family, especially his older brother Corbin (a



former student of Mr. Holiday's) and his younger brother Connor (another student at CSJ). The three brothers not only played video games together, they also were avid movie watchers and Christopher frequently would relay for me stories of their weekend adventures.

### **Instructional Context**

CSJ educators were encouraged to teach writing daily. However, because writing occurred in the latter part of the day, lessons were sometimes abbreviated or even skipped. Other times, weather-related school closures such as snow days or early dismissals also disrupted the consecutive flow of day-to-day writing. I observed a total of 72 days, but to nuance and constrain the findings of this paper, I focus on a series of days over two weeks when children engaged with developing a compositional fluency and used digital and analog tools to re-tell print-based narratives.

Because this was Mr. Holiday's first year teaching third grade at CSJ (he had taught fourth grade previously), he relied heavily on the unit plans created with his grade-level team. The writing lessons he implemented followed a similar structure each day. For example, he opened the lesson with a daily objective and then shared a mentor text exemplar aligned to the objective. After reading this text, he encouraged children to share their ideas. Next, children were provided the opportunity to collaboratively engage with the focal practice/skill/strategy before engaging in independent practice. Finally, children were provided space to share their compositions either as a whole class, in small groups, or in pairs.

Mr. Holiday asked children to write about a "true" experience. He shared numerous ways children might use compelling leads and employed a variety of pedagogical tools to guide children, including graphic organizers. Children first produced a narrative using alphabetic text. A word web (Figure 3) scaffolded learners as they captured salient ideas before composing a

draft narrative on lined paper. Children wrote a narrative about a trip; some wrote about travels across the country while others told about trips made within their community.

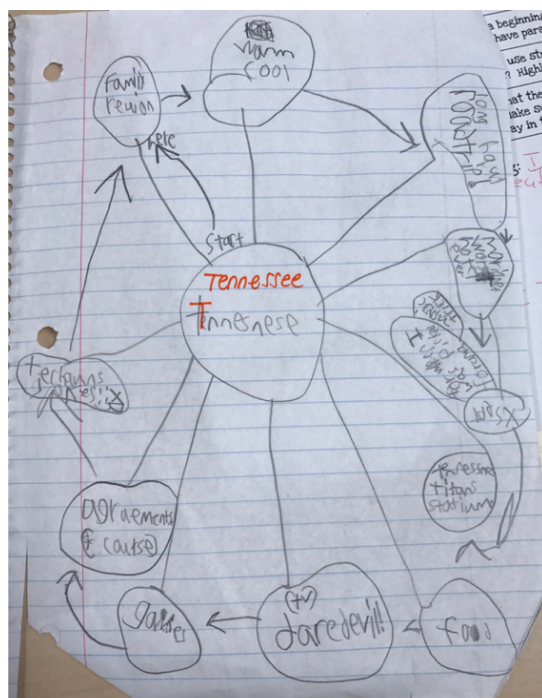


Figure 3. Christopher's Word Web

After the children completed a print-based draft (a requirement of the school administration), Mr. Holiday and I collaboratively introduced them to the prompt of re-telling their narrative in what we referred to as the composing block. Prior to this, children had been aware that I was interested in composing and that I frequented their classroom to learn about their processes. But, it was not until we concluded the written artifact that used alphabetic text that I shared my explicit interest in understanding how children could use other communicative practices to tell their stories.

Making use of the shared workspace around which the four third grade classrooms were situated, we splayed a variety of analog and digital tools. On one end of the room, three large kidney-shaped tables held numerous craft items including pipe cleaners, ribbon and string, glue sticks, and multiple kinds of tape. Also on this table were recyclable materials like empty yogurt

or berry containers and magazines. On the other side of the room, two large tubs of LEGOs were available along with several stop-motion animation kits (i.e., plastic bags with 3-5 Stikbot characters, a tripod, and a smartphone). Tables and digital cameras lined one wall while a hot glue gun and drill sat on the opposite wall.

Children were free to use any tools they liked and could also request materials if none fit their needs. Additionally, they could work in the project area or they could choose to work in Mr. Holiday's classroom. Most children opted to remain in the shared workspace. While many children worked alongside their peers and sometimes offered a helping hand, Christopher eventually carved out a part of the room for himself in which to compose his final text.

### **Data Generation and Analysis**

In addition to teacher- and child-created written and multimodal artifacts, data was also generated in a number of other ways. This included participant observation accompanied by weekly field notes as well as video- and/or audio-recorded class meetings and individual interviews with both the children and their teacher. Formal interviews were a regular part of data generation and I also had many informal conversations with Mr. Holiday and the children. The larger data corpus includes the written and multimodal artifacts of all children, but, for this paper, I focus on texts Christopher produced.

During the composing block, two stationary cameras were positioned on opposite ends of the room. Additionally, audio-recorders were placed on communal workspaces in the room such as the table with all the craft materials. Children were also provided the opportunity to wear a GoPro as they composed. Christopher selected to wear one on his chest and, as I later found out, he narrated much of his thinking and his composing process.

I also video-recorded conversations with Christopher that explored his final product and

process. Adapting the retrospective analyses described by Dalton et al. (2015), Prior (2004), and Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa (2009), I asked Christopher to think aloud for me the storyline/narrative of his final product (because the original Stikbot film did not include sound) and his process in creating the final product. This was done in two ways.

First, I used the internal camera on a laptop to capture our faces as we watched his final film. Additionally, I used a second stationary camera to capture Christopher's body as he pointed at the screen. Each device also recorded our voices. During this interview, Christopher made mention of several media sources that he drew upon in retelling his story. Thus, shortly after this interview, I presented Christopher with full-color, still images from his video (screenshots I captured every .05 seconds) which I adapted from Norris (2004). In this second interview, Christopher described what was happening in each frame and, if applicable, why he included the idea and where it came from. Due to the length of time required to complete this task, Christopher and I met twice to do this. By conducting a scene-by-scene analysis and annotation of the video with Christopher, the complex, intertextual connections and tracings he made were clearly evident. Each meeting was recorded and I later scanned and uploaded the still images with his annotations for later review. In this way, data generation and analysis were iterative, multilayered processes that mirrored previous work of intertextual scholarship (Wynhoff Olsen, VanDerHeide, Goff, & Dunn, 2018).

Because I engaged Christopher in a retrospective discussion of his work, I could readily identify what he borrowed from other sources tailored the assigned composing for his own purpose and interests. This included specific instances wherein he used intertextuality to create texts infused with his own cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing as a Black boy. I also noted when other children used the Stikbot tool as well as the ways in which Christopher

engaged with other writers in his class. Doing so provided me an enriched understanding of Christopher's composing process and nuanced the codes I used in my analysis.

## **Findings**

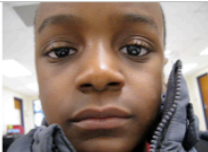
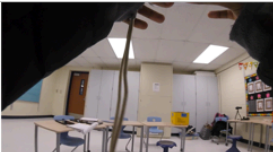


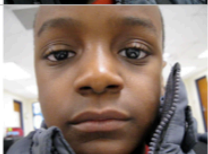


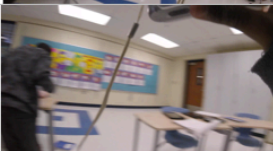
As previously stated, I was guided by the three research questions. In what follows, I showcase Christopher's process of moving from the assigned personal narrative he wrote with alphabetic text through his selection and use of the stop-motion animation tool, Stikbots. In doing so, I introduce and explain the cinematographic tools he appeared to like best and used most often. Next, I demonstrate how, by watching the final animated video with Christopher, his connections to media, culture, texts, and experiences became more apparent in a way that was not necessarily as evident as in his written text. In turn, I zoom in on specific instances wherein he engaged cinematographic tools in his multimodal composition and infused elements of Black media and culture. The third findings section focuses specifically on the post-production conversations I had with Christopher about his process and the multitude of ways he strategically implemented intertextuality into his Stikbot composition.

### **Findings 1: From Alpha Text to Animation**

Because of Christopher's success as an author using traditional forms of alphabetic text and print, he was one of the first children dismissed by Mr. Holiday into the shared grade-level workspace. Thus, as an early participant, I asked Christopher if he would be willing to wear a GoPro to help me with what he termed as my "kid experiment." With his usual excitement, Christopher happily agreed to wear a Go-Pro on a chest harness. I anticipated the GoPro would be a useful tool in my analysis to explore the constraints and benefits of various tools for children's composing. I did not expect that this tool would allow Christopher to unintentionally create a meta-level commentary as he moved about the room thinking aloud his noticings and

process. In what follows, I outline Christopher’s movements about the room and specific encounters that likely informed his final stop-motion composition.

The first scene captured on Christopher’s GoPro was the face of his peer, Andy, holding a digital camera. Just a few seconds in to the GoPro video, Christopher asked aloud about the handheld camera, “Now, how does this thing work?” to which Andy responded, “It’s like a little video camera.” When Christopher turns his own handheld camera on, he exclaimed, “WHOA! That was weird!” before walking around with the digital camera facing outward. Twenty seconds later, Christopher turned the camera to talk to his audience as demonstrated in Figure 4.

View 1, Camera 1: Christopher's Handheld Digital Camera	View 2, Camera 2: Christopher's GoPro on Chest Harness	Transcript of Christopher's Talk
		Hello, you are on the set of one,
		a sneak peek of one of a kind...One of um,
		I'm going to see what you guys are working on, I'm gonna turn it into a movie!
		This is a pre-sequel set.

*Figure 4. Multimodal Transcript of Christopher’s First Draft (Part I)*

The resulting product mirrors instances of composing seen in the wider digital culture. Arguably, Christopher created a selfie video much like those seen on social media apps like SnapChat or Instagram. Moreover, his oral storytelling resembled the sort of talk relayed by individuals making using of Facebook Live or even some YouTubers.

Christopher's early work with the camera was the first instance of his composing and demonstrates the necessity of getting to know the basics of using a new technology. Despite having not used a camera like this before, the GoPro video showed that Christopher quickly noticed the dial on the top of the handheld camera and turned it on video following Andy's prompting.

This recording also provided a glimpse into the text that Christopher eventually produced. In his role as narrator for the video on the digital camera, Christopher made clear to his audience this was a multi-stage process by suggesting:

So, this is like a pre-sequel. [...] And I am showing the pre-sequel to the whoooooole entire thing [*spinning in a circle to show of the workspace*] of the book I'm going to make, or a movie. Yeah, a movie. I'm going to make a movie.




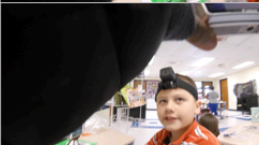



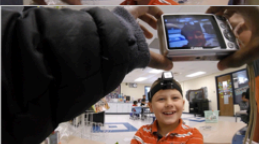


In describing the video recording as a "pre-sequel," Christopher drew on his knowledge of movies such as *Star Wars*, a film series he talked about frequently. Simultaneously, Christopher created space for the video he produced to be used later while also giving a nod to his understanding that this film preceded his other composing work.

Throughout his "pre-sequel" video, Christopher made clear he was doing a lot of "deciding" (his words, not my own) about how he to make the film entertaining. After thinking aloud ideas related the environment of the workspace, Christopher reconnected his "pre-sequel" video to his alphabetic text, telling his audience:

In the movie we're going to like make, like, it's going to take place outside and it's called the Tennessee Road Trip. It's going to have like funny quotes, it's gonna have some breaking the fourth wall [*giggle*]. If you know what that means. Where the character talks to whoever is like watching the movie. Yeah. It's going

to be really cool.

While thinking aloud his overview of his film, Christopher tended to others in the space. Christopher noticed one of his closest friends, Brian, was working with Stikbots, a stop-motion animation tool. As evidenced in the multimodal transcript that follows, Christopher asked Brian what he was working on before noting they were both wearing a GoPro. Christopher then giggled as he warned Brian he was being recorded on the digital camera, a clear representation of his humor and joy as a Black boy well as the way he valued and engaged in friendship.

View 1, Camera 1: Christopher's Handheld Digital Camera	View 2, Camera 2: Christopher's GoPro on Chest Harness	Transcript of Christopher's Talk
		<b>Christopher:</b> Hey, what are you guys doing?
		<b>Christopher:</b> Whoa, what are you working on Brian? <b>Brian:</b> Stikbots.
		<b>Christopher:</b> Cool. Do you have the same thing cause I have something like this long. Like this [GoPro]?
		<b>Brian:</b> I have it [GoPro]. I have it. <b>Christopher:</b> Also, you're being recorded [on digital camera in hand]
		<b>Brian:</b> Hi! <b>Christopher, Brian, Andy:</b> [laughter]

*Figure 5. Multimodal Transcript of Christopher's First Draft (Part II)*

In this excerpt, Christopher saw his peers working with Stikbots. The boys he spoke with were peers he previously produced Stikbot videos. I first acquired Stikbots after another boy in the class mentioned them to me in early fall. I then invited children from Mr. Holiday's class to play with them during their lunch recess. On several occasions, Christopher, Brian, and Andy



explored Stikbots together.

After Christopher concluded recording on the digital camera, he shifted gears to think more critically about the video he wished to make to re-tell his narrative. In the GoPro video, Christopher attempted to watch his video on the handheld camera; however, even after trouble-shooting, he was unable to do so. He then turned his attention to acquiring a car for his movie and asked Mr. Holiday how to do so. Christopher emphasized he wanted the car to be “life-size.” Mr. Holiday jokingly asked if Christopher sought permission to use his teacher’s car before suggesting he make a miniature version. With that, Christopher turned towards the large LEGO bin.

After realizing the LEGOs he picked up were already in use by another boy (who in turn offered those LEGOs to Christopher), Christopher moved away from the LEGOs in pursuit of another option. Again, Christopher approached Mr. Holiday, this time he asked to borrow from the stack of empty tissue boxes only to be told the boxes were for Valentine’s Day. With that, Christopher turned his attention to the craft table. He initially created a wall for his car with magazines and a stock image of car before he decided to read his written text while his peer Jana—a 9-year old white girl—recorded. The transcript below picks up at this point.

Christopher: Taking place inside a car is an adventure, an epic  
adventure for a family reunion. But this might be a stupid and  
short story, so just hang on to your butts, okay? Just hang on to  
your butts. [*laughter*] Yes, perfect. This is gonna work! This is  
gonna work! This is gonna work, this is gonna work, this is gonna  
work. [...] Like, this is going to be scene one. Sitting inside a car.

Before filming the first take, Christopher rushed to the other side of the workspace to retrieve his

notebook, returning to Jana shouting, “I’m trying to learn my lines!” A few minutes later, Christopher sat before Jana in a chair calling “3-2-1-Action!” before singing the opening lines of his original narrative, “We’re going on a trip, ...”

With Jana’s assistance, Christopher made several attempts to create a video using the same digital camera he previously used. The videos provide a glimpse into Christopher’s intertextual practices as he opened by singing a trap music<sup>3</sup> remix of theme song of *The Little Einsteins*<sup>4</sup>. For unfamiliar readers, *The Little Einsteins* is a children’s television show produced by Disney, but readily available on Netflix; trap music, which originated in the Southern region of the United States, brings together synthesizers, hi-hats, and kick drums. Often, trap music brings together elements of hip-hop, dance, and dub (a low-frequency, repetitive beat). While trap music traces back to the early 1990s, its popularity and presence in mainstream media has grown since the new millennium. At the time of the study, several trap remixes of *The Little Einstein’s* theme song were readily available across social media platforms, including Instagram and YouTube.<sup>5</sup> Christopher’s inclusion of this trap remix highlights his desire to curate a humorous text (his claim, not my own) and demonstrates how a pedagogy of a compositional fluency—one that makes space multiple communicative practices—afforded Christopher the chance to infuse elements of Black culture into his learning.

While Christopher appeared to pay close attention to his “lines,” he also attended to the aesthetics of the video. Before the second take, he directed Jana where to stand, explaining, “Maybe right here? I’d like you recording on the side of me.” Despite such explicit directions,

---

<sup>3</sup> To learn more about trap music, visit: <https://runthetrap.com/what-is-trap-music/>

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the show, visit: <http://disneyjunior.disney.com/little-einsteins>

<sup>5</sup> The popularity of these remixes even warranted a story in Billboard online magazine<sup>5</sup> in early 2015. To read more, visit: <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/dance/6501921/little-einsteins-remix>

there were still minor instances of miscommunication between Jana and Christopher during filming. In the third take, Jana did not stop filming when Christopher desired for her to stop, causing Christopher to call out, “Awww, failed again!” Jana took full blame for this error and Christopher then told her how to use the digital camera, specifically how to stop recording. After a fourth take, Jana handed the camera back to Christopher and told him she would be happy to record him again later, should he require assistance. As she walked away, Christopher turned the camera back on himself to talk to his audience again.

Despite the multiple takes where Jana assisted him, Christopher likely remained unsatisfied by each of the four videos both given the number of takes as well as the fact that he did not return to this tool on the following days. Instead, Christopher started the next day (and every day thereafter) at a solo desk positioned along the wall working with Stikbots. This was the same desk where his digital camera audience had seen his friend Brian working with Stikbots in Christopher’s “pre-sequel.”

Curious about why Christopher used Stikbots instead of his previously recorded videos, I inquired and he replied, “Well, here's the thing. That, the reason why I did that is because I was thinking of doing the one where it's just with me in it. But then [...] I changed my mind because it would be easier if I just used the Stikbots.” In Findings 2, I detail more about Christopher’s final product before zooming in on the traces of intertextuality visible in his Stikbot animation. Additionally, I demonstrate the intertextual ways Christopher used cinematographic tools to present the content of his story.

## **Findings 2: Tracing Intertextual Connections in the Final Cut**

The complex ways in which Christopher used both digital and analog technologies to compose his narrative became apparent and his intertextual tracings were made more visible as

he noted explicit instances wherein he made such connections. For example, his final production was separated into several “chapters” marked by construction paper with alphabetic text outlining what the chapter title (Figure 6). In this way, Christopher used conventions from books beyond story grammars.

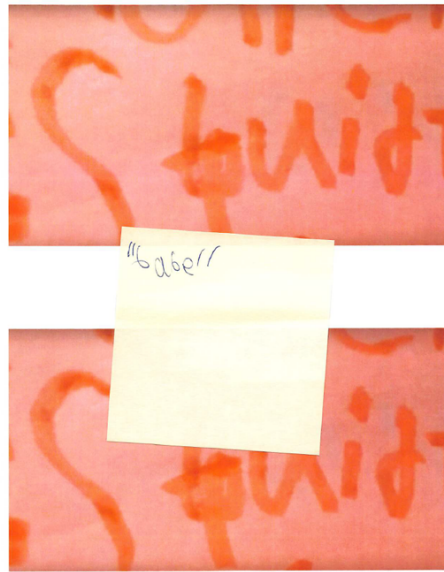


Figure 6. Stikbot Excerpt: Christopher’s “Chapter”

Christopher told me that he borrowed the idea from the movie *Babe*, which he had watched with his family. Christopher noticed how the movie drew on the book on which it was based to give it structure by separating scenes as chapters.<sup>6</sup>

Christopher: But what I was really trying to do is, in movies...In one of these 1990 movies or like one of those old, early 2000's type of movies...my dad showed us the movies he and my step-mom watched when they were littler. And they showed us *Babe*. Have

---

<sup>6</sup> The movie *Babe* was, in fact, based on a book by Dick King-Smith, first published in 1983 as *The Sheep-Pig* but later titled *Babe: The Gallant Pig* when it was published for an American audience two years later.

you ever heard of *Babe*, like the pig?

Cassie: Yeah. The talking pig.

Christopher: Yeah. That's the movie I saw. And what I realized is the movie is based on a book. You know why?

Cassie: Why?

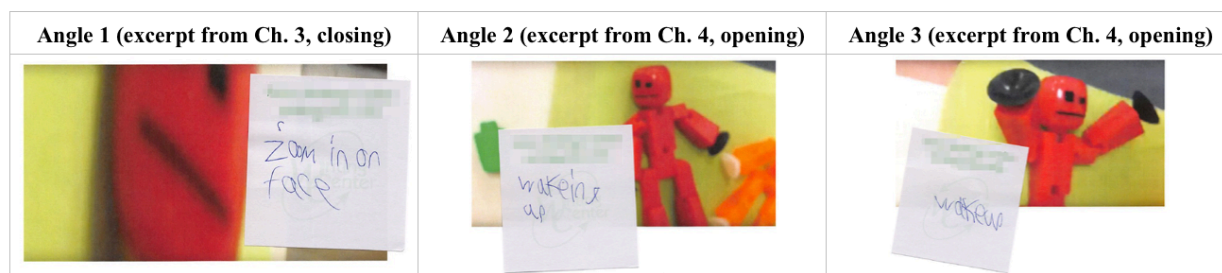
Christopher: Each time a scene would like cut, it would show like this thing like chapter one, something, something. Chapter two, something, something. Chapter three, something, something. That's how I knew it was based off of a book. So then, I was like, "What if I put this in my story?" And I decided to change it up a little bit.

In this excerpt, Christopher said he borrowed from another text—the movie *Babe*—and he used the language of films (e.g., “cut”) to describe how he incorporated this idea into his final production. He also named challenges of composing with Stikbots and noted adaptations that were required because the Stikbots could be easily knocked over, telling me:

If I moved the paper too far, it would hit one of the Stikbots and then the next scene would look like a complete madness. [...] So, I tried to slowly do it.

Here, he specifically outlined how precision was both an affordance and a constraint of using the tool, a topic I return to in the discussion.

In addition to explicitly connecting his final Stikbot composition to films like *Babe*, Christopher's digital text shared likenesses to other movies and television series as well. One such example I noted was in his attention to detail with regard to camera positioning (Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Stikbot Excerpt: Camera Angles*

For instance, Christopher intentionally zoomed in on his Stikbot character (e.g., the red Stikbot) as he fell asleep and then he strategically changed the camera angle for the next scene. The transcript below provides greater detail into his logic, cinematographic noticings, and intertextual tracings.

Christopher: I tried to make it look like it's a movie, like Nickelodeon or something like that.

Cassie: Oh, okay. And then from there, so...What is this one? "When I wake up."

Christopher: Yeah, when I woke up.

Cassie: What happens there?

Christopher: Then I'm surprised because it feels like...When I wake up, we're not exactly there, but I didn't want me to, like, wake up and then the people watching the video have to wait five minutes for me.

Cassie: Oh, you had to do it like a real movie. But I have a question. Something's different about this scene. You changed where your camera was.

Christopher: Yeah, that's what I said to do. Because you know how in sometimes in movies how it begins like how, "Okay, this is

sleeping," and then when they hear the alarm, it's like, "Yes." And they're like this [*arms up in air*].

Cassie: And they wake up. And then they have the camera has changed how where they see them.

Christopher: Yeah.

Christopher outlined how his decision-making was informed by past experiences as a viewer of video media, which I argue is a valuable way of knowing. For example, he emphasized the purposeful ways he changed his camera angle to align his own composition with those he had seen.

Here, he also mentioned how he used sleep as a means to pass time more quickly. Again, this was an intentional choice based on his past experiences. Christopher outlined that, by having his character fall asleep and wake up, the audience would not be waiting around. The passage of time, like precision of tool, was another reoccurring theme that challenged Christopher to think critically as he composed with Stikbots. When we discussed his Stikbot video, Christopher stated his final composition—one based on a print-based text—mirrored other film adaptations insofar as “movies, like, they can’t fit like everything inside the book.” As a result, Christopher stated, “I just tried to make this like kind of a small story. Like, a small normal Stikbot story.”

In addition to Christopher’s intentional use of these cinematographic techniques, Christopher demonstrated rich understanding of the fourth wall as a storytelling element. His knowledge of the fourth wall became apparent through our conversations because Christopher made mention of it across his texts. A few days into the composing process, I asked him more about the fourth wall. He quickly obliged my request and asked me if I knew what it was as illuminated below.

Christopher: Do you know what breaking the fourth wall is?

Cassie: Can you tell me about it?

Christopher: Breaking the fourth wall means, in TV shows, sometimes the character just talks to you while you're watching it, you know that? That's called breaking the fourth wall. So, when you break the fourth wall, you talk to the people that's watching you. So, talk to the people that's watching you. And it makes it funny, because they're talking. To the other characters it feels like you're talking to nobody.

The fourth wall was a central component to Christopher's storytelling and reappeared across the data. In the third findings section, I discuss Christopher's review of stills of his final product.

### **Findings 3: Processing Production and Intertextual Tracings**

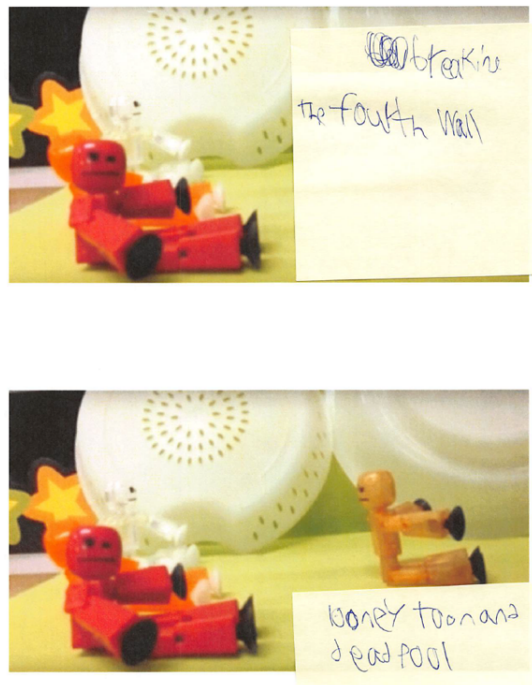
Cassie: What happened here? You turned your head here. So now you're facing the camera.

Christopher: So, here's the thing, remember about the fourth wall? These two are me breaking the fourth wall. And let me explain the fourth wall in movies. The fourth wall is like...A movie that's just fourth wall is a movie of where a character just stays in his story. He doesn't tell anybody else his story. It's just a story he remembers. That's what breaking the fourth wall is. You go and tell the audience something while the other characters are not watching.

Christopher maintained a similar working definition of what the fourth wall was and how it was used. He highlighted affordances of the fourth wall as an opportunity for the protagonist to



communicate with their audience unbeknownst to other characters. Alternatively, in his Stikbot text, which included no sound, Christopher consistently turned the red Stikbot (e.g., the one representing his character) towards the camera/audience. During our post-production conversation, Christopher used a post-it note to annotate instances when his character broke the fourth wall as in Figure 8.



*Figure 8. Stikbot Excerpt: Fourth Wall*

Because Christopher consistently discussed the fourth wall, I challenged him to tell me more about where he learned this construct during our post-production conversation., Christopher included both the animated cartoon series *Looney Tunes* as well as the movie *Deadpool* as mentor texts for this scene and therefore listed them on a post-it note. His commentary on the topic of the fourth wall and this media is explicated below.

Cassie:           Do you know of a place where you know that they break the fourth wall?

Christopher: Like I said, the only movie I really saw somebody break the fourth wall is probably like *Looney Tunes* or like *Deadpool* the movie.

[...] Because in *Looney Tunes* you know how Bugs Bunny is like talks to the audience sometimes?

Cassie: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: And then *Deadpool* like every few seconds in the movie it goes in slow motion and then he does something. Like once he was like got thrown into a car but he slowed down before he hit the car and he was like, “As you see, I’m about to get thrown into a car.” It’s funny.

Cassie: So, it adds a little bit of humor when you break the fourth wall?

Christopher: Yeah. That’s mostly what you want to do when you break the fourth wall. Add some humor so then it’s like really funny.

The fourth wall was a strategy that Christopher used intentionally in his composing, particularly because he saw the fourth wall as a way to bring humor and Black boy joy to his storytelling. In this excerpt of our post-production conversation, Christopher was selective about what popular media texts he borrowed ideas from. He chose particular techniques and storytelling elements from films and television media to help him represent the content of his story. In turn, his comments made explicit the critical analysis he brought to texts he encountered, both in and out of school. Perhaps this was, in part, due to his desire to generate what he determined were “entertaining” texts for his audience, but it also demonstrated the sociality of communication as Christopher consciously sought to incorporate humor.

Christopher was sophisticated in the intertextual connections he made related to the

fourth wall and camera angles and in how he adapted parts of his print-based story to keep his Stikbot audience engaged. As evidenced here, many of the intertextual connections Christopher made were sparked by specific popular media texts. In our post-production conversation, Christopher said he carefully considered how he to use texts to curate his story’s setting or further his plotline. For instance, his story started in a car on purpose, as he explained:

How I made that decision [*to start with characters in the car*] is I thought of like if it was like actually a movie about driving like a car. What makes those types of movies cool is most the movies start with a character driving inside a car.



Figure 9. Stikbot Excerpt: *Are We There Yet?*

Specifically, Christopher recapped a favorite movie—*Are We There Yet?*—and shared that his opening was based on that film (Figure 9). Like this movie, Christopher’s story started in the car on a long road trip and included children engaging in funny antics.

While Christopher related the setting to popular media texts, he said Stikbots allowed him to embellish the “true” story represented in his print-based text. Perhaps the best example of this

stretching of the “truth” came when his aunt’s head turned completely as in the scene captured in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Stikbot Excerpt: *Goosebumps* and *Aladdin*

In this scene, Christopher giggled as he explained, “like she [his aunt] didn't really do that. That would be like snake lady or something like that.” He went on to tell me that this choice was again, an effort to “make the story entertaining,” going on to say, “So, what I did is I made it look like she turned her head like all the way around to look at us.” While many viewers may think his aunt was “a venomous monster or [...] like half-human, half-monsters like in movies,” Christopher’s purpose was not to scare his viewers as in the movie *Aladdin* or the *Goosebumps* television series which he cited. Instead, his goal was to “make people laugh.” Still, Christopher understood how some of his viewers may confuse this turning of the head as something scary because that is how it was used historically (according to Christopher).

Christopher: I've seen a lot of movies that have been here before I was even born.

Cassie: Whoa. They're as old as me?

Christopher: Yeah. They're probably like ... Once I watched this, it might have been the *Goosebumps* TV series. That would be like in the 90's.

Cassie: How do you know about *Goosebumps* then?

Christopher: It's a Netflix TV series.

Popular media informed many of the choices that Christopher made as he composed this remake of his print-based narrative and stretched the truth. But it was also the case that, at times, Christopher's story remained closely connected to his original text. For example, in his original text and Stikbot creation, Christopher retold the joke he made when his family encountered traffic. Christopher played on the slogan "Red Bull gives you wings."

Christopher: So, in this chapter, we are driving from traffic but then Aunt Lisa tries to tell us like when she was little and she went through traffic all of the time, but then I make up a funny joke. Like about Red Bull and in one of the cut scenes because one cut scene he got out of the car, he drank the Red Bull and he got wings and he started flying.

Christopher's use of the Red Bull commercial is an explicit example of moving public language into the private domain (Fairclough, 1992). Christopher demonstrated how, in our day-to-day living, individuals are always making intertextual connections. The Red Bull joke and head-turning of his aunt, however, also illuminate different ways individuals make connections. During our post-process interview, Christopher drew the YouTube logo (Figure 11) on a postcard and named it as his source for the Red Bull commercial. Alternatively, I was not aware commercials were available online, but rather thought of television commercials. While we both could connect to a commercial, the source was different for each of us.



Figure 11. Stikbot Excerpt: Red Bull and YouTube

Similarly, when I first saw the head turn, I thought of the movie *The Exorcist* and imagined Christopher's intent to be a scare tactic. My assumption about this intertextual connection was quite different than Christopher's actual purpose. Not only did I connect to a different text (*The Exorcist*) than he did (*Goosebumps*, etc.), I also misinterpreted the purpose of his technique and overlooked how Christopher tried to incorporate (Black boy) joy.

As evidenced within and across the findings, Christopher not only made intertextual connections to content, but there were also traces of various techniques from other media visible in his final Stikbot video. Christopher did not make these connections haphazardly. Instead, he was quite strategic about how he both made references to other media and the content which he brought in to his own film.

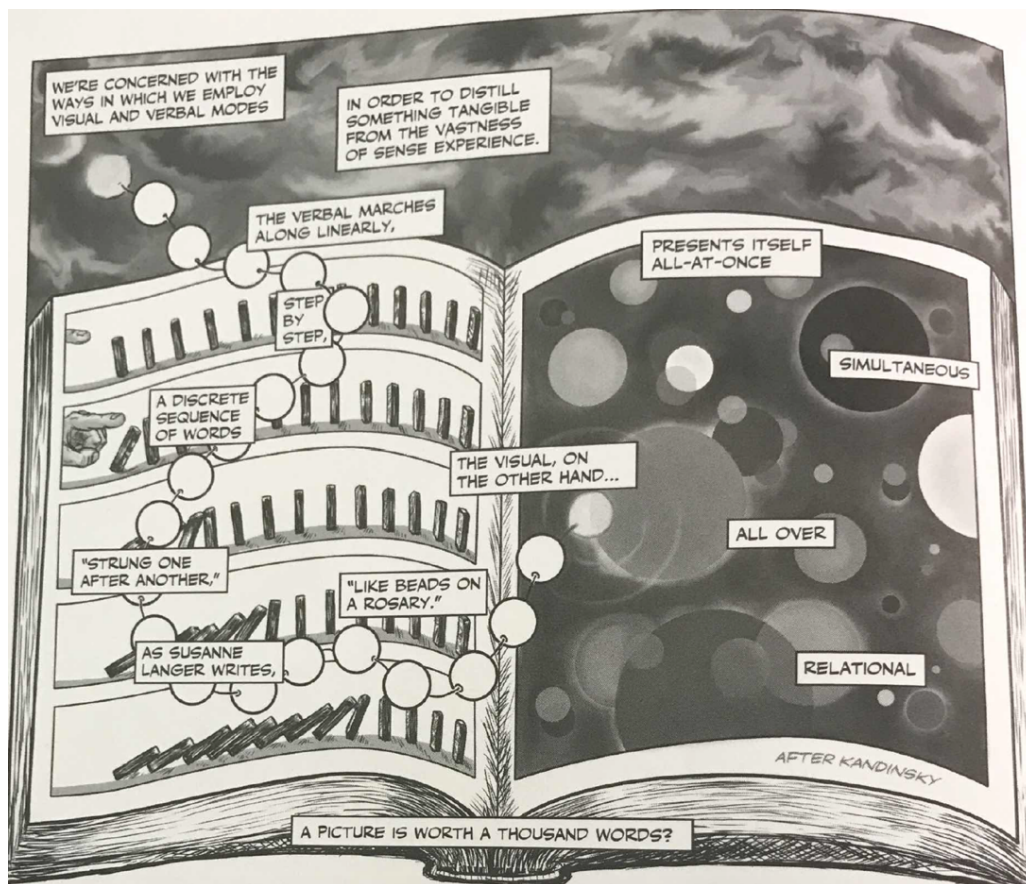
## Discussion

There exists a large body of research from across the PK-16 spectrum that has explored the intertextual connections children and youth make to content from other sources in print-based

products. Still, more studies explicating the strategies, tools, and techniques students use to express that content, particularly when we talk about multimodal texts, remains necessary. As Bazerman (2004) has suggested, analysis of intertextuality is important insofar as it affords a glimpse into how writers are “negotiating the complex worlds of text” (p. 84). With ever-evolving technologies that afford a definition of text that is inclusive of more than the printed word, intertextual intertextuality must also account for more than content. Thus, in my analysis, I explored not only Christopher’s words and connections to content, but also the techniques he borrowed and the tools he used to produce his film.

This dynamic approach to Christopher’s process and product as he engaged a compositional fluency afforded me the opportunity to also gain insight into the constraints he encountered as he composed and how he worked through or around them. For example, during our mid-unit interview, Christopher told me how challenging it was to keep the camera steady. This was true in the moments when he was personally handling the tripod and iPhone and when he would leave the scene of his composing to gather an analog tool, telling me that every time he got up, the camera seemed to be at a different angle. When I inquired why he thought this happened, he told me that maybe someone had bumped the table or moved the camera, but that this could be solved by having another pair of hands to help him hold the tripod or even using tape to hold the tripod in place. This specific challenge of precision illuminates the technical skills required to create a digital video with Stikbots and the necessity of providing children time to practice the operational aspects of various tools (Mills, 2010). At the same time, providing children the space to try their hand composing using diverse communicative tools cultivates a compositional fluency and strengthens their understanding about the affordance, constraints, and possibilities of different technologies (Dyson, 2008, c.f. Luke & Carrington, 2004).

Although the story was still told chronologically, Christopher's composition was "full of rich and complex communication strategies that far surpassed the linear expectations of print text often presented in the classroom," (Mahar, 2003, p. 110). Christopher displayed a sophisticated understanding of visual rhetoric as he engaged in composing practices that are generally not accounted for by the standardized curriculum. My own understanding about this is best represented in the work of Sousanis (2015, p. 58) wherein he argued:



I emphasize this quote from Sousanis (2015) because it illuminates the necessity I see for educational researchers and practitioners to reimagine both how texts are produced in the literacies classroom and how children are assessed. Arguably, Christopher's composition was one that stayed within the lines of the "official" curriculum while also playfully testing the boundaries of it—he told a "true" story that made use of popular culture to incorporate humor



and be entertaining. In this way, Sousanis (2015) outlines a similar path to what I saw in Christopher's Stikbot video.

Christopher both retold his narrative as a linear story while also using the visual to tailor the text to be relational. As his original story was remade using Stikbots, Christopher infused story grammars from other media directly into his story, creating a more "permeable" curriculum as he stretched the "truth" about what happened on the Tennessee road trip to create what he deemed an entertaining narrative (Dyson, 2008). Christopher worked within genres that he was familiar with—comical television shows, movies, and commercials—and the composing block created a space for him to draw on his knowledge in a meaningful way. Furthermore, in this daily life, Christopher was intertextual as in the Red Bull joke that he made on his trip. In this example, Christopher takes the text (the commercial) at its face value (Bazerman, 2004), but repeats it in a new form (the joke) with a new personal goal (to make his brothers laugh).

Christopher both recognized and adopted conventions from this genre as he retold his personal narrative. He attended not only to characters (Dyson, 1997) or to storylines (Brownell, 2018) children consume from diverse media sources, but Christopher also showed a deeper understanding of how such media is produced. For example, he strategically considered how such comedies are shot as he noted his intentionality with regards to camera angles. For literacies researchers and practitioners, this prompts the question of how digital technologies and tools like Stikbots might make visible other knowledges children like Christopher bring with them to the classroom.

As an adult listening to Christopher, I did have my doubts about some of the connections he made with the stills in relation to media and texts he cited. For example, in one scene, the camera lens is mostly covered and a fuzzy, predominantly black screen resulted. I inferred this to

be a mistake wherein Christopher's finger or hand covered the lens on accident. Christopher, however, told me that that he covered the screen on purpose "Because all good movies start in the dark," as in the *LEGO Batman* movie. This was something that I doubted, yet, upon watching *LEGO Batman* myself, I was un/surprised to find the movie really does open with these words. I was then disappointed I doubted this connection and/or Christopher's intention as he composed this work.

Christopher invoked communicative practices that are not often accounted for in ELA classrooms, in part because of the perceived split between home and school literacy practices (Mahar, 2003). Typically, standardized rubrics for print-based texts alone do not fully account for the sophisticated threads children can make across and between texts as they inter/weave stories, particularly when they use digital modes. Thus, I propose adults not only create opportunities for children to cultivate a compositional fluency, but I encourage educators to take pause from traditional writing conferences in order to inquire about children's processes of composing (Dyson, 2013; Anderson, Stewart, Kachorsky, 2017).

By reimagining the type of talk they engage children in, adults may come to more fully recognize the layered and overlapping communicative practices children strategically employ. Christopher, for instance, used a compositional fluency to make explicit connections to cultural markers and social identities as through his inclusion of a trap remix while also infusing humor and joy throughout his composing process. While many institutional and systemic structures remain as barriers to Black boys' learning, a pedagogy of a compositional fluency can help cultivate a nurturing environment for children to imagine, create, learn, play, and *thrive*. It can encourage adults to revisit questions about who counts as a "good student" as it facilitates new insights into the potentials and possibilities of Black boys like Christopher. As stories about

Christopher and other Black boys are shared, understandings about what Black boys “know, understand, and can do as opposed to what they cannot do or what they do not know and understand” (Wright & Counsell, 2018, p. 20) can contribute to the reimagining of Black boyhood called for by Dumas & Nelson (2016) and the recognition of the brilliance of Black boys called for by Wright & Counsell (2018).

Interestingly, Christopher used a digital tool that required micro-actions in order to create a long-form video, meaning he had to have a vision for how his final product would take shape. He kept track of where the story was going as he produced it in-the-moment. Through his digital composition, Christopher demonstrated an enriched understanding of how narrative evolves from beginning to end. Likewise, his stop-motion animation also served as a metaphor for how adults might begin to reimagine Black boyhood. Rather than perceiving Black boys in “essentialized, static” ways, adults must tend to Black boys as dynamic, complex individuals that are responsive to time, space, and circumstance (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p.30). Put another way, in the same way Christopher reimagined his alphabetic text as “a little mini-movie of what happened on my trip to Tennessee,” so too can narratives about Black boys be reimagined both in-the-moment and across possible futures.

## REFERENCES

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, K. T., Stewart, O. G., & Kachorsky, D. (2017). Seeing academically marginalized students' multimodal designs from a position of strength. *Written Communication*, 34(2), 104-134.
- Brownell, C. J. (2018). (Re)Imagining children's writing: Creative language play(giarism) in the elementary English language arts classroom, *Language Arts*, 65(4), 218-228.
- Baker-Bell, A., Paris, D., & Jackson, D. (2017). Learning Black language matters: Humanizing research as culturally sustaining pedagogy. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(4), 360-377.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanič, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Bazerman, C. (2004). Speech acts, genres, and activity systems: How texts organize activity and people. In C. Bazerman & P. Prior (Eds.), *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices* (pp. 309-339). New York: Routledge.
- Bazerman, C., & Prior, P. (Eds.). (2004). *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices*. New York: Routledge.
- Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2008). Writing in multimodal texts: A social semiotic account of designs for learning. *Written Communication*, 25(2), 166-195.
- Britzman, D. (2000). "The question of belief: Writing poststructural ethnography" In E. A. St. Pierre and W. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 27-40). New York: Routledge.
- Books Kid (2016). *Diary of a Minecraft Creeper: An Unofficial Minecraft Book*.
- Collins, J., & Blot, R. (2003). *Literacy and literacies: Texts, power, and identity* (Vol. 22). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dutro, E. (2010). What "hard times" means: Mandated curricula, class-privileged assumptions, and the lives of poor children. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 44(3), 255-291.
- Dumas, M. J., & Nelson, J. D. (2016). (Re)Imagining Black boyhood: Toward a critical framework for educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(1), 27-46.
- Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: NY: Teachers College Press.

- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2008). Staying in the (curricular) lines: Practice constraints and possibilities in childhood writing. *Written Communication*, 25(1), 119-159.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). Intertextuality in critical discourse analysis. *Linguistics and Education*, 4(3-4), 269-293.
- Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of masculinities*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In Y. S. Lincoln & N. K. Denzin, *Turning points in qualitative research: Tying knots in a handkerchief* (pp. 143-168). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Genishi, C., & Dyson, A. H. (2015). *Children, language, and literacy: Diverse learners in diverse times*. Teachers College Press.
- Harper, S. R. (2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM. *New Directions for Institutional Research* 2010(148), 63-74.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Howard, T. C. (2013). How does it feel to be a problem? Black male students, schools, and learning in enhancing the knowledge base to disrupt deficit frameworks. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 54-86.
- Hull, G. A., Stornaiuolo, A., & Sahni, U. (2010). Cultural citizenship and cosmopolitan practice: Global youth communicate online. *English Education*, 42(4), 331-367.
- Kamberelis, G., & De La Luna, L. (2004). Children's writing: How textual forms, contextual forces, and textual politics co-emerge. In C. Bazerman & P. Prior (Eds.), *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices* (pp. 239-277). New York: Routledge.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2013). *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Lensmire, T. (1994). Writing workshop as carnival: Reflections on an alternative learning environment. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(4), 371-392.

- McGrail, E., & Behizadeh, N. (2017). K-12 multimodal assessment and interactive audiences: An exploratory analysis of existing frameworks. *Assessing Writing*, 31, 24-38.
- Mills, K. A. (2010). Shrek meets Vygotsky: Rethinking adolescents' multimodal literacy practices in schools. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(1), 35-45.
- Mills, K. A., & Exley, B. (2014). Time, space, and text in the elementary school digital writing classroom. *Written Communication*, 31(4), 434-469.
- Moje, E. B. (2000). "To be part of the story": The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 102(3), 651-690.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]. (2016). Professional knowledge for the teaching of writing. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teaching-writing>
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-93.
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100.
- Palmeri, J. (2012). *Remixing composition: A history of multimodal writing pedagogy*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press.
- Prior, P. (2004). Tracing process: How texts come into being. In C. Bazerman & P. Prior (Eds.), *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices* (pp. 167-200). New York: Routledge.
- Prior, P. (2006). A sociocultural theory of writing. *Handbook of Writing Research*, 54-66.
- Ranker, J. (2007). Designing meaning with multiple media sources: A case study of an eight-year-old student's writing processes. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(4), 402-434.
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Selfe, C. L. (2009). The movement of air, the breath of meaning: Auality and multimodal

- composing. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), 616-663.
- Shanahan, L. E. (2013). Composing “kid-friendly” multimodal text: When conversations, instruction, and signs come together. *Written Communication*, 30(2), 194-227.
- Shipka, J. (2011). *Toward a composition made whole*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Shipka, J. (2016). Transmodality in/and Processes of Making: Changing Dispositions and Practice. *College English*, 78(3), 250.
- Smith, B. E. (2018). Composing for affect, audience, and identity: Toward a multidimensional understanding of adolescents’ multimodal composing goals and designs. *Written Communication*, 35(2), 182-214.
- Stornaiuolo, A., & Hall, M. (2014). Tracing resonance. In G. B. Gudmundsdottir & K. B. Vasbø (Eds.), *Methodological challenges when exploring digital learning spaces in education* (pp. 29-43). Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice* (Vol. 9). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Syverson, M. A. (1999). *The wealth of reality: An ecology of composition*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press.
- Taylor, Paul. “The Next America.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 10, 2014). <http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/>
- Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vasudevan, L., Schultz, K., & Bateman, J. (2010). Rethinking composing in a digital age: Authoring literate identities through multimodal storytelling. *Written Communication*, 27(4), 442-468.
- Wargo, J. M. (2015). “Every selfie tells a story...”: LGBTQ youth lifestreams and new media narratives as connective identity texts. *New Media & Society*, 19(4), 560-578.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). A sociocultural approach to socially shared cognition. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine, & S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 85-100). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing identity texts through Disney princess play. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(1), 57-83.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2013). Playing Star Wars under the (teacher’s) radar: Detecting kindergartners’ action texts and embodied literacies In V. M. Vasquez & J. W. Wood



(Eds.), *Perspectives and provocations in early childhood education* [National Council of Teacher of English Early Childhood Assembly Yearbook] (pp. 105-115). Charlotte, NC: Information Age

Wynhoff Olsen, A., VanDerHeide, J., Goff, B., & Dunn, M. B. (2018). Examining Intertextual Connections in Written Arguments: A Study of Student Writing as Social Participation and Response. *Written Communication*, 35(1), 58-88.

Yoon, H., & Llerena, C., & Brooks, E. (2016). The unfolding of Lucas' story in an inclusive classroom: Living, playing, and becoming in the social world of kindergarten. *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series: Life in Inclusive Classrooms*, 37.

Yoon, H. (2018). The *imperial march* towards early literacy. Locating popular culture in a kindergarten classroom. *Language Arts*, 95(3), 171-181.

Yoon, H. S. (2015). Assessing children in kindergarten: The narrowing of language, culture and identity in the testing era. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 15(3), 364-393.

## **CHAPTER 3: Cultivating Contemplative Constituents: A Case Study of Children**

### **Composing in an Era of (Im)Migration**

#### **“What do we tell the children?”**

Like hundreds of students across the United States, on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the children in Ms. Honey’s third grade class<sup>7</sup> excitedly cast their ballots for President. Across the entire third grade, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton won by a landslide over business tycoon Donald Trump. Yet, in the early morning hours of November 10<sup>th</sup>, the results of the national election proclaimed Trump as the winner. His victory, however, was marred by two years of turbulent campaigning that included controversial conversations about the (im)migrant and Muslim “problem” in the United States. Beginning with Trump’s announcement that he was running for the country’s highest elected office through conversations about DACA recipients, El Salvadoran refugees, and, more recently, (im)migrants from “shithole” countries in 2017 and 2018, news sources and social media feeds highlighted refugee and (im)migrant experiences. Simultaneously, as the threat of the GOP Administration’s proposed United States border wall with Mexico still loomed, back-and-forth court decisions based on the 5<sup>th</sup> Executive Order of 2017 (commonly referred to as the #MuslimBan) ticked across television screens (Zapotosky, 2017).

For many classroom teachers and students, the aforementioned (im)migration issues left them questioning what the future may hold for their families and communities (Michael, 2016). Because of such uncertainty, “What do we tell the children?” became a recurrent refrain for many adults as they questioned the ways young children could engage in conversations about issues of equity and justice. Children’s capacity for and interest in seemingly “adult” topics is

---

<sup>7</sup> All names are pseudonyms self-selected by the participants.

oftentimes underestimated and much elementary humanities classroom instruction remains focused on standardized content as opposed to critical issues (Halvorsen, 2017). Frequently, children are assumed to be unable to participate in critical conversations despite educational scholarship that has long-evidenced young children as capable of discussing social topics like race (Souto-Manning, 2009), class (Jones, 2006), and gender (Hermann-Wilmarth, Lannen, & Ryan, 2017).

Because children live out issues of identity and inequity every day, they deserve opportunities for interrogating and producing meaningful texts related to critical issues (Mirra & Garcia, 2017). A critical sociocultural approach to the teaching and learning of literacies is therefore imperative because children (and literacies) are not apolitical (NCTE, 2017). *Critical literacies* (Luke, 2004) is one paradigm that offers alternative and expansive ways to read, reflect, and respond to texts of all sorts. In turn, it addresses long-standing calls for literacies instruction grounded in sociocultural perspectives (Woodard & Kang, 2016). A primary goal of critical literacies is to encourage children and their teachers to invoke tools of analysis and critique as they engage and produce texts of all types in an effort to “transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of institutions and everyday life,” (Luke, 2014, p. 21). In this way, a critical literacies stance is “an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning” (Luke, 2014, p. 21). It draws attention to issues of equity and justice while situating learners as active agents for knowledge production and societal change.

Drawing from data generated across the 2016-2017 academic year, this study focused on multilingual and multicultural children’s design and production of two persuasive compositions—a print-based letter to Congress and a second text created using analog and digital tools like LEGOs and digital cameras. Situated within an integrated writing unit focused on

(im)migrant experiences, children called on their legislators to take action on current topics such as the GOP Administration's proposed border wall with Mexico and the #MuslimBan. Simultaneously, their teacher, Ms. Honey, took actionable steps to engage her students in critical conversations about access and equity in/to the United States. In this paper, I highlight how, by cultivating a pedagogy of compositional fluency—an expansive skillset of communicative practices, children designed texts and enacted identities related to civic agency.

I began this study with the presupposition that developing a compositional fluency (Shipka, 2016)—an expansive skillset of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, material, and modal ways of knowing—could provide children and teachers an increased facility of multiple communicative practices. In turn, I thought a compositional fluency would amplify children's experiences and afford differences in ways of knowing to be seen for what they truly are—resources to be valued. In other words, I understood a compositional fluency as one possible avenue for cultivating more just social futures (New London Group, 1996). Specifically, I believed that by fostering children's diverse cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing, notions of what 'counts' as writing in the elementary English language arts classroom could become more inclusive. However, while a pedagogy of compositional fluency opened new avenues for children's multiple communicative practices to be made visible, I found it necessary to pair with a critical literacies approach.

## **Research Questions**

Building on the understanding of all literacies as political (Street, 1984) and teaching and learning as value-laden, emotionally prejudiced tasks (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005), in what follows I outline how children in a Midwestern classroom used alphabetic print alongside multimodal tools to consider real-world politics. Employing a critical ethnographic approach

(Britzman, 2000) and using a case study design (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I investigated the following questions:

1. How do analog and digital technologies, used alongside traditional schooled writing (e.g. writing making use of only alphabetic print), construct possibilities for children to engage in critical literacies and civic action?
2. What rhetorical moves do children make to (re)present their views on the critical issue of welcoming refugees and (im)migrants to the United States across modes?

### **Towards a Humanities Classroom Made Whole**

Critical literacies scholarship has documented various ways young learners have been invited to grapple with social issues. While some of the earliest iterations of critical literacy revolved around the deconstruction of a written text (Luke & Freebody, 1999), many studies now focus on children's text production (Janks, 2010; Janks & Vasquez, 2011). To isolate text *consumption* from *production*, however, creates a false binary. Likewise, more critical or multiple forms of literacies do not always reside outside "the basics" (Dyson, 2013) of literacies. Children and teachers can draw on a combination of these (Comber, 2012). Technical forms of literacy (e.g., writing), for example, can serve as a vehicle for engaging with/in current political issues (Exley, Woods, & Dooley, 2014).

In our ever-evolving, globally-connected society, critical literacies also cannot be disconnected from conversations about civic participation. To separate the two is not only futile, but such attempts also do little to prepare individuals to deal with "the messiness" of education (Pandya & Ávila, 2014, p. 6). Because putting theory and discussion into action is perhaps the most challenging aspect of critical literacies in classrooms (Exley, Woods, & Dooley, 2014), integrating social studies with literacies is logical step in fostering a humanities made whole

(Shipka, 2011). Social studies education is akin to critical literacies in that both facilitate opportunities for learners to deliberate social issues, empathize with others, and reimagine a more just future (Halvorsen, 2013; Parker, 2003). They also share concern with “broader questions about the human condition” (Halvorsen, 2017, p. 386, cf. Brophy & Alleman, 2006) and have an emphasis on inquiry (particularly through writing) as evidenced in both the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA and the College, Career, and Civic Life for Social Studies State Standards (C3) Framework. Thus, researchers and educators stand to benefit largely from investigations into children’s diverse communicative practices as they engage in critical topics broadly defined as “social studies” content, including public concerns like (im)migration (Halvorsen, 2017).

### **Creating Critical (Multimodal) Texts: An Overview of Scholarship**

One possible pathway for engaging young children in critical conversations is by incorporating various modes of communicating alongside alphabetic print. Previous scholarship across the PreK-16 spectrum suggests multimodal composing is a tool for changing the playing field of school (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Mills & Exley, 2014; Selfe, 2009; Shipka, 2011, 2016; Wargo, 2015, 2017; Wohlwend, 2011, 2013; Yancey, 2004). For many children, considering modes of composing outside of standardized notions of writing builds on their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) while simultaneously opening new avenues for what counts both as composing and as content in the English language arts (ELA) classroom (Buchholz, 2015; Kuby & Rucker, 2016). Engaging in multimodal composing practices, as others have argued, can provide children and youth opportunities to use familiar communicative practices to address political matters they live out each day (Pandya, Pagdilao, & Kim, 2015; Ranker, Lowery, & Fink, 2010). This is especially true and important for children

with diverse cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing as they are usually forced into a box of white, middle-class ways of knowing rather than provided the space to sustain their identities and communicative practices (Paris & Alim, 2014; Paris, 2012).

Contemporary literacies scholarship attends to children's complex communicative practices (Axelrod, 2014; Genishi & Dyson, 2015; Larson, 2006; Yoon, 2013, 2014) and forefronts children's identities as individuals situated in larger systems of power. This includes explorations of young children's play (Wohlwend, 2011; Brownell, 2018), analysis of early learners' multiple languages (Souto-Manning, 2007; Brownell, 2017a), and inquiries focused on how children draw on multiple ways of knowing to compose (Brownell, 2017b; Husbye, et al., 2012; Skerrett, 2013). Other scholars, including Dyson (1997; 2013), have demonstrated the interconnectedness of children's social worlds with "the basics" of the explicit curriculum. Through her descriptions of young, predominantly African American children, Dyson (1997; 2013) foregrounds children negotiating constraints of the "official," or standardized, explicit writing curriculum to build on personally relevant communicative practices. Such stories center young children as they *are* in the moment rather than only who they *are to become* over time and across their schooling.

### **Multiple Practices of a Plural Populace**

In early childhood and elementary classrooms, a pedagogy of multiliteracies is an important lens for planning, implementing, and exploring critical literacies (Larson, 2006). The primary requirement for children to engage in practices of critical literacies is to be provided space to do so (Larson, 2006; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Vasquez, 2004); it does not first require mastering "the basics" of standardized literacy (Dyson, 1997; 2013). Additionally, ethical considerations as well as continual advances in technology and global connectedness (Hull,

Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010), require a reimagining of ELA. Paradigms about “appropriate” writing should shift from “out-of-date” (NCTE, 2016) monomodal understandings to transmodal practices as children and teachers develop a compositional fluency (Shipka, 2016)—an expansive skillset of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, material, and modal ways of knowing. This requires the field to attend to the complexity of *all* communicative practices (e.g., digital and analog) beyond “fetishizing” print-based, alphabetic texts “as the modality of reason” (Horner, Lockridge, & Selfe, 2015, p. 15). Developing a compositional fluency, for both teachers and children, provides all parties increased facility with/of multiple communicative practices. In turn, teachers are better suited to engage in culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) as they recognize, honor, and sustain children’s different approaches to communication.

In addition to considering children’s multiple modes for communication, so too is it important to consider the different rhetorical strategies they employ. Borrowing from Haas (2012), I define rhetoric as “always already cultural” and as “the negotiation of cultural information—and its historical, social, economic, and political influences—to affect social action (persuade)” (p. 287). Historically, the language of rhetoric has been reserved for students in upper-level grades and/or college classrooms as they are asked to engage in seemingly “advanced” arguments about critical topics. One approach for engaging older students in fostering skills of persuasion is through an Aristotelian lens (Albaldejo, 2016); more commonly, this perspective is known by three rhetorical strategies: *logos* (reasoning based on logical appeals), *ethos* (reasoning based on credibility appeals), and *pathos* (reasoning based on feelings and/or emotional appeals). While Aristotelian rhetoric lingers in high school and first-year writing courses, contemporary scholars of writing, rhetoric, and composition have challenged the



dominance of this lens with calls for educators to create space for cultural rhetorics and “contend that an Aristotelian history of rhetoric told through the Enlightenment is an imperial narrative that assumes Greco-Roman rhetorical practices to be the origin of all rhetorical practices” (Mukavetz, 2014, p. 109).

In my analysis, I read children’s text and rhetorical approaches using a cultural rhetorics orientation to Aristotelean rhetoric. This included attending to how children were oriented to cultural rhetoric practices and the four key tenets of a cultural rhetorics approach: relations, story, decolonization, and constellations (Bratta & Powell, 2014). I showcased children’s capabilities to argue using commonly recognized rhetorical strategies (e.g., logos, pathos, ethos) while also documenting how much more children, as the “future generations of knowledge makers” (Mukavetz, 2014, p. 110), can do when provided the space to build on their cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing. Put another way, in my analysis, I attempted to demonstrate how children engaged multiple rhetorical traditions all at once and argue that each strategy they used provided them a viable avenue for persuading their audience and expressing themselves as cultural beings (Powell, 2012; Powell, et al., 2014). Thus, like critical literacies, a cultural rhetorics orientation was a useful way for me to examine dynamic power relations while confronting issues of equity (Bratta & Powell, 2014). Simultaneously, invoking cultural rhetorics practices, in a similar way to multiliteracies, creates new spaces for ways of knowing and being in the world to be shared through various modes, with no one form of story being more valued than the next.

### **Modes of Inquiry**

As previously discussed, this project explored cultivating a compositional fluency as one avenue for engaged children in critical literacies. In the following section, I provide a “thick

description” (Geertz, 1973) of the community context, participants, and focal curricular unit before detailing methods used in data generation and analysis.

### **Contextualizing Teaching and Learning**

This interpretive study was situated within a resource-limited, public elementary school—Community School J (CSJ)—located in a medium-sized city in the United States. Ms. Honey’s classroom was the primary site for this case study. Drawing on her twelve years of teaching experience, Ms. Honey—a cisgender, white, monolingual, American-born female—planned a six-week persuasive writing unit for the 22 children in her class (7 children self-identified<sup>8</sup> as white, 5 as Black/African American, 4 as “Mixed/Bi-Racial”, 2 as Asian American, 1 as Latino, 1 as Mexican American, 1 as Mexican, 1 as Muslim, and 1 as Asian).

Besides English, several children in Ms. Honey’s class also spoke other languages including Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Thai. The racial and linguistic diversity of the children in Ms. Honey’s class in many ways mirrored the make-up of the school which, in turn, paralleled national demographics (Garcia & Cueller, 2006; Taylor, 2014; Wang, 2013). For example, the school’s population was reported to be predominantly white (52%) while the remaining 48% were identified as children of Color (36% African American, 9% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Other). Alongside my own experiences teaching in multicultural and multilingual communities, Community School J’s mirroring of national public school demographics informed my interest in understanding the research questions in a highly racially and ethnically diverse setting.

---

<sup>8</sup> The listed terms were those used by children to describe themselves during a data generation “who I am” activity. In an effort to amplify the voices of the children involved in the study, I use their self-selected terms here.

## **Focal Child Participants**

**Nicki (9-year-old, Mexican American, emergent bilingual girl).** In relation to many of her classmates, Nicki was small in appearance. Yet, she did not let her size deter her from making her presence known. When participating in class, for example, Nicki almost always had a question to ask or a story to share. Likewise, on the playground, Nicki led her peers in games of all sorts. Nicki frequently talked with me about her family which included not only her parents and her two older siblings, but also her dog, Simba. Her grandparents also appeared central to Nicki's experience and she described to me her desire to learn Spanish (a language spoken by the elders in her family), the fun she had swimming at her grandmother's house, and also how much she enjoyed sharing her favorite food—tamales—with her extended family. As a learner in Ms. Honey's class, Nicki frequently performed quite well working independently and at other times she requested additional assistance from her teacher or peers.

**Gem (11-year-old, Southeast Asian, multilingual girl).** Known for her signature platform shoes, Gem wrote imaginative stories and drew illustrations that incorporated anime-esque images. Self-described as a multilingual refugee from Southeast Asia, Gem said this was her second home since arriving to the United States the previous year. Gem enrolled in CSJ after living in North Carolina for just a few weeks. Gem and I talked about her adventures with the extended family members with whom her family shared an apartment. Gem—a speaker of three languages—only spoke English at school, but told me she spoke Thai at home with her family. During our schoolyard chats, she also told me about speaking Chinese with her grandmother, especially when she was assigned specific jobs around the apartment. Although Gem considered herself a strong reader and writer, she did not meet all the standardized benchmarks for literacy

learning and left the classroom frequently for individualized instruction in reading, writing, and speech.

### **Focal Adult Participants**

**Ms. Honey (34-year-old, white American, monolingual woman).** Because of our history working and learning together in a project the previous academic year and because she was always willing to engage in critical conversations, I asked Ms. Honey to participate in this study. Our shared history provided us a level of trust and understanding from which to continue to build our working partnership. Despite Ms. Honey initially agreeing to participate, she opted out of the larger study in early fall due to family circumstances. Upon seeing the multimodal composing work I engaged in with children in another third-grade class, however, Ms. Honey approached me about rejoining the study in the middle of the year.

As a cisgender, straight, middle-class woman from the area, Ms. Honey was representative of the majority of the school's faculty and staff, who were predominantly white. Ms. Honey brought twelve years of experience to the classroom, three of which were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at CSJ. I observed that Ms. Honey approached teaching with care and continually sought opportunities to enhance her skills not only in standardized content, but also in being a culturally sustaining teacher. She frequently engaged in professional development opportunities offered at the school or district level and, at the time of the study, she relied on external networks she developed through social media (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) to augment local learning opportunities.

**Researcher (31-year-old, white American, monolingual woman).** At the time of the study, I was in my third year as a researcher at CSJ and I had become a familiar face within the school for children, teachers, and caretakers. My role at the site was quite dynamic as I

participated as a co-player, co-teacher, and co-researcher across children's classrooms, on the playground, and in the cafeteria. I also attended and helped facilitate professional development for the teachers, especially during the year of the study, and I assisted with a summer camp for children focused on invention. I came to know caretakers through participating in field trips, the book and technology fairs, and family events at the school.

Additionally, I embodied a presence much like the majority of the adults CSJ as a white, cisgender woman. I could freely move about the campus and was often welcomed into events without question in a way that may not have been possible for a colleague of Color, a male peer, or a differently-abled person. My physical appearance, paired with my status at the nearby university, provided me great privilege and power in the space that is important to acknowledge. Power—implicit or explicit—impacted my relationships in the school community. I both observed the children at CSJ and worked to establish relationships with them. I shared my own stories and participated in conversations, composing, or play with children to cultivate reciprocity and other practices fitting the description of humanizing research (Paris & Winn, 2014).

I negotiated my positioning with the administration, faculty, and staff. Like in my previous projects at CSJ, I dressed more casually than the other adults. For example, I often wore a sweatshirt from my university with jeans and shoes that allowed me to engage at recess in the same way that the children did. I sat where the children sat, be it on the classroom carpet for a read aloud or the gym floor for an assembly. While my physical presence (e.g., age, size, and status as an adult) posed limits for my complete involvement to mirror that of a child, I attempted to minimize these differences as much as possible (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

## Overview of the Focal Unit

Although the premise of the persuasive unit was the brainchild of Ms. Honey, she suggested we collaboratively discuss how the last assignment of the unit would take shape. Ms. Honey was very adamant about having alignment across the daily read alouds she did in class and what, ultimately, children would be asked to do. Hence, we planned out six weeks of read alouds to establish a common background knowledge about community activists, (im)migration, and the legislative process.

Ms. Honey opened the unit with the book *One* (Otoshi, 2008) and included other texts such as *Separate Is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014). In addition to the shorter picture books she read to her class each morning, Ms. Honey also read a related chapter book to her students after lunch each day. Written in prose, *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007) follows a young boy from the continent of Africa as he engaged with new cultural and linguistic practices in the United States. Like the picture books, this longer text provided Ms. Honey an opportunity to explore some of the trials and tribulations of uprooting from one context to another.

Ms. Honey also provided information to the children about focal individuals (e.g., “Immigrant Inventors”) and concepts (e.g., “Executive Order”) while engaging children in critical literacies conversations (Luke, 2014; Vasquez, 2014). We created a GoogleSlide deck (1 slide/day) that was shared in morning meeting. The slides provided children reference points for 1) building their understanding about kids making a difference in the world by taking action, 2) providing the children information about refugees and immigrants in the United States, and 3) broadening the children’s understanding of having someone representing them in Congress.

Because a migration across national boundaries was abstract for many of the children, we sought multiple opportunities to “show” children what the experience could entail and discuss

the reasons such crossings were sometimes necessary. For instance, we incorporated videos of (im)migrant children describing the circumstances of their departures or arrivals from one country to another.

Finding information about children identified as refugees was often easier to come by than stories of young children crossing the Mexican-United States border. Thus, we invited Dr. Jason De León (2015)—an anthropologist and archaeologist studying the clandestine migration of individuals at the border—to virtually join the children for a discussion. Prior to this conversation, children had read *Pancho Rabbit and Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013), an allegorical tale emphasizing circumstances that push families to cross the border and obstacles they face in their pursuit to do so. Dr. De León built on the ideas presented in the story by grounding the tale in real-life. He showed children objects individuals crossing the border left behind on their journey including water jugs spray-painted black (to prevent it from becoming too hot), a child's stuffed animal, and backpacks with messages of love and hope written on them.

After extending children's background knowledge on refugee and (im)migrant experiences, they wrote letters to their state legislators. Ms. Honey required children to not only state their opinion with reasons, but she also encouraged them to provide supporting evidence for their claims based on the shared readings and discussions they completed as a class. Once a written text had been produced, children crafted multimodal compositions using a variety of digital and analog tools. Children selected from a variety of tools for their second composition including digital cameras and tablets as well as pipe cleaners, playdough, and tape. Using these materials, children created digital products like photographs and videos of skits as well as concrete objects such as LEGO compositions and three-dimensional texts.

## **Data Generation and Analysis**

In addition to the persuasive unit materials generated with Ms. Honey, data was sourced in several other ways. Participant observation (n= 93 hours) was the primary mode of data generation, accompanied by weekly field notes, children's written and multimodal artifacts, and one-on-one interviews with the children and their teacher. Informal conversations with children occurred throughout the unit and varied in length. I conducted one formal interview with each child that lasted an average of 20 minutes. I also engaged in weekly informal interviews with Ms. Honey. When I observed the writing block 4x/week, I audio- and/or video-recorded each session. Ms. Honey audio-recorded the related daily read alouds and class discussions about the GoogleSlides that occurred during the morning meeting block. Additionally, she shared materials used for the planning and delivery of lessons.

I began initial analysis by looking within and across the 22 children's written letters and accompanying multimodal artifacts as data sources to identify salient, topical themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). I then used the following questions to guide my analysis: a) What themes are present related to children's positions on welcoming refugees and/or (im)migrants?; b) What modes are used by children to (re)present their positioning (e.g., what modes are used and/or in which focal artifacts do they appear)?; c) How do children use rhetorical strategies to write themselves as civic participants? In the coding excerpt of Gem's written text (Table 3), I demonstrate how I coded children's print-base texts to account for rhetorical strategies children used and personal connections they made to the issue of (im)migration.

The children used elements of writing that would, in many respects, be recognized as being beyond the scope of third grade. For example, through my analysis, I noticed how children made sophisticated rhetorical moves in their calls to action. Using the lens of Aristotelian



rhetoric, I read noted how children used logos (reasoning based on logical appeals), ethos (reasoning based on credibility appeals), and pathos (reasoning based on feelings and/or emotional appeals) in their texts. But, children used other persuasive tools in their alphabetic writing (as in Gem’s letter in Table 3) and across their more digital/analog composing. Children engaged cultural rhetorics (Powell, et al., 2014) and used multiple communicative modes to both personalize their composing and position themselves as directly impacted by (and implicated in) the issues at hand. Finally, children used stories and relationality as they demonstrated a deep understanding of the politics related to critical issues. Through my analysis, their constellated approach to composing became more apparent.

Table 3. Coding Example: Gem’s Persuasive Letter

Dear Rep Smith,	
I think we should welcome refugees into our country so people don’t have to worry about wars and people coming to hurt them.	-Draws on PATHOS to evoke emotional response from reader
I used to be a refugee because we did not have money or food.	-PERSONALIZES composing by inserting self into the argument
People can rely on us . We are a helpful country because people go for a reason to get a good education.	-Engages rhetorical strategy of ETHOS as she builds on her credibility as both a refugee and her experiences in the U.S.
You should tell Donald Trump you do not want t build a wall or ban refugees.	-Connects to POLITICS of larger issues of (im)migration
I appreciate your help. Please send a response letting me know if you are able to pass a bill that would protect refugees.	
Sincerely, Gem, age 11	

### Calling on Congress and Citizens to Act: Exploring Children’s Persuasive Artifacts

In the findings, I highlight two data glimpses that address the research questions. In doing so, I outline how a pedagogy of a compositional fluency constructed possibilities for children to

engage in critical literacies and demonstrate how children engaged traditional rhetorical strategies like logos, ethos, and pathos to (re)present their opinions about (im)migration. In Data Glimpse 1, I show how the focal children composed persuasive texts using logic (logos), emotions or feelings (pathos), and their own and others' credibility (ethos) in both alphabetic and other forms of composing.<sup>4</sup> Then, in Data Glimpse 2, I illuminate how children engaged cultural rhetorics to personalize their composing practices and/or positioned themselves as directly impacted by the issues at hand. As evidenced across the findings, children demonstrated a deep interest in critical literacies and used sophisticated rhetorical strategies to produce persuasive compositions to (re)present their views on (im)migration across modes.

### **Data Glimpse 1: The Subtleties of Children's Rhetorical Strategies**

**Logos: Rationalizing Action on (Im)Migration.** Across their compositions, many children focused on the imperative of welcoming refugees and drew upon logical appeals to make their case. As evidenced in these brief examples, children used elements of persuasive writing, including voicing a call to action, by attempting to use logos to persuade their audience. Several children highlighted the fact that refugees are, in many ways, homeless. For example, one white boy, Mark described in his letter to his Congressional Representative that a high number of refugees had their homes destroyed by war. Similarly, a white girl, Savanna, cited several videos that showed refugees living in camps, without a home to call their own, as she wrote, "no one should be homeless." Likewise, one Black girl, Sierra, mentioned that "lots of children are suffering in little camps."

---

<sup>4</sup> I am aware of critiques of logos, pathos, and ethos (elements of rhetoric attributed to Aristotle) as a Western way of viewing the world, but I opted to use this because it is a common framing for teaching and learning of rhetoric at the (post-)secondary level in the United States.

Clarence, a Latino boy, offered specific statistics about the striking number of Syrian refugees. Clarence made a reasonable claim and then offered evidence in support of that claim. By drawing on class discussions about the Syrian refugee crisis and the number of refugees that are children worldwide, Clarence argued, “children shouldn’t have to suffer” and then claimed that “we [citizens of the United States] should welcome refugees no matter religion or skin type.” He then called for his Representative to “protect refugees and give them sanctuary in our safe country.” In doing so, Clarence drew on syllogism and deductive logic to move from a general claim (e.g., children being homeless and suffering is bad) to make a specific call to action (e.g., the U.S. should welcome and protect refugees), a common pattern across children’s compositions.

Nicki, a focal child participant, served as another primary example of using logical reasoning in her written letter as she advocated for refugees to be welcomed to the United States. In the example that follows, Nicki used inductive reasoning as she cited specific circumstances refugees face that she deemed inhumane. Specifically, Nicki related both her letter and her multimodal text to the ease of access to resources and safety in the United States as compared to in a refugee camp, similar ideas to what many of her peers described. In her letter to her Senator, Nicki wrote:

*While refugee camps are helpful they are dirty, crowded plus have few resources.*

*America would be more comfortable. Where refugees live they don’t have a lot of schools. But in america we have free schools.*

Additionally, Nicki made claims in her multimodal composition—a three-dimensional book—about how refugees often lack a home of their own, stating many instead must sleep in tents or share spaces with other families. In her three-dimensional book, Nicki’s use of a logical appeal

was made quite clear. She created a visual using popsicle sticks, tape, feathers, and string alongside alphabetic print that depicted “how they [refugees] sleep in their houses in the refugee camps” going on to state that “it’s like supporting evidence on the next page” where she illuminated “how they would sleep in America.” Not only did she use logic as a base for her argument, but she again used inductive reasoning and examples as supporting evidence. Additionally, she invoked a cultural rhetorics approach by storying which I detail later.

Nicki and her classmates did not necessarily rely on statistics or quantitative data to prove their claims (which some may suggest is the epitome of *logos*). Instead, Nikki and her peers articulated “facts” as they learned them in class in order to substantiate their claims, indicating a beginner’s understanding of how to utilize *logos* in an argument. While many children used the rhetorical strategy of *logos* to sway their audience, children also worked to establish credibility as an author in order to advocate for change by putting to work the strategy of *ethos*.

**Ethos: Building Credibility and Advocating for Change.** As mentioned in the discussion of Nicki’s texts, access to resources was a recurring issue raised in class discussions and it appeared in many of the children’s multimodal compositions. Children drew upon their personal experiences as citizens living in the United States while nodding to the national authorities involved in issues of (im)migration. In addition to the calls for Congress to open the United States’ proverbial doors in order to provide shelter and safety, water was another focal point. Many children communicated their ideas about the necessity of welcoming refugees based on their own credibility as experts related to ease of access to water. For example, Lily—a self-identified Muslim girl—argued for refugees to be welcomed to the United States because “everyone deserves the essential of life,” including water.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, other children emphasized

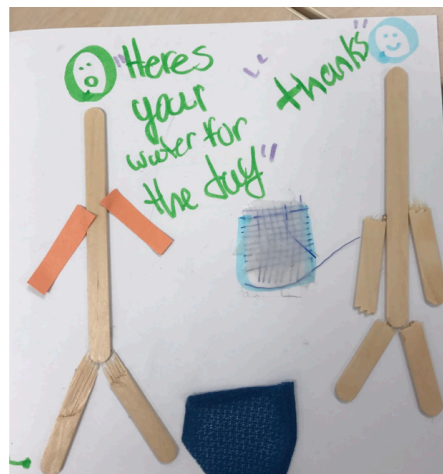
---

<sup>5</sup> While for many of the children in the class had daily access to clean water, I would like to recognize the catastrophe of the Flint water crisis as it persists still today. For more information on what happened in Flint, please

the long wait refugees face at camps noting that many individuals have to wait several hours for just one jug of water. Clarence, for instance, wrote:

*The last reason why I think that we should let refugees in America is because access to clean water is a human right. All refugee camps give the refugees one jug of water but they have to wait several hours.*

Nicki built on a similar idea in her letter to her Senator. Ease of access to clean water was a central theme as she also discussed the availability of water in her multimodal composition, an informational book. This second text was one that was, as Nicki stated, “talking about how the refugees live at the refugee camps.” Nicki’s book opened with a three-dimensional visual depicting “a worker” and “a refugee” exchanging a bucket of water (see *Figure 12*).



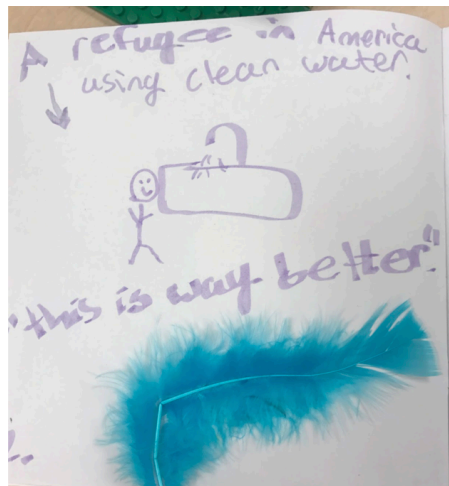
*Figure 12.* Nicki’s Multimodal Informational Book, p. 1

Nicki’s knowledge about the genre/form of persuasive texts also informed her decision-making as an author. For example, in her own words, Nicki stated that *Figure 12* showed “how in the refugee camps they only have one water [jug] but when, if they move to America, they can have clean water.” Thus, this page served as the logical appeal she made as to why refugees should be

---

visit: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis>

welcomed to the U.S. In our interview, Nicki then told me the following page was “supporting evidence” for her claim because it showcased clean water flowing from a sink (*Figure 13*). In this example, Nicki drew on logos as her evidence by providing a hard number (e.g., one jug of water), but then used ethos for her claim as she built on her personal knowledge and experiences about the ease of access to water.



*Figure 13.* Nicki’s Multimodal Informational Book, p. 2

Nicki used story, a key tenant of cultural rhetorics, to compose a persuasive message. She used the written word alongside craft materials, as evidenced in these two images. In the first image, Nicki used a variety of materials to show a worker at a refugee camp handing a refugee a jug of water. In the second image, Nicki highlighted how, from her experience in the United States, clean water often flows with ease in many homes. By using elements of story, Nicki’s argument resembled an advertisement as she used logic and, in turn, ethos and implied her own credibility based on her experience as a citizen living in America.

Other children in the class also made use of ethos as they developed their line of reasoning based on their own credibility as an authority. Clarence and Savanna, for instance, both wrote about the imperative for all children to be educated. In his letter, Clarence wrote:

*We can give them [refugees] a good education. Children deserve a good education. Schools in American are for everyone and are free.*

In this excerpt, Clarence builds on his own knowledge and authority by drawing on his personal experiences and class conversations about access to education. Savanna shared a similar sentiment writing, “everybody deserves a edication.”

For several children, they made connections to authority, even imagining themselves as the leader of the United States. Sierra was among such children. In her letter, she wrote:

*What if Donald trump was a refugee and I was the president. And he was in a tent in a dangerous country I would let all of them [refugees] in the U.S.*

Sierra’s letter exemplified her understanding about the role of the 45<sup>th</sup> President as someone with the ethos to make decisions regarding persons far beyond the borders of the United States. In this composition, she highlighted how, with the same ease that the 5<sup>th</sup> Executive Order, a.k.a. the #MuslimBan, was established with the flick of a pen, individuals could just as easily be welcomed to the country. Simultaneously, she engaged cultural rhetorics practices of relations with her proclamation of what she would do.

Like others, Katie—a self-identified white girl, called attention to President Trump as she called for action. In her letter, Katie wrote that her Representative should “persuade people to Not like the wall so when in court they won’t let him [the President] take money and build this worthless wall.” Katie attended to several levels of authority in this quote—the President, Congress, and constituents. In a later part of her letter, Katie argued against the border wall and suggested that it “tears people apart.” She suggested individuals that are forced to be separated by the wall may be able to take legal action against the 45<sup>th</sup> President, writing, “wouldn't they be

able to sue Trump?” In this way, not only did Katie allude to the power of the President, but she also alluded to the power of the people and the courts, making use of ethos.

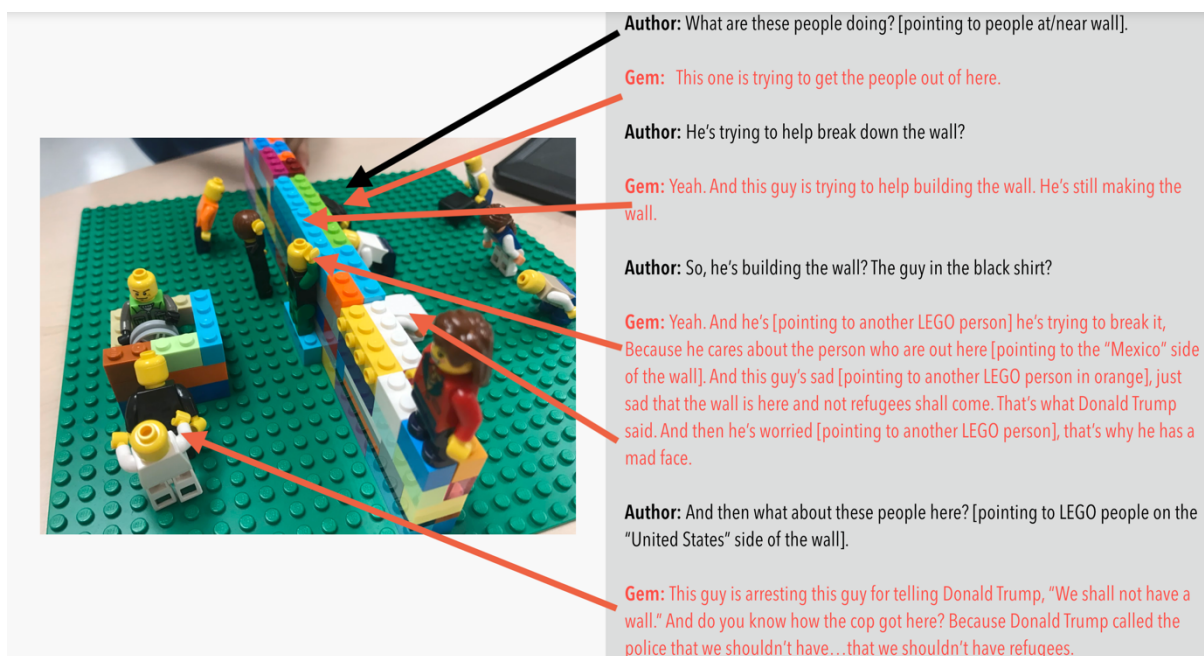
Across these examples, children made sophisticated use of the rhetorical strategy of ethos. For many, they first built their own ethos as writers in an effort to establish credibility and, in turn, substantiate their argument. Although these children were not always explicit in their moves, the persuasive texts above highlight how children used subtle means to engage the rhetorical strategy of ethos.

**Pathos: Emoting Feelings as Evidence.** While many children based their reasoning on logos and ethos, they also attempted to evoke an emotional response in their readers by making use of pathos as they storied relationships. Most often, children called for their Congressional representatives to take action on issues of (im)migration because, as Sierra—a Black girl—wrote, “Refugees Have had a lot of heartbreak.” Sierra furthered her argument against the wall as well, writing, “I think the wall should not be build because what if the Mexicans want to see their family”—the cause of their “heartbreak.” Likewise, Luis—a Mexican American boy, wrote about the necessity for folks to defy the Trump’s desire for a border wall with Mexico because “it separates people from their loved ones.” Similarly, his white peer, Fidget, noted that, with a border wall in place, “people don’t get to visit each other.” Like these young boys, in her letter, Sierra argued against the wall as well, writing, “I think the wall should not be build because what if the Mexicans want to see their family.”

Across their compositions, children used the rhetorical move of pathos most often when discussing the issue of the border wall. One child that exemplified her knowledge about the contentiousness of the border wall issue was Gem. This was quite evident to me as we discussed her second text, a LEGO construction of the border wall (*Figure 14*). In her description of this



LEGO text, Gem noted the emotions of various individuals on (quite literally) the two sides of the wall.



*Figure 14. Gem's LEGO Construction (Part I)*

Using a variety of LEGO people—which were marked by distinct features such as their clothes, hair, or facial expressions—Gem expressed a nuanced understanding of the rhetoric about the potential for a border wall. Gem talked about “care” for another person as she described emotions and feelings of the LEGO people in her composition. In doing so, she alluded to the rhetorical move of pathos. She stories LEGO people as sad or mad about the proposed wall and spoke directly about why this was the case. For example, she highlighted one person’s sadness “that the wall is here and not refugees shall come” while another felt anger because he was worried about similar issues.

In her oral description, Gem also highlighted multiple outcomes for the proposed border wall. Among them—individuals helping to build and protect the wall as well as other persons who may attempt to take the wall down. Perhaps most interesting was her inclusion of persons

from countries to the south of the United States that would still attempt to cross the border, even despite the building of a border wall.

Detachment from one's family due to (im)migration policy was a primary concern for the children. At the same time, many children also wrote about their concerns about how the border wall might impact the environment, including animals whose habitats would be impacted if the wall were to be erected. Katie described specific animals that would be impacted by the border wall, writing:

*The wall would hurt the beautiful Gray Wolf, Jaguar, and Ocelot. Poor animals.*

*It splits animal herds too.*

Unlike most of her peers, however, Katie called into question her Senator's care for how a border wall would impact the "precious environment," asking in her letter, "Don't you care about the environment as much as I do Mrs. Senator?"

Luis also made a plea by making clear how the personal is political as he connected his care for his sister to his concern for the environment. For instance, in his letter, Luis wrote:

*If a wall happens the ocelot could go extinct and the ocelot is my sister's favorite animal.*

Another child, Phi—a self-identified Vietnamese boy, questioned where funds may come from in order to build the wall in his letter and multimodal composition. In doing so, Phi drew on the words from a video we watched of Toby, a white, seven-year-old Arkansas boy who questioned his Republican Representative about this topic. Phi wrote about his concern that PBS kids shows might "get taken down to get money for the wall to be built" and told about how his little brother "will be heartbroken" because his brother "loves those shows." For many of the

children, reasoning with pathos was used to evoke a personal reaction from their audience and, hopefully, entice them to advocate on behalf of the concerns of their youngest constituents.

### **Data Glimpse 2: Reflecting (on) the Refugee Experience**

As evidenced in the aforementioned examples of children's composing, the students in Ms. Honey's class used a variety of materials in addition to alphabetic print to make rhetorical appeals, offer reasons, and include supporting evidence in their multimodal artifacts. A second pattern that emerged across children's artifacts was their use of cultural rhetorics to story how they are implicated by changes to (im)migration policies. For instance, Gem used her status as a recent refugee to center her identity in relation to shared class read alouds about refugee and (im)migrant children and in her written compositions for legislators. In her letter to her United States Representative (Table 1), she called on her Representative to protect refugees. Further, she asked her Representative to "welcome refugees into our country so people don't have to worry about wars and people coming to hurt them." Gem then cited what necessitated her family's move to the United States, including her family's lack of money and food.

Gem also noted the promise that comes with becoming American citizens, including access to public education and a decolonial imaginary. America, she wrote, is "a helpful country" and "People can rely on us." She closed by asking that her Representative "should tell Donald Trump you do not want to build a wall or ban refugees." Gem used the opportunity to compose something for her Congressional representative (and, arguably, her teacher, peers, and myself) to center her lived (hi)story as a participant in culture. Yet, while Gem appeared to have a rich understanding about immigration policies as evidenced in her alphabetic text, she also proved to have deep knowledge about the larger political landscape regarding (im)migration as was evidenced in a later discussion about her second persuasive composition.

Gem grounded her letter in her refugee experience and in her multimodal composition she troubled the notion of a border wall through her construction of a model wall with LEGOs (*Figure 15*)..



*Figure 15. Gem's LEGO Construction (Part II)*

The design of Gem's multimodal construction, at first glance, may appear a simple idea. However, her composition was more than what met the eye. For example, she included proponents of the wall (e.g., Donald Trump) and presumed opposition (e.g., Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). Through our conversation, Gem's storying of the larger political and cultural landscape became quite evident.

I find it important to pause here to emphasize that, upon sharing this data with Ms. Honey, she stressed how imperative it was for a larger audience to understand that, for many children, including multilingual children like Gem, "traditional" print-based writing was something they were challenged by. She described her appreciation for a pedagogy of a compositional fluency because children marked as "below grade level" in standardized literacy practices were provided new avenues to demonstrate their deep understanding of content (Saidy,

2018). In turn, Ms. Honey's personal knowledge about the children's capabilities for not only interrogating texts, but *producing* them increased as well.

Through opportunities to engage in multiple modes of composing alongside alphabetic print, most children went beyond sympathy to "put themselves in someone else's shoes" (Pandya & Pagilao, 2015). In doing so, children enacted positionings on critical issues in meaningful ways as evidenced within and across the specific findings. For example, Nicki highlighted challenges refugees and (im)migrants face as they journey across borders and settle in new communities. Others, like Gem, spoke with authority, drawing both from her story as a refugee and her knowledge about the larger political landscape.

### **Conclusions**

In the findings, I highlighted how the children in Ms. Honey's class used analog and digital technologies alongside alphabetic text and print to (re)present their views on whether refugees and (im)migrants should be welcomed to the United States. Although the rhetorical strategies of logos, ethos, and pathos were not explicitly taught, children made sophisticated rhetorical moves to (re)present their views across a variety of communicative practices. Many of the children engaged in cultural rhetorics practices as they storied their lived experiences and past composing practices as they attempted to sway their Congressional representatives. In this way, they engaged in the process of developing a compositional fluency while producing critical literacies texts as they put their thoughts into calls for social action as they took their constellated approach to composing that emphasized story, relations, and decoloniality.

Prior to the start of the unit, Ms. Honey told me she desired to "help them [the children] understand they have a voice" and that there is someone in the world working on their behalf (e.g., legislators). By grounding the unit in everyday conversations about equity and justice

related to pressing issues of (im)migration, Ms. Honey engaged in critical pedagogy. In turn, she fostered “critical readers and communicators” (Comber & Nixon, 2014, p. 93) as nearly all children used rhetorical strategies to challenge social systems and structures of power towards a more just and equitable society (Finn, 2014) as illuminated in the findings.

The focal curricular writing unit for this study serves as one example of how elementary children and their teacher benefitted from integrating the humanities and contemporary justice issues of (im)migration in meaningful ways. Required by her administration to teach children in her class how to write a persuasive text, Ms. Honey took a critical approach to this mandate as she opted for children to discuss crucial topics and current events. While this was in part driven by Ms. Honey’s desire to engage children in writing for a real audience (e.g., Congressional leaders from their state), she thought it was imperative to ground the unit in a current issue of equity. Ms. Honey encouraged children to both think about (im)migration issues and actively engage with/in them. Ms. Honey selected this topic for two reasons.<sup>3</sup> First, and as she stated, she wanted to “ground everything we [as a class] are talking about in something real.” And, second, she sought to demonstrate how, despite their youth, children *can* critically engage with political issues locally and globally (Campano, Ghiso, & Sanchez, 2013; Pandya & Pagilao, 2015).

As noted in the introduction of this paper, some adults may think that such topics are best reserved for a later point in children’s lives (Halvorsen, 2017). But, educational researchers and teachers must create space and opportunities for children to engage in critical literacies and we must also open opportunities for children to compose with a variety of communicative practices and to cultivate a compositional fluency. In doing so, adults—as facilitators of many of

---

<sup>3</sup> Here I find it important to note that, while much of the wider scholarship about critical literacies calls for children to self-select the topic, I still read the teaching and learning done in Ms. Honey’s classroom as aligned with the principles of critical literacies.

children's schooling experiences—can sustain children's diverse cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing. In turn, children might be offered new opportunities to know, to be, and *to be known*.

Critical literacies can provide an important avenue for engaging young children in meaningful discussions about issues of equity and justice as “human agency and informed action” (Luke, 2014, p. 20) are highly dependent on access to information as well as a structure for how to critically analyze texts and media. Cumulatively, integrating literacies and social studies open new doors for children and teachers to enact curriculum together as they explore how power circulates (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2014).

While the data presented here aligns well with previous studies exploring children's engagement with critical literacies (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Vasquez, 2004), this work also has important implications for children's writing and, in particular, for amplifying their experiences and valuing their voices. The personalized composing exemplified in the work of Nicki, Gem, and their classmates, highlights for me the imperative of centering children as co-producers of knowledge. As Mirra and Garcia (2017) suggest, civic interrogation is a necessary tool for children and youth to engage in as we work toward creating more just futures. Thus, we, as adults, must shift our perspective as we interrogate critical social issues with young learners and ask not “What do we tell the children?” but rather, “*What can the children tell us?*”

Across the stories of the children in this paper, I have highlighted how cultivating a compositional fluency may be one avenue for engaging children in critical literacies as they interrogate larger social issues. This pedagogical approach puts children at the forefront of political discussions and not only provides them opportunities to engage in a variety of

communicative modes, but also opens space for their lived (hi)stories and experiences to be amplified.



## REFERENCES

## REFERENCES

- Albaldejo, T. (2016). Cultural rhetoric: Foundations and perspectives. *Res Rhetorica*, 17-29.
- Alvermann, D. & Hagood, M. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in "new times." *Journal of Educational Research*, 93, 193-205.
- Applegate, K. (2007). *Home of the brave*. New York: Macmillian.
- Axelrod, Y. (2014). "¿Tu te acuerdas de ganchulinas?": Longitudinal research with young emergent bilinguals. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 15(2), 94-108.
- Bratta, P. & Powell, M. (2016). Introduction to the special issue: Entering the cultural rhetorics conversation, *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*.
- Brownell, C. J. (2018). (Re)Imagining children's writing: Creative language play(giarism) in the elementary English language arts classroom, *Language Arts*, 65(4), 218-228.
- Brownell, C.J. (2017a). Language identity in the elementary English language arts classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(2), 225-228.
- Brownell, C. J. (2017b). Mandated curricula as figured world: A case-study of identity, power, and writing in elementary English language arts. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 16(2), 252-267.
- Britzman, D. (2000). "The question of belief: Writing poststructural ethnography" In E. A. St. Pierre and W. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 27-40). New York: Routledge.
- Barrett, M., & Buchanan-Barrow, E. (2005). Emergent themes in the study of children's understanding of society. In M. Barrett & E. Buchanan-Barrow (Eds.), *Children's understanding of society: Studies in developmental psychology* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Buchholz, B. A. (2015). Drama as serious (and not so serious) business: Critical play, generative conflicts, and moving bodies in a 1:1 classroom. *Language Arts*, 93(1), 7-24.
- Campano, G., Ghiso, M. P., & Sánchez, L. (2013). "Nobody knows the...amount of a person": Elementary students critiquing dehumanization through organic critical literacies. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(1), 98-125.
- Comber, B. (2012). Mandated literacy assessment and the reorganization of teachers' work: Federal policy, local effects. *Critical Studies in Education*, 53(2), 119-136.
- Comber, B., & Nixon, H. (2014). Critical literacy across the curriculum: learning to read,

- question, and rewrite designs. In J. Zacher Pandya & J. Avila (Eds.), *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts* (pp. 83-97). New York: Routledge.
- De León, J. (2015). *The land of open graves: Living and dying on the migrant trail* (Vol. 36). University of California Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2013). *Rewriting the basics: Literacy learning in children's cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. & Genishi, C. (2005) *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press and the National Council for Research on Language and Literacy.
- Finn, P. J. (2014). Unrest in Grosvenor Square: Preparing for power in elite boarding schools, working-class public schools, and socialist sunday schools. In J. Z. Pandya & J. Avila (Eds.), *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts* (pp. 45-56). New York: Routledge.
- Exley, B., Woods, A., & Dooley, K. (2014). Thinking critically in the land of princesses and giants: The affordances and challenges of critical approaches in the early years. In J. Z. Pandya & J. Avila (Eds.), *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts* (pp. 59-70). New York: Routledge.
- Garcia, E. E., & Cuellar, D. (2006). Who are these linguistically and culturally diverse students?. *Teachers College Record*, 108(11), 2220-2246.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In Y. S. Lincoln & N. K. Denzin, *Turning points in qualitative research: Tying knots in a handkerchief* (pp. 143-168). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Genishi, C., & Dyson, A. H. (2015). *Children, language, and literacy: Diverse learners in diverse times*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Haas, A. M. (2013). Race, rhetoric, and technology: A case study of decolonial technical communication theory, methodology, and pedagogy. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 26(3), 277-310.
- Halvorsen, A. L. (2017). Children's learning and understanding in their social world. In M. M. Manfra & C. M. Bolick (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research* (pp. 385-413) Boston, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M., Lannen, R., & Ryan, C. L. (2017). Critical literacy and transgender

- topics in an upper elementary classroom: A portrait of possibility. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 13(1), 15-27.
- Horner, B., Lockridge, T., & Selfe, C. (2015). Translinguality, transmodality, and difference: Exploring dispositions and change in language and learning. Digital Monograph. *Enculturation Intermezzo*.
- Husbye, N. E., Buchholz, B., Coggin, L. S., Powell, C. W., & Wohlwend, K. E. (2012). Critical lessons and playful literacies: Digital media in PK-2 classrooms. *Language Arts*, 90(2), 82-92.
- Hull, G. A., Stornaiuolo, A., & Sahni, U. (2010). Cultural citizenship and cosmopolitan practice: Global youth communicate online. *English Education*, 42(4), 331-367.
- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. London: Routledge.
- Janks, H., & Vasquez, V. (2011). Critical literacy revisited: writing as critique. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(1), 1-6.
- Johnson, E., & Vasudevan, L. (2014). Looking and listening for critical literacy: Recognizing ways youth perform critical literacy in school. In J. Zacher Pandya & J. Avila (Eds.), *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts* (pp. 98-112). New York: Routledge.
- Jones, S. (2006). *Girls, social class, and literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Kuby, C. R., & Rucker, T. G. (2016). *Go be a writer!: Expanding the curricular boundaries of literacy learning with children*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Larson, J. (2006). Multiple literacies, curriculum, and instruction in early childhood and elementary school. *Theory Into Practice*, 45(4), 319-329.
- Larson, J., & Marsh, J. (2005). *Making literacy real: Theories and practices for learning and teaching*. London: SAGE.
- Luke, A. (2004). Two takes on the critical. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.) *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 21-29). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Luke, A. (2014). Defining critical literacy. In J. Z. Pandya & J. Avila (Eds.), *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts* (pp. 19-31). New York: Routledge.
- Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1999). Further notes on the Four Resources model: *Reading Online*. <http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html>

- Michael, A. (2016). What do we tell the children? *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-should-we-tell-the-children\\_us\\_5822aa90e4b0334571e0a30b](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-should-we-tell-the-children_us_5822aa90e4b0334571e0a30b)
- Mills, K. A., & Exley, B. (2014). Time, space, and text in the elementary school digital writing classroom. *Written Communication*, 31(4), 434-469.
- Mirra, N., & Garcia, A. (2017). Civic participation reimagined: Youth interrogation and innovation in the multimodal public sphere. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 136-158.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Mukavetz, A. M. R. (2014). Towards a cultural rhetorics methodology: Making research matter with multi-generational women from the Little Traverse Bay Band. *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, 5(1), 108-125.
- National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]. (2016). Professional knowledge for the teaching of writing. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teaching-writing>
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-93.
- Otoshi, K. (2008). *One*. Chicago: Ko Kids Books.
- Pandya, J., & Ávila, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts*. New York: Routledge.
- Pandya, J. Z., Pagdilao, K. C., & Kim, E. A. (2015). Transnational children orchestrating competing voices in multimodal, digital autobiographies. *Teachers College Record*, 117(7).
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy?: A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100.
- Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (2014). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Parker, W. C. (2003). Promoting justice: Two views. In W. C. Parker (Ed.), *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life* (pp. 54-75). New York: Teachers College

Press.

Powell, M. (2012). 2012 CCCC Chair's Address: Stories take place: A performance in one act. *College Composition and Communication*, 64(2), 383-406.

Powell, M., Levy, D., Riley-Mukavetz, A., Brooks-Gillies, M., Novotny, M., & Fisch-Ferguson, J. (2014). Our story begins here: Constellating cultural rhetorics. *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, 18, 46.

Ranker, J., Lowery, R., & Fink, L. (2010). The interactive potential of multiple media: A new look at inquiry projects. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(3), 36.

Saidy, C. (2018). Beyond words on the page: Using multimodal composing to aid in the transition to first-year writing. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 45(3), 255-273.

Selfe, C. L. (2009). The movement of air, the breath of meaning: Aurality and multimodal composing. *College Composition and Communication*, (60)4, 616-663.

Shipka, J. (2011). *Toward a composition made whole*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Shipka, J. (2016). Transmodality in/and processes of making: Changing dispositions and practice. *College English*, 78(3), 250-257.

Skerrett, A. (2013). Building multiliterate and multilingual writing practices and identities. *English Education*, 45(4), 322-360.

Souto-Manning, M. (2007). Immigrant families and children (re)develop identities in a new context. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(6), 399-405.

Souto-Manning, M. (2009). Negotiating culturally responsive pedagogy through multicultural children's literature: Towards critical democratic literacy practices in a first-grade classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 9(1), 50-74.

Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice* (Vol. 9). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Paul. "The Next America." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 10, 2014). <http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/>

Tonatiuh, D. (2014). *Separate is never equal: Sylvia Mendez and her family's fight for desegregation*. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers.

Tonatiuh, D. (2013). *Pancho Rabbit and the coyote: A migrant's tale*. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers.

- Vasquez, V. (2004). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.
- Vasquez, V. (2014). Using the everyday to engage in critical literacy with young children. In K. Winograd (Ed.), *Critical literacies and young learners: Connecting classroom practice to the Common Core* (pp. 44-54). New York: Routledge.
- Wang, H. L. (2013, June 13) Census shows continued change in America's racial makeup. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/06/13/191266414/census-shows-continued-change-in-americas-racial-maketiip>
- Wargo, J. M. (2015). "Every selfie tells a story...": LGBTQ youth livestreams and new media narratives as connective identity texts. *New Media & Society*, 19(4), 560-578.
- Wargo, J. M. (2017). Rhythmic rituals and emergent listening: Intra-activity, sonic sounds and digital composing with young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 17(3), 392-408.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2013). Playing Star Wars under the (teacher's) radar: Detecting kindergartners' action texts and embodied literacies. In V. M. Vasquez & J. W. Wood (Eds.), *Perspectives and provocations in early childhood education* [National Council of Teacher of English Early Childhood Assembly Yearbook] (pp. 105-115). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Woodard, R., & Kline, S. (2016). Lessons from sociocultural writing research for implementing the Common Core State Standards. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(2), 207-216.
- Yancey, K. B. (2004). Made not only in words: Composition in a new key. *College Composition and Communication*, 56(2), 297-328.
- Yoon, H. (2013). Rewriting the curricular script: Teachers and children translating writing practices in a kindergarten classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(2), 148.
- Yoon, H. S. (2014). Can I play with you? The intersection of play and writing in a kindergarten classroom. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 15(2), 109-121.
- Zapotosky, M. (2017, February 6). Federal appeals court decides to schedule hearing on Trump travel order. *Washington Post*, Retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/opposition-to-trump-travel-ban-grows-as-key-court-decision-looms/2017/02/06/d766ec7c-ec74-11e6-9662-6eedf1627882\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.2fff82f5074b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/opposition-to-trump-travel-ban-grows-as-key-court-decision-looms/2017/02/06/d766ec7c-ec74-11e6-9662-6eedf1627882_story.html?utm_term=.2fff82f5074b)





## **CHAPTER 4: What do you do with an Elliot?: Reflection and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research in the English Language Arts Classroom**

This reflexive paper is written to highlight how many of my long-held values as a researcher, teacher, and person were brought into conflict as I came to know a white child named Elliot during the spring of 2017. Many of these values—for racial equity, for strength-based understandings of children, for the centering of continually marginalized perspectives, and for naming my own whiteness and privilege—were brought to the fore in new ways through my engagement with Elliot, his teacher, and his peers. As his peers wrote letters to their Congressional representatives arguing against the GOP Administration’s proposed restrictions to (im)migration, Elliot claimed such measures were important and necessary.

Elliot’s white teacher—Ms. Honey—appeared bewildered, frustrated, disappointed, and a bit lost about how to engage with him. Together, we reflected on the tensions we felt. This included our own inclinations that what Elliot was espousing was hate speech and yet, we were uncertain about how to respond or help him to critically consider how there were likely very real consequences for his peers to be personally impacted by the GOP Administration’s policies. Rather, we wanted to maintain space for children to engage in the act of writing a persuasive piece and gain the understanding that, for each claim, supporting evidence must be provided. Thus, as a white woman writing about a white child, this writing of Elliot is also a writing of myself and the tensions I continue to encounter as a white person.

\*\*\*

While talking with a friend about being stuck on how to write about my encounters with Elliot—a child I met during the 2016-2017 academic year, I recalled the work of Lather & Smithies (1997) and my admiration of the not only their storytelling, but also the means they

used to do so. In their work, Lather & Smithies (1997) incorporated the words of participants together with their personal renderings. Building on the words and ideas of their participants, Lather & Smithies (1997) curated a text that encapsulated elements of popular media and culture (e.g., angels) alongside facts and statistics about HIV/AIDS—a seemingly divisive and ‘taboo’ topic at the time of their writing—to convey their inquiry. I felt, as a reader, that Lather & Smithies (1997) documented the women they described not as static beings, but rather as individuals in flux. I also remembered how limited I felt by words alone when I was asked to write a response to their text. Instead, in what felt like a risk at the time, I chose to create a multimodal representation of the text (Figure 16), a composition that now sits in the office of the professor that asked for that written response, as a means to showcase my personal experience with the words of Lather & Smithies (1997). Recalling their text, I finally felt as if I may have found a way *in* to writing about Elliot that would account for happenings in the wider national landscape of the United States as well as my own personal life.



*Figure 16. Cassie's Multimodal Reading Response*

\*\*\*

As a reader, you will notice this manuscript breaks from the typical form of research-based articles as they appear across many scholarly journals. The story I share is one that occurs in “the middle of things” as St. Pierre & Jackson (2014) described, without a clear beginning or end. Rather, I understand analysis as happening everywhere and all the time. I use the space of this manuscript to showcase how I am continuing to meld my own story with artifacts produced with and alongside Elliot and his peers during my larger inquiry project. This is a deliberate decision on my part insofar as I argue that “life stories never involve only the person who experienced them, but always offer points of connection with the stories of others,” (Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016). By adapting and building on the work of others (Bridges-Rhoads, 2015; Langer, 2016; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti, 2016), I aim to provide a reflexive account of my encounters with Elliot. I include multimodal contextual elements (informational text, images, links) and alongside documents from the wider world, including (social) media (Baker-Bell, Stanbrough, & Everett, 2017).

\*\*\*

This is not the article I expected to write. Perhaps that is a common refrain among qualitative researchers. And yet, even in its final form, this article is one that continues to surprise me as a writer, as a researcher, as an educator, and, ultimately, as an audience for my own work (Langer, 2016).

\*\*\*

During my first year of doctoral studies, I missed my daily interactions with young children and teachers. Therefore, I sought opportunities to participate in a local school. Through a colleague in my graduate program, I was introduced to a teacher at a public elementary school serving children in grades one through four. Over the course of the next four years, I came to

know the teachers, administrators, children, and families of the school through research inquiries I engaged in, community events I volunteered at, and professional development for teachers that I helped to facilitate.

As a researcher committed to amplifying the voices of young children, I did not approach my inquiries as an unobtrusive observer. Instead, I engaged as a co-participant, co-researcher, co-teacher, and co-player—each a role I actively engaged with and in across the 12 weeks of the focal inquiry I describe in this paper. Borrowing from Lather and Smithies (1997), then, I write from my perspective as someone “both getting out of the way and getting in the way” of the stories of others (p. xiv). Still, the story I share here has limits and functions as only a partial retelling of the learning I engaged in, with, and alongside the participants.

\*\*\*

Not only was not the article I expected to write, but it also remains among the most challenging of texts for me to generate. This is a text that, perhaps more than any other that I have written, has been a laborious task. It has been fraught with frustration, with disappointment, with worry (emerald & Carpenter, 2015). It has been one filled with questions, many of which remain unanswered, particularly those related to how my personal history informed my engagement in the field and in the months since the school year ended. And yet, throughout this process, I was gifted with time and meaningful (but critical), feedback from colleagues, friends, and mentors. Each challenged me to re-consider how my biases, assumptions, and whiteness facilitate/d my understandings of my encounters with Elliot. Likewise, I had to critically reflect about how our shared identity as white individuals informed his interactions with me (Paley, 2009).

\*\*\*

The community of children and families at the school represented a diverse array of communities that, in many ways, mirrored the demographics of the nation more broadly (Taylor, 2014) According to school reports, for instance, the population of children was predominantly white (52%) with 48% of children officially identified as students of color (36% African American, 9% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Other). Linguistically, children at Community School J spoke a number of languages besides English, including Spanish and Arabic. Yet, as the school's principal noted, the "official" statistics are limiting insofar as they do not account fully for the diversity of the school in that children that are multi-racial or multi-lingual are often not accounted for. Additionally, according to the school principal, many caretakers frequently opted not to mark their children in these ways because they worried about the stigma that such labels may carry.

Ms. Honey—a white, cisgender, monolingual, straight married woman, born and raised in Michigan—was one of the teachers I worked most closely with and alongside across my time at Community School J. With twelve years of teaching experience as a third-grade teacher both in the Southwestern and Midwestern United States, she first welcomed me into her classroom in the year prior to the focal inquiry. In our initial inquiry project together, we explored how behavior management clip charts informed and impacted children's identities and positioning. During this first project, we engaged in critical discussions about race and gender as they related to the children in her class. We also cultivated a shared understanding about our goals for inquiry projects and what we each hoped to gain from them. We later built upon this foundation as we developed plans for a second project together the following academic year.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, Ms. Honey's self-contained class was home to 22 children. As a former educator-turned-researcher, I am committed to creating space for children

to share their experiences and I seek to amplify the voices of young children. Thus, I asked the children to self-identify racially and/or ethnically through an interview protocol wherein they drew a self-portrait and used alphabetic text to identify themselves. The listed terms in this manuscript are those used by the children. In sum, 7 children self-identified as white, 5 as Black/African American, 4 as “Mixed/Bi-Racial”, 3 as Asian American, 3 as Mexican, and 1 as Asian. In many respects, the children in Ms. Honey’s class were representative of the larger population of the United States; demographically, their school and their classroom were a microcosm of the larger nation.

\*\*\*

Despite critical conversations with mentors and peers, for more than nine months I battled to put words on the page. I lamented to many colleagues about my reluctance in writing this piece. I shared with them my concerns about centering the story of Elliot—an 8-year old, American-born, monolingual white boy in Ms. Honey’s third grade class—when the stories of white boys and men have been and continue to be centered in history textbooks as well as diverse forms of media. Still, I strongly desire to be a researcher that amplifies the voices of children. Keeping this in mind, then what responsibility did I have to share Elliot’s story? If I were to write explicitly about Elliot, what other stories might then go unheard (Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2011)?

\*\*\*

My initial intent in the larger inquiry was to explore the cultural and social ramifications of children’s experiences writing with a variety of communicative tools to re-present their stance on current (im)migration issues. Across the larger project, I focused on many children in Ms. Honey’s class. In this paper, however, I highlight one child, Elliot, as he communicated his

opinion on the ostensibly controversial topic of the GOP Administration's proposed border wall with Mexico and the #MuslimBan. My re-telling is peppered with comments and artifacts from his peers in his class in my effort to nuance the immediate community of the classroom of which Elliot was enveloped.



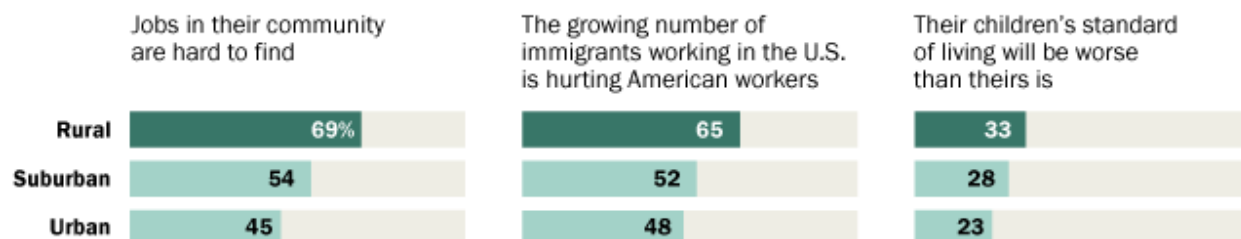
Figure 17. Image from *Fear of Foreigners...* (Warner, 2016)

In the days leading up to children composing the first draft of their letters, all the children seemed to agree that the GOP Administration should welcome (im)migrants to the United States. However, as the children sat down to write to their Congressional representatives following Memorial Day weekend in 2017, Elliot announced a change in his stance as he declared the border wall with Mexico a necessity. While Elliot appeared as an outlier among his classmates, but he invoked a stance reminiscent of the white men from the broader nation. This included the large gathering of men that would be seen in Charlottesville, Virginia, a few months later where a counter-protest Heather Heyer was killed (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018). Elliot's perspective on (im)migration set him apart from his peers, but his rhetoric replicated beliefs of white women

and men in the United States, particularly those in rural communities.

### **Rural whites more concerned about jobs, working immigrants and children's economic future than other whites**

*% of whites in each group saying ...*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 25-June 29, 2016.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

*Figure 18.* Image from Pew Research Center Report (Morin, 2016)

\*\*\*

In addition to my concerns regarding my responsibilities whether to write about Elliot or to instead keep it out of my final dissertation (Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2013), a litany of questions iteratively propelled my thinking. How could I write about Elliot in a way that both provided space for him to stake a claim that was different than his peers while also providing myself space to trouble what I considered problematic notions that he proposed in his writing (Paley, 2009)? Is it always right and just to allow for differing perspectives when those viewpoints do not read as equitable or just themselves?

\*\*\*

In my earliest encounters with Elliot, he made it clear to me that he was a fan of the “other” state school in the area rather than the local university where I was employed. On many occasions, Elliot would call, “Hey, Ms. Cassie, look!” before pointing to the rival state school’s emblem on his favorite sweatshirt, on a new illustration, or on a journal page. I playfully engaged with Elliot each time this occurred and we often ended such conversations with



laughter.

\*\*\*

How might writing about Elliot open Ms. Honey or myself to critique about what we did or did not do in the moment? How might our actions be read as perpetuating systems of oppression rather than disrupting them (Kaomea, 2003)? In what ways would either Ms. Honey or I be prepared for this potential criticism (von Unger, 2016)? How might I, as an empirical researcher writing about Elliot, “reproduce part of what [I] may sharply criticize as theorists” (Kuehner, Ploder, & Langer, 2016, p. 701)? For example, in some instances of retelling the story of Elliot to critical friends and mentors, I found myself being protective of him, often emphasizing that he was *only* eight years old. Why did I find it necessary to emphasize Elliot’s youth? Was this a way to prove him innocent (Goff, et al., 2014)? Was I not reifying white supremacy—a construct I sought to critique in some of my other scholarship (Brownell & Coles, 2016)—through stressing his age? Was I using his youth as an excuse for his assertions not also hypocritical to arguments I made elsewhere that children are capable of engaging in meaningful discussions about critical social issues?

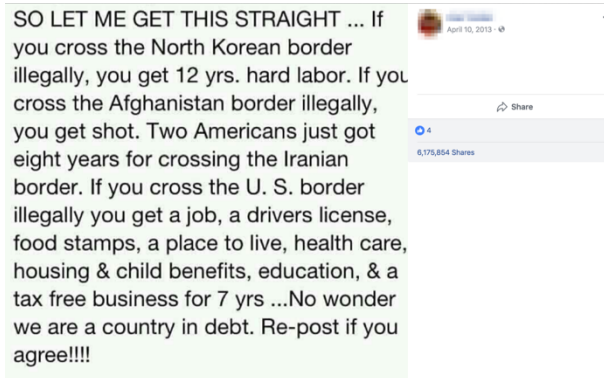
\*\*\*

Elliot had attended the school for three years and came from a home of divorced parents. We sometimes talked about growing up with mom and dad living under separate roofs as I was raised under the same circumstances. Elliot was marked by standardized measures as above grade-level in math and in reading. He frequently discussed with me the books he breezed through and he often asked me to test him on “harder” multiplication facts than the ones his classmates seemed to have difficulty with. Elliot’s success with traditional school practices was undeniable and Ms. Honey frequently worried she was not doing enough to push him.

\*\*\*

At other times, I joked to critical friends about how Elliot's stance on (im)migration was reminiscent to Facebook posts I saw on my newsfeed from folks from my home state and my immediate family members. Arguably, making light of the situation was another exasperated attempt on my part to rectify the lingering tension I felt between the place where I was raised and the woman I continue to become; between how my "social locations, biographical histories, and worldviews interact with, influence, and are influenced by the research process" (Brooks, 2007, p. 79). I remained "friends" on Facebook with many individuals from my past despite being radically opposed to the ideas they shared either through their own original posts or through the words of others they felt compelled to share. I maintained these social connections with individuals from my past in an effort to be reminded of the work which still remains in terms of fostering communities of care, committed to equity, access, and justice for all people. At the same time, access to posts by those whom I disagree with also brings me back from the seemingly "liberal" community of the university I am surrounded by daily.

In this way, for me to tell the story of Elliot was to confront the blurred lines between researcher and researched (Müller, 2016; Revsbæk & Tanggaard, 2015) as I confronted the work that I, as a white woman, needed to do to directly challenge the more conservative white folks I encountered. At the same time, I needed to further interrogate my own positioning as a cisgender white woman and critically consider the benefits and constraints of my perspective.



*Figure 19. 2013 Post Re-Posted by Cassie’s Facebook Friend in 2016*

\*\*\*

While the majority of children in Ms. Honey’s third grade class wrote letters to their Congressional representatives in opposition to Trump’s proposed border wall and the Muslim travel ban, Elliot dissented from his peers. Although Elliot initially shared the same stance on the issue of (im)migration as his classmates when Ms. Honey and I first introduced the topic, in his final compositions, he differed in opinion and positioned himself away from his classmates. At the same time, Elliot made use of the same rhetorical strategies his peers used as illuminated in his letter (Figure 20). Elliot used sophisticated strategies of logos, pathos, and ethos to recirculate ideas often promoted by individuals on the (alt-)right (Neiwert, 2017). For example, in his letter below, I read Elliot’s rhetoric as demonstrating a distrust of a foreign “Other.”

Dear Mr. Senator,  
 I believe we should have a wall on the border of Mexico and the U.S.A.  
 One reason I agree with the wall is that people crossing the border will take U.S citizens jobs.  
 Another reason is immigrants will take farmer's jobs. We should have a wall because they will steal our money. We should have a wall because it will keep immigrants out. It keeps the dangerous weapons out.  
 We need a wall because Donald Trump said we need a wall and he is the president. Will you vote for the wall because the immigrants can't bring dangerous weapons.  
 i appreciate your help. Please send me a response letting me know if you are able to pass a bill that would build a wall. Thank you for your time and considering my request.  
 elliot, age 8

*Figure 20. Elliot’s Written Persuasive Text*

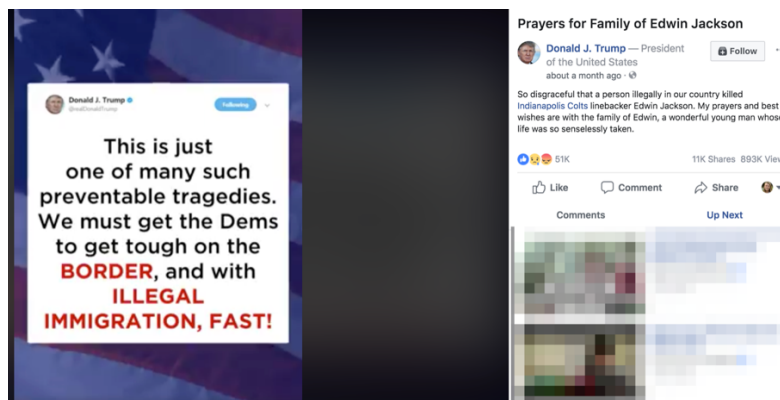
\*\*\*

As I have written about elsewhere (Brownell, 2017), I recognize the specific limits of my positioning (e.g., status as an adult, size, age) for engaging in research with young children, many of whom self-identified as part of historically marginalized communities. Yet, I am also aware of the ways in which my positioning and outward appearance provided me entry into elementary school spaces, particularly those which are served by predominantly white and female teachers. In other words, I looked the part of the already-existing educators at the school and, with credentials from the large Midwestern university I attended, I was seemingly qualified to participate at the site.

Writing about the ease with which I entered the site, however, is far less challenging than considering how my white, settler colonial gaze filtered all that I saw and/or experienced while at the site and in my attempts to read across artifacts from my time there (Morrison, 1998; Paris & Alim, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In my desire to engage as a critical scholar, I understand the necessity for critical reflexivity. I know I must push myself through the door frame, but at the same time, I also am aware that I hold myself back from actually pushing through. How could I, as a white woman, lay claims to the embodied experiences of individuals I shared a learning space with as if I was an objective participant and/or the sole expert? And how could I authoritatively suggest what educators or researchers were to do when they encountered “an Elliot,” when likely many had more expertise or experience than I did? I am constantly worried that I cannot do justice to the story of Elliot, his teacher, his peers, myself. Leaning into the process of un-learning/re-learning to be/think/story/do is a consistent everyday task and one that is far more difficult and indescribable than I could ever have imagined.

\*\*\*

In his letter, Elliot highlighted contemporary concerns of some Americans about the potential loss of American jobs to (im)migrants as well as the presumed increased risk populations of (im)migrants pose (Figure 21). He employed the rhetorical strategy of pathos to play on his readers' emotions and reason that a wall is necessary because "it will keep immigrants out" and will prevent them from taking farmers' jobs or "steal our money." In addition to economic fears, Elliot also touched on safety concerns writing that "It [a wall with Mexico] keeps the dangerous weapons out." Elliot's claims in his letter were similar to those made by other supporters of the GOP Administration's proposed border wall (Neiwert, 2017). While Elliot's classmates used logical and emotional appeals to voice their opinions (Brownell, forthcoming), so too did he.



*Figure 21.* Screenshot of Facebook Video of Trump Tweet Posted in 2018

Elliot also used Trump's desire for the wall as an additional reason for his position on the issue, writing, "We need a wall because Donald Trump said we need a wall and he is the president." While many of his peers in Ms. Honey's class, based their appeals on their own credibility as Mexican Americans or recent refugees, Elliot drew on Trump's ethos. Elliot's statement spoke to broader systems of power, privilege, and marginalization as he used the rhetorical strategy of ethos and chose the side of authority in his persuasive letter to his Congressman.

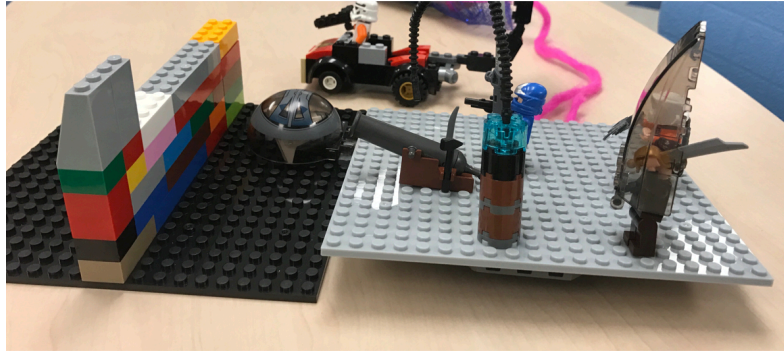
\*\*\*

I remain paralyzed by my anxiety and the tensions I feel in writing the story of Elliot (Bridges Rhoades, 2015). Without writing about myself, writing about Elliot seems an impossible task. Yet, in doing so, I worry that sharing such stories may weaken my own positioning in academic discourse (Kuehner, Ploder, & Langer, 2016; Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2011).

\*\*\*

Across the two persuasive compositions Elliot created in Ms. Honey's class, he remained opposed to the idea that refugees and (im)migrants should be welcomed. His teacher and I assumed that Elliot drew on rhetoric found in the world beyond the walls of Ms. Honey's classroom at Community School J. Elliot argued for a wall with Mexico in both his letter (*Figure 20*) and his second text, a multimodal artifact that took shape as a LEGO wall (*Figure 22*). The LEGO wall that Elliot constructed mirrored one that his peer Gem—a self-identified multilingual, refugee girl of Southeast Asian descent, created.

Although Elliot did not state that his construction was influenced by Gem's work, she was the first in class to build a LEGO wall to represent the proposed construction along the U.S. border with Mexico. Other children in Ms. Honey's class followed Gem's lead to create their own walls. Some children, such as Phi—a self-identified Asian American boy with Vietnamese roots, told me during a one-on-one interview that Gem's creation was "an inspiration" and that he used her LEGO wall as a mentor text for his own. While I cannot claim that Elliot's wall was also directly informed by Gem's construction and not by another peer, similarities across their LEGO walls are quite apparent. I find Elliot's choice to mirror the work of Gem ironic as he also made arguments against the United States opening its doors to children like her.



*Figure 22. Elliot's LEGO Construction*

Elliot, like Gem, used the LEGOs to create a wall that separated Mexico and the United States. Yet, although Gem and many of her peers included LEGO people on both sides of the border, Elliot only included “Americans” on the United States’ side. In *Figure 22*, Elliot displayed several LEGO people, all standing on the “United States” side of the wall and facing “Mexico.” Each person that is visible is holding weaponry of some sort—a sword, a gun, a shield. A canon is also present and, although there are several LEGO people on the gray and black LEGO plates, there is a Stormtrooper character driving a LEGO car with a gun that is also visible.

At first glance, Elliot’s multimodal text, like his letter, repeats rhetorical strategies and ideologies which have circulated in the media since Trump first announced his desire for a wall. Yet, Elliot’s LEGO, construction when read alongside his alphabetic text, is incongruous. In his letter, Elliot mentioned that a wall “keep dangerous weapons out,” but in his construction, it was the United States that was armed. In fact, he did not place any person, let alone a weapon, on the Mexico side of his wall. Rather, he only placed artillery on the side of the United States. Without a direct threat of danger from persons south of the border, what then is there to be afraid of? How does Elliot replicate proponents’ ideas about strict (im)migration policies—including Trump and

others on the (far) right—as he invoked sophisticated rhetorical strategies to play upon fear of a supposed “Other?”

\*\*\*

*“it is a marker of our positioning in this study [...] telling stories which are not ours”*

*~Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 3*

I would be remiss to not provide a deeper dive into my own identity and positioning, especially since I live with privileges that inform both my worldview and my existence. I self-identify as a cisgender, monolingual, American-born, straight white woman. While I am now often assumed to be of a part of the middle-to-upper class because of my educational status and my experiences traveling the world, I was born to working-class parents in a rural community in Montana. My mother was a long-time elementary educator of 40+ in the community with an undergraduate degree in education; my father, having only attended college for a few semesters, worked a variety of different jobs while helping to manage his family’s farm and ranch.

I attended the local public schools, the same schools my paternal family had attended for generations. As a student in a predominantly white high school, I still recall racial slurs and stereotypes my peers or adults in the community perpetuated as they talked about athletes from rival sports teams or their home communities—referring to a stand-out football player from a nearby high school with the racial epithet “n\*\*\*\*\*” or claiming dogs were served at the deli in the Indigenous communities with stellar basketball teams down the road. Similarly, I remember conversations about the “wetbacks” that arrived annually to assist local farmers the late summer harvest. While I do not wish to generalize the whole of my community as overtly racist, these instances replay in my head as I work through my own whiteness and how I was/am complicit in sustaining white supremacy. Simultaneously, I feel tension with how it is that I can trouble



whiteness with folks in my home community in a meaningful way, when hateful language and fear of an “Other” feels embedded in the culture and community.

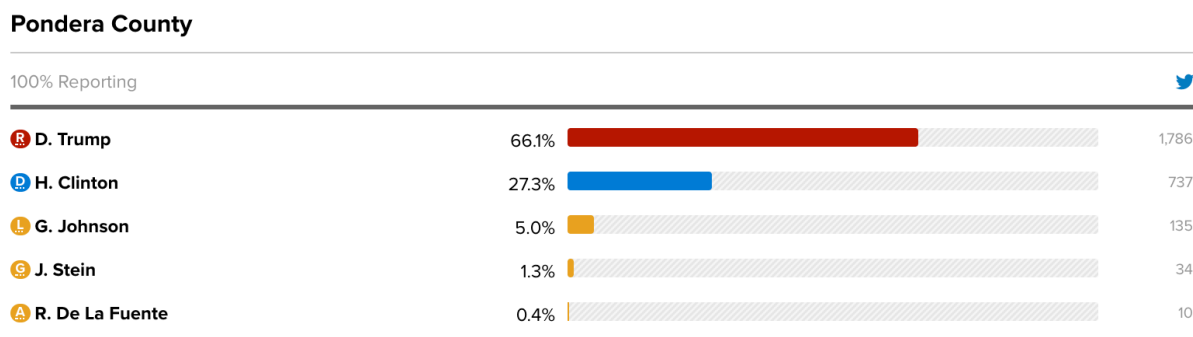


Figure 23. 2016 Election Results for Cassie’s Home County (Politico, 2016)

\*\*\*

Despite informal conversations with his peers about their experiences as recent refugees or as children of color, Elliot’s understanding of (im)migration also mirrored what I suggest is the short sightedness and cherry-picking tendencies of Trump supporters. For example, while composing his letter, Elliot appeared in disbelief as he learned that Gem was a recent refugee, shouting, “You’re a refugee, Gem?! Ms. Cassie, Gem says she’s a refugee!” Even as conflicting evidence about who was an (im)migrant was presented to him, Elliot maintained his stance as a supporter of limited (im)migration. Later in the day, as he continued composing his persuasive letter to his Senator, Elliot asked for assistance from me.

Cassie: What are we working on?

Elliot: *(pointing to screen)* This...

Cassie: *(reading what Elliot has written)* So, you said, “We should have a wall because it will keep some people of some colors separate.” Do you know what that means?

Elliot: Yeah.

Cassie: What does it mean?

Elliot: It will make Mexicans and other skin colors separate.

Cassie: What does that mean, “skin colors separate”?

Elliot: Their, what color you are! I’m white, you’re white! (*tapping his arm and then Cassie’s arm*)

Cassie: So, you think that, like, people that are white should be separate from people who are not white? Is that what you are saying? Do you have a reason why you think that is a good idea?

Elliot: Because Mexicans can stay in their home.

Cassie: So, you think Mexicans should stay in their country, right? There’s other people who cross that border and there might be people in our classroom who identify as Mexican.

Elliot: (*looking around the classroom*) Nicki?

Cassie: Yeah, so do you think that’s like, well, she might not be from Mexico, but we know she has family that came from Mexico originally.

Elliot: Alvarez...that sounds like a Mexican name.

Cassie: So, what does it mean? What would be your evidence? Why is that a good thing? That’s what you have to come up with. The reason why you think that’s a good thing, to keep skin colors separate.

Elliot: I don’t think I have a reason why. I like Nicki.

Cassie: Hmmm...well, what do you think the advantages are?

Elliot: I don’t know.

Cassie:           You don't know? Hmmm...It's kind of a really hard one. I don't know if I have a real answer for it either.

Elliot:           Well, I don't know other reasons.

My exchange with Elliot reminded me of conversations I had with adult peers about issues of race and racism as well as sexual orientation. Recalling such discussions, Elliot's comments about Nicki—a self-identified Mexican American, emerging bilingual girl in Ms. Honey's class, made me think about experiences wherein adults had told me, “I have a Black/Mexican/gay/etc. friend/relative/colleague/etc., so what I said is not racist/xenophobic/homophobic/etc.”

At the same time Elliot's citing of Nicki as someone he liked, also reminded me of arguments many make about liking someone despite an identity they otherwise despise. How do individuals make such decisions? In my personal experience, it is because their friend is an exception to their hate and therefore have been marked “as a good one” and their friend therefore exists outside the stereotypical categorization of how a particular group is in the world (Paley, 2009).

\*\*\*

On the day that I shared the exchange above with Elliot, an exasperated Ms. Honey had approached me, whispering, “I don't know what to do with him.” She then relayed to me the following conversation (which had also been audio-recorded).

Elliot:           Ms. Honey, I'm doing a better job. I figured out. I can do it now.

They would steal our money and I have supporting evidence why they'd steal our money. They'd steal our money because...

Ms. Honey:      How would they steal our money?

Elliot:           In Mexico, like, it's hard to get money because it's very, they don't

get paid a lot of money.

Ms. Honey: But how would they take your, our money? How are they going to take money that's mine?

Elliot: They would steal it.

Ms. Honey: You think they would steal it from me?

Elliot: No.

Ms. Honey: Well, that's what you just said. Do you think that when the Mexicans come over here, they are coming to pick our pockets and steal our money?

Elliot: No.

Ms. Honey: Oh, what do you mean then? What do you mean by they'll steal our money?

Elliot: They'll take it. They'll maybe rob people.

Ms. Honey: Do you think people from Mexico are criminals and their gonna just, they will rob people?

Elliot: Maybe.

Ms. Honey: Okay.

Elliot: *(talking to self as Ms. Honey turns to another child)* S-T-E-A-L...

I reviewed and replayed this interaction between Ms. Honey and Elliot many times, both the day of that it occurred and I the months following. Each time, I am struck by how Ms. Honey's voice, a voice I came to know over two years, alludes to her genuine questioning of Elliot's "supporting evidence," as he called it. From this transcript and our discussions that followed, Ms. Honey tried to wrap her head around where Elliot was coming from while pushing

him to articulate his stance. In the end, however, the final “okay” she voices, illuminates her frustration and disappointment with the situation.

\*\*\*

I am also an educator. Prior to beginning my doctoral studies, I was an early childhood and elementary educator in post-Katrina New Orleans. I thoroughly enjoyed my days as a classroom teacher, but I was troubled by the rapid changes to education in the city and, in particular, how many of the decisions were made by white bodies without input from the Brown and Black communities that were most-often impacted. Thus, I left behind the city and people that had cultivated me as an educator and further fostered my questions about educational justice and equity to extend my graduate studies.

\*\*\*

Ms. Honey’s attempts to converse with Elliot, as an 8-year-old she knew well and as someone with a vastly different stance on the issue of (im)migration than she personally held, highlights her own process of sense-making of her privilege and whiteness (Emdin, 2016). In particular, this excerpt demonstrates the tension between recognizing and sustaining children’s funds of knowledge and how, as educators, we can disrupt knowledges that sustain white supremacy. As Ms. Honey continues to make sense of her own privilege, how can she gently guide children in her class to also understand systems of power and oppression?

\*\*\*

We cannot excuse hateful language articulated by individuals based on their age. We cannot justify violent action by claiming they are ‘a product of their time.’ Instead, we must take small steps to gently push (or sometimes shove) individuals using rhetoric marked by an aversion for another person based on their appearance or country of origin. I worry that the transcripts of

exchanges Ms. Honey and I each had with Elliot might not have been enough. Conceivably, the different lines of questioning paired with his interactions with his peers could have challenged him to reconsider his words on the page.

\*\*\*

Elliot also had a personal connection to issues of (im)migration, though this connection may not be as evident as with his peers. In none of our conversations did Elliot make clear from where his position on the topic of (im)migration stemmed. Still, Elliot's ideas did reflect arguments made more broadly in the news media. In his letter, he recycled discourses often heard coming from the mouths of adult, white men as he cited Trump in his desire for strict (im)migration laws. His LEGO construction mirrored images shared in the media and online, including on the GOP Administration's position page on (im)migration.

\*\*\*

Although Elliot did not state that his opinions were learned at home or from a specific source in his local community, both adults and children were displayed on national news networks for their reactions to (im)migrants following the 2016 election. This included students in a cafeteria at a school down the road chanting, "Build that wall! Build that wall!" (Dickson & Williams, 2016). Thus, while his peers used rhetorical strategies and their personal positioning to interrogate critical civic issues and *oppose* the proposed border wall or limits on (im)migration, Elliot used similar means to argue *for* them.

\*\*\*

As I previously mentioned, the strongly reflexive nature of this article was purposeful. From my first encounter with Elliot's dissenting perspective through my composing of this text, I sought to interrogate "attachments that keep us from thinking and living differently" and

demonstrate “how thinking differently changes being – which was, perhaps, always already different all along” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013).

Creating this reflexive account required both introspection and transparency on my part as my personal hi/story was always already embedded within the inquiry and with the story of Elliot (Denzin, 2012; Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti, 2016; Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016; Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2013). My account here—written with and alongside Elliot’s texts and commentary—showcases how academia and how researchers do not exist outside of the communities in which they engage, but rather troubles how such borders are constructed and persist.

We are always part and parcel of the story; in this way, the story is us. Our stories are informed by our histories. But our stories and our futures are not predictable, nor set in stone. They cannot be pre-determined or stereotyped. So too is this true of our understandings of the world. Thus, while I can critique/understand/read Elliot’s position in his texts on the issue of (im)migration, I must also acknowledge that he is adept at holding his ground and engaging in sophisticated rhetorical practices. However, I am left with more questions than answers: Is this how it starts? How can it be changed? How can we address hateful or violent rhetoric as it is espoused by children/adults/elders in our school/work/home communities?

\*\*\*

The format of this article is also in direct response to the contentious social and political landscape of the United States (and, arguably, the world). For example, some individuals continue to argue for more restrictive policies to be enacted. Reasoning that strict limitations for both who enters the United States and the conditions under which individuals would be able to do so, many argue that such stringent policies would safeguard the United States from dangerous

weapons, drugs, and individuals while also protecting the livelihood of hard-working Americans. These arguments are often countered, however, by calls for the United States, as a global leader, to open wide its borders and create new inroads for would-be citizens, rather than forefront nationalist policies.

\*\*\*

*“We all live with HIV labels, he says; be they positive or negative, we are all caught up in the crisis. Rather than the either/or of HIV+ or HIV-, he posits an HIV continuum where, culturally speaking, everyone is at risk and we are all involved because sexuality is a collective phenomenon.” ~ Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 32*

In closing, I find useful to adapt the words of Lather & Smithies (1997) in the epigraph above. In doing so, I do not wish to conflate living with a label of HIV+ or HIV- as equitable to the social issues in this paper. Instead, I draw on the words of Lather & Smithies (1997) to illuminate a shared complicity in discourses. Specifically, I find great parallel between the continuum described by Lather & Smithies (1997) and the construct of white supremacy as it exists today. In adapting this quote with new labels (bold words are my own), for example, I suggest it could easily read as follows:

We all live with **racial/ethnic** labels, he says; be they positive or negative, we are all caught up in the crisis. Rather than the either/or of **white American or Non-white American** he posits an **racial/ethnic** continuum where, culturally speaking, everyone is at risk and we are all involved because **white supremacy** is a collective phenomenon.

The stories outlined in this article—of Elliot, Ms. Honey, and myself—are representative of the crisis of white supremacy as it lives and breathes in not only our country, but also our world



today. Each of us is engaged in a both/and process wherein we both complicit in and benefit from a system of white supremacy and we are also coming to understand how we might negotiate this in order to create the world we wish to live in. Of course, the society Elliot envisioned at the time of the study was quite different than what Ms. Honey or I wished to create.

In our work as researchers and practitioners, this means that we must talk about race in our classroom and that we must also be self-reflective (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017). Disrupting white supremacy in schooling will also necessitate a change in our pedagogies. We need to ask, for example, how privileging student choice and voice might prevent us from directly addressing acts of hate or violent language. What are the most effective ways to bring such things to a halt?

This question brings to mind for me the work of Paley (2009) wherein she describes a circumstance from her own classroom when one white child told a child of color that she did not want to be her partner. At the time, Paley (2009) had a student-teacher with her in the classroom—a Black woman named Janet—whom addressed the situation in a way that was different than what Paley (2009) could have predicted. When Paley (2009) inquired with Janet about her response, Janet told Paley (2009), “Guilty feelings never bring about an improvement in behavior,” (p. 43).

What do you do with an Elliot then? As Janet notes, guilt is surely not the resolution, but neither is it fair to ask Elliot’s peers or teachers of color to do the work changing his behavior or language. Additionally, I argue that it is also wrong to that every white boy (or girl) will engage as Elliot did. To do so is not only unjust to children after Elliot, but also to Elliot because it does not account for or create space for him to grow and change. Instead, such action would do what

Elliot does—it would reinforce stereotypes about individuals and communities rather than critically challenge them.

While adults in education should work to create classroom as space for kids to learn with, alongside, and from each other, it is equally important for us to recognize how we too can learn from children and how we might engage in the reflexive acts we ask them to participate in. Speaking from the perspective of a white woman, reflexivity facilitated new understandings for me about my own identity. Through writing this paper, I illuminated how my long-held values as a researcher and educator conflicted with my privilege as a product of white supremacy. I sought to portray Elliot as complex, to explore how to work with/in my own opinions on the situation and of Elliot, and to tell a story that was meaningful. In my pursuit to get “unstuck,” I also complicated my own experience as a white woman writing about a white child in a classroom predominantly populated by children of color and situated more broadly in the tumultuous political landscape of the United States. In other words, in my attempts to humanize Elliot and trouble his to actions that I perceived to be both problematic and emblematic of our current era, I worked to do so to myself.

I deliberately chose not to leave out Elliot’s story, to present only successes from the work I engaged in, or to take an “objective” approach to create “a *replica* of social life” [emphasis original] (Müller, 2016). Instead, I opted to use the space of this article as “a forum for exchanging doubts and dilemmas and even situational failures in the research process,” (Kuehner, Ploder, & Langer, 2016, p. 700). In turn, I engaged in “critical reflection of the relationship dynamic and the construction of my own subjectivity and identity related to it” and how these were threaded with/in my inquiry (Langer, 2016).

I debated first whether to include Elliot at all and then made several attempts to write

about him from a distance as in a traditional empirical piece. The form and function of this text, then, provided me an opportunity to work from my stuck place. Through this experience, I realized that the perceived messiness of my thinking might create a more productive invitation for being/thinking/storying/doing “the mix of memory and foundations entailed in building the new out of ruins,” (Lather, 2003).

White supremacy in our current time is not an end point; instead, I see it as is a pivot. In this way, disrupting white supremacy requires an understanding that conflicting things can be true simultaneously; we must know that, in our pursuits to pivot towards a new future, we must first acknowledge the ways in which we are products of white supremacy and the iterative nature of this task. By choosing to confront the ways in which white supremacy is pervasive in our histories, in our everyday actions, in our daily encounters, and in the words of children, we might continue to pivot towards a more just society.

## REFERENCES

## REFERENCES

- Baker-Bell, A., Butler, T., & Johnson, L. (2017). The pain and the wounds: A call for critical race English education in the wake of racial violence. *English Education*, 49(2), 116.
- Baker-Bell, A., Stanbrough, R. J., & Everett, S. (2017). The stories they tell: Mainstream media, pedagogies of healing, and critical media literacy. *English Education*, 49(2), 130.
- Beirich, H. & Buchanan, S. (2018). *2017: The year in hate and extremism*. Retrieved from: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2018/2017-year-hate-and-extremism>
- Bridges-Rhoads, S. (2015). Writing paralysis in (post) qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(8), 704-710.
- Brooks A. (2007). Feminist standpoint epistemology. Building knowledge and empowerment through women's lived experience. In P. Leavy & S. N. Hesse-Biber (Eds.), *Feminist research practice: A primer* (pp. 53-82). Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE.
- Brownell (forthcoming). Cultivating contemplative constituents: A case study of children composing in an era of (im)migration.
- Brownell, C. J. (2017). Mandated curricula as figured world: A case-study of identity, power, and writing in elementary English language arts. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 16(2), 252-267.
- Brownell, C. J., & Coles, J. (2016). "Coloring" within the lines: Implications for practicing colorblindness. In J. Diem (Ed.), *The social and cultural foundations of education: A reader* (pp. 260-279). San Diego, CA: Cogella Academic Publishing.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood...and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- emerald, e., & Carpenter, L. (2015). Vulnerability and emotions in research: Risks, dilemmas, and doubts. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(8), 741-750.
- Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Leone, D., Lewis, B. A., Culotta, C. M., & DiTomasso, N. A. (2014). The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing Black children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(4), 526-545.
- Kaomea, J. (2003). Reading erasures and making the familiar strange: Defamiliarizing methods for research in formerly colonized and historically oppressed communities. *Educational Researcher*, 32(2), 14-23.

- Kuehner, A. (2016). Social research as a painful (but rewarding) self-examination: Re-reading Georges Devereux's psychoanalytical notion of radical subjectivity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 725-734.
- Kuehner, A., Ploder, A., & Langer, P. C. (2016). Introduction to the special issue: European contributions to strong reflexivity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 699-704.
- Langer, P. C. (2016). The research vignette: Reflexive writing as interpretative representation of qualitative inquiry—a methodological proposition. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 735-744.
- Laughland, O. (2017, May 25). Trump travel ban: White House appealing to supreme court after block upheld. *The Guardian*, Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/25/trump-travel-ban-blocked-federal-appeals-court>
- Lather, P., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2013). Post-qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(6), 629-633.
- Morin, R. (2017). *Behind Trump's win in rural white America: Women joined men in backing him*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/17/behind-trumps-win-in-rural-white-america-women-joined-men-in-backing-him/>
- Morrison, T. (1998, March). From an interview on Charlie Rose. *Public Broadcasting Service*, Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4vIGvKpT1c>
- Müller, S. M. (2016). Becoming the phenomenon? An alternative approach to reflexivity in ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 705-717.
- Neiwert, D. (2017). *Alt-America: The rise of the radical right in the age of Trump*. New York: Verso Books.
- Paley, V. G., (2009). *White teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100.
- Ploder, A., & Stadlbauer, J. (2016). Strong reflexivity and its critics: Responses to autoethnography in the German-speaking cultural and social sciences. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 753-765.
- Revsbæk, L., & Tanggaard, L. (2015). Analyzing in the present. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(4), 376-387.
- Ruokonen-Engler, M. K., & Siouti, I. (2016). Biographical entanglements, self-reflexivity, and transnational knowledge production. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 745-752.

- St. Pierre, E. A., & Jackson, A. Y. (2014). Qualitative data analysis after coding. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 715-719.
- Taylor, Paul. "The Next America." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 10, 2014). <http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/>
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2014). Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 811-818.
- von Unger, H. (2016). Reflexivity beyond regulations: Teaching research ethics and qualitative methods in Germany. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(2), 87-98.
- Warner, A. (2017). *Fear of foreigners: A cartoon history of nativism in America*. Retrieved from: <https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/23788/fear-of-foreigners-a-cartoon-history-of-nativism-in-america>
- Weiner-Levy, N., & Popper-Giveon, A. (2013). The absent, the hidden and the obscured: reflections on "dark matter" in qualitative research. *Quality & Quantity*, 47(4), 2177-2190.

## CHAPTER 5: (Com)Promising Conclusions

Broadly, across my scholarship and teaching, I center the question, *How might writing in the elementary English language arts classroom become more inclusive of multiple cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing?* Despite long-standing calls of PK-16 literacy researchers to attend to individual's varied language and literacy practices, many educational policies remain informed only by developmental models of writing. Grounded by the belief that in order to better serve children, educators must better understand their experiences as raced, classed, and gendered individuals, in this dissertation I drew on critical sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives and used them in conjunction with qualitative methods. Informed by my own practice as an elementary educator, I approached this project mindful of the promise my research could hold for extending understandings of theory as well as practice. Thus, I took an interdisciplinary approach to literacy and language studies to interrogate how writing with a variety of communicative resources (e.g., visuals, audio, material items) might meaningfully facilitate new spaces for human diversities.

My goal in this dissertation was also to inform and trouble presuppositions educators, as facilitators of children's learning, hold with regards to children's capabilities to engage in such issues. I did not wish to make a spectacle of the children's experiences composing. Rather, I desired to highlight children's experiences and texts as a means to challenge conventional understandings about the benefits and constraints of children engaged in developing a compositional fluency and using diverse multimodal communicative practices to engage in critical social topics.

When teachers and children are pushed to adhere to systemic reforms that promote a



print-based, monolingual notion of writing, they are also pushed to set aside other communicative practices (Dutro, 2010; McCarthy, Woodward, & Kang, 2014). Additionally, writing that focuses only on rote, technical skills emphasized in the “official” curriculum, overlooks valuable identity and social work present in children’s writing (McCarthy, 2008; Yoon, 2013). Further, children frequently have fewer opportunities to explore their personal purposes for writing and literacies during the structured school day (Dutro, Selland, & Bien, 2013).

### **Cultivating a Qualitatively Different English Language Arts Classroom**

*While there is some effort to look for patterns as well as differences, our primary interest is in a more interactive way of doing research than is usually the case where researchers are presented as disembodied, “objective” knowers. [...] our stories are situated among many voices where, accumulating layerings of meanings as the book proceeds, the story of these women goes far beyond the pages of this book as they change themselves, their worlds, and researchers like us.*

*~Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xvi*

As individuals engaged in the teaching, learning, research, and practice of literacies, we are standing at a precipice. The current moment is one wherein literacies themselves are rapidly changing, both in how they are consumed and in how they are produced. This is due in no small part to our the increasingly globalized and connected society that continues to take form thanks to changing technologies. Yet, and as noted throughout the dissertations, the teaching and learning of literacies in many elementary English language arts classrooms remain tethered only to alphabetic text and print rather than engaging young children in a variety of communicative practices. Simultaneously, as the digital continues to make its mark, so too are calls for inclusion and messages of hate streamed across media devices. Since the official announcement from then-

Presidential candidate Trump that he would be running for office in June 2015 to more recent discussions, (im)migration has been and remains a focal concern for young and old persons alike.

While national, state, and local governments debate the way forward for United States (im)migration policies, the nation's population continues to become increasingly more diverse. In turn, the waves of children progressing through school are representative of this racial and/or ethnic demographic change and more and more children are multilingual. Why then does little room still exist for children to engage their diverse cultural, linguistic, or modal communicative practices in the standardized classroom? Likewise, few elementary English language arts classrooms yet address "adult" topics, despite calls for young children to be engaged in critical discussions about social issues like (im)migration. Although I remain uncertain about the boundaries of a democratic classroom wherein freedom of speech is centered, through my dissertation and the stories of children in Ms. Honey's class, I wish for researchers and practitioners to see children as perhaps more capable of engaging in critical issues than even we, as adults, may be able to. For example, in the story of Elliot, where and/or how the lines between free/hate speech became blurred as our own values as adults made the whole situation messier.

Across his artifacts, Elliot's responses highlighted the situatedness of literacies, particularly in the larger discourses and systems of marginalization he drew upon. Elliot's texts also raised the question about how teachers can create opportunities for children to engage in critical literacies while also providing them opportunities to listen, question, and discuss differences in opinions with others. However, as indicated by Elliot, just because adults provide the tools for compositional fluency and critical literacies does not mean that all conversations or ideas stemming from this approach will move towards more equitable or just social futures; a compositional fluency does not save us from perpetuating disenfranchising rhetoric. Instead,

Elliot's dissent from his peers (and the wider information and data Ms. Honey presented in classroom conversations and texts), demonstrates the need for all civics work to be paired with critical conversations about equity and justice.

Teachers and educational researchers must not view Elliot, or other students that divert from justice and equity for all, as lost causes but as advocates in process. By this I mean to say that, like Nicki, Gem, and his peers, Elliot has the capability to interrogate critical topics and to use advanced rhetorical strategies to communicate his ideas. Although an initial reaction to ideas like Elliot's—that differ so greatly from Ms. Honey's goal of cultivating contemplative constituents—may be to challenge him directly, as adults, we must do so gently while also making space for peers to do this critical work through conversation. Put another way, adults must help *all* children to learn to listen critically to information and others' experiences in ways that do not push children that differ away, but rather invite them in to hear how their worldviews and lived (hi)stories may be more similar to an imagined "Other" than not.

### **Fostering an English Language Arts Made Whole**

*Although the qualitative paradigm has already challenged the idea of control in many respects, the world of social research is still structured by the same old metaphors evoking the idea of a competent, trained, skilled professional researcher-as-a-strong-subject, using her (clean) research tools that enable her to generate reliable results. There may be an increasing awareness that research is a process that often evolves so much differently to how it was planned.*

*~ Kuehner (2016)*

I began this study with the presupposition that, as children and teachers develop a compositional fluency, differences in their ways of knowing could be seen for what they truly

are—resources to be valued. Developing a compositional fluency, I thought, could provide children and teachers an increased facility of multiple communicative practices. In turn, I presumed, teachers would be better suited to engage in culturally sustaining pedagogies as they recognized, honored, and sustained different approaches to communication (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

In other words, I understood a compositional fluency as one possible avenue for cultivating more just social futures (New London Group, 1996). Specifically, I believed that by fostering children’s diverse cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing, notions of what ‘counts’ as writing in the elementary English language arts classroom could become more inclusive. Adapting Shipka’s (2016) concept, I expected that changes in disposition and practice would highlighted how “markedly different and greatly enriched points of entry for experiencing and better appreciating the dynamic, highly distributed, translingual, multimodal, and embodied aspects of all communicative practice” could emerge (p. 252).

Written in alignment with NCTE’s *2016 Professional Statement on the Teaching of Writing* and extending my previous research of children’s writing, in this dissertation, I explored opportunities for educators to sustain children’s identities in the elementary ELA classroom. Funded in part by the International Literacy Association’s Helen M. Robinson Dissertation Grant, the chapters of this dissertation were crafted as three distinct articles for publication. Taking this approach, I was able to use varied theoretical frameworks and qualitative methods to amplify the voices of diverse children as they developed a compositional fluency—or an expansive skill set of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing.

In the first article of my dissertation (Chapter 2), I centered one third grade child,

Christopher, as he used stop-motion animation to retell a print-based personal narrative. Christopher's composing process and final product highlighted the possibilities of a compositional fluency to illuminate the sophisticated, intertextual tools made visible when children compose with diverse modes. This chapter was written to be submitted to *Written Communication* because the journal seeks to publish research “in all its symbolic forms” in order to illuminate “what writing is, how writing gets done, and what writing does in the world,” (*Written Communication*, n.d.). The story I share in the dissertation of Christopher is well-suited for *Written Communication* given the journal’s focus and because Christopher’s story emphasized how his writing processes both informed and were informed by technologies and personal histories.

The second article (Chapter 3), intended for submission to *Teachers’ College Record*, explored children's multimodal compositions during a persuasive writing unit. Specifically, in this chapter, I demonstrated how Nicki, Gem, and their peers used sophisticated rhetorical strategies as they wrote letters to their legislative representatives. Additionally, I outlined how children also composed a persuasive text using digital and analog tools. Given the interdisciplinarity of this article and in particular its focus on an integrative humanities unit, this article could have a broad reach across the field of education if published in a journal like *Teachers’ College Record*. This article is also important to share because it demonstrated how children *are* capable of and interested in discussing critical social issues. Additionally, this is an important contribution as it extends current understandings about how children are processing and making sense of the current political landscape.

The final article (Chapter 4), to be submitted to the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*,

demonstrated how reflexivity of me as the researcher emerged as a major area of inquiry in my analysis. As evidenced in this excerpt of the larger study, the focal child Elliot complicated my understanding and presumption that multimodality could equate to equity, civic action, and/or social justice in the elementary English language arts classroom. As I outlined in this chapter through the stories of Elliot, Ms. Honey, and myself, are examples of products of white supremacy that are capable of critically considering issues of justice. As Elliot's dissent from his peers, his teacher, and myself illuminated, however, daily conversations about justice are a necessary component of English language arts and education more broadly.

### **Extending the Dissertation: Projected Manuscripts & Anticipated Research Trajectory**

I anticipate drawing on data generated in my dissertation to produce multiple articles focused on language and literacy as well as qualitative methods. For example, I plan to outline the varied techniques I used in generating data with the children and their teachers in a second methods article for the *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education*. In this piece, I will explicate both methods I planned for and implements (e.g., GoPros, protocols for children to self-identify) and the data generation methods children engaged in without my prompting (e.g., recordings, photographs, and photographs children like Christopher created). Additionally, I would also like to use the data that some children generated, including Nicki, to write an article for the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* in which I explore how children used digital recording tools to ensure that they were both heard and seen. In the case of Nicki, for example, she captured the process of her multimodal text as she created a meta-commentary video using a handheld digital camera. Similarly, a self-identified Black boy, Steph, took a series of selfies with a handheld digital

camera to literally inserted himself into other children's composing processes and multimodal texts.

Moving forward from this dissertation, I would like to also write a featured article for *The Reading Teacher* because I value making research accessible for teachers. In this piece, I plan to share specifics about how the persuasive writing unit Ms. Honey and I created as well as considerations for other teachers that wish to incorporate critical literacies in their curriculum. The assertions I outlined in the dissertation are well suited to be shared not only with the literacies research community, but also with prospective and in-service teachers. I also would like to zoom in on a secondary interest of mine—sound—to highlight the role sonic resonances played in how children, especially boys of color, were positioned during the regular writing block in Mr. Holiday's classroom. In particular, I will explore the following question in a manuscript for *Curriculum Inquiry: How and in what ways might sonic experiences (re)produce (systemic) identities and positionings for children in an urban third grade classroom?*

Because in this dissertation I generated data that looks across the planning and execution of lessons of the teachers in the two third grade classrooms, I will also submit an article to *Research in the Teaching of English*. Using a multiple case-study approach, I considered each teacher's personal understanding of, and development towards, a compositional fluency. Though not explored here, I have an immense amount of data that I generated based on the teachers' planning and implementation of lessons as well as engagement with their students. Hence, I plan to interrogate more deeply how Mr. Holiday and Ms. Honey understood a compositional fluency. In turn, I would like to explore how a compositional fluency might be related to literacy assessments and how evaluation of

children's compositions might shift in response.

This dissertation study also frames my next research project, exploring practices of “making” in early childhood literacies. Because “Making” and “makerspaces” are quickly becoming more prevalent in discussions of education, practicing teachers and educational researchers alike have engaged in exploring the potentials of “maker ed.” Little attention, however, has been paid to the possibilities of engaging our youngest learners in practices of making. Thus, a distinct opportunity exists in considering how the “Maker Movement” might enhance young children's digital literacies and creativity development. In response, my next project explores how children, teachers, parents, and researchers engage with children's making practices. In collaboration with an early career teacher and with funding from MSU's College of Education, this research and learning will be shared with international research partners through the MakeEY Project (<http://makeyproject.eu/>).

Whether I am studying children's identities as related to language, analyzing how teachers assess multimodal writing, or learning about children's making practices, my commitment to children's multiple cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing informs all aspects of my research. As a scholar-activist, I use an interdisciplinary approach to center historically marginalized children's experiences with literacies. In doing so, my research enriches current understandings about the resources children bring to the standardized writing classroom and reimagines their literacies as assets towards cultivating an English language arts made whole.



## REFERENCES

## REFERENCES

- Dutro, E. (2010). What “hard times” means: Mandated curricula, class-privileged assumptions, and the lives of poor children. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 44(3), 255-291.
- Dutro, E., Selland, M. K., & Bien, A. C. (2013). Revealing writing, concealing writers: High-stakes assessment in an urban elementary classroom. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 45(2), 99-141.
- McCarthy, S. J. (2008). The impact of No Child Left Behind on teachers' writing instruction. *Written Communication*, 25(4), 462-505.
- McCarthy, S. J., Woodard, R., & Kang, G. (2013). Elementary teachers negotiating discourses in writing instruction. *Written Communication*, 31(1), 58-90.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60(1), 60-92.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100.
- Shipka, J. (2016). Transmodality in/and processes of making: Changing dispositions and practice. *College English*, 78(3), 250-257.
- Yoon, H. (2013). Rewriting the curricular script: Teachers and children translating writing practices in a kindergarten classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(2), 148.