

THE INTERSECTION OF READING INSTRUCTION, ASSESSMENT, AND BODIES IN A
FIRST-GRADE CLASSROOM

By

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ABSTRACT

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A Substantial body of research on “struggling” or “at-risk” readers has mostly focused on identifying children and developing and testing interventions aimed at remediating children’s perceived deficiencies. Research has generally assumed that a reading (dis)ability is an intrinsic and hereditary condition that children embody. This dissertation seeks to employ a wide lens by exploring the materials within and beyond school walls that manifest reading (dis)ability. First, it uses disability studies in Education (DSE) as a theoretical frame, which presupposes (dis)ability is socially constructed. Second, it uses Dewey’s (1938) Theory of Experience to argue that although reading (dis)ability is a social construct it is a real phenomenon that impacts young children’s embodied notions of (in)adequacy. Finally, it traverses disciplines by merging DSE and Soja’s (2010) critical spatial perspective to show how unequal power relations across school space, for some children, produce and maintain the reading (dis)ability construct.

To explore these issues, I spent sixteen weeks in a first-grade classroom where I used ethnographic research methods, primarily during English language arts instruction, where I observed the children, the teacher, the school reading interventionist, and various instructors hired by the school to teach ability group reading lessons. Throughout this dissertation, I draw on my experiences in these spaces, as well as on written documents like state and federal policy, scripted curricula, literacy assessments, lesson plans, and student assessment data.

The results suggest that viewed through various theoretical frames, (dis)ability is constructed differently in and across space. First, artifacts in the form of state and local policy,

literacy assessments, grade-level practices, and classroom-level interactions constructed and stabilized a 7-year-old, African American girl's literate identity as reading (dis)abled. Second, an African-American, first-grade child labeled as "at risk" of reading failure produced verbal and non-verbal cues indicating discomfort with the assessment while distorting the teacher's perceptions of her learning potential. Last, the spatiality of ability-group reading instruction produced and maintained the reading (dis)ability construct by differentiating children's access to materials, space, and instruction. The central argument of the dissertation is that a narrow focus on reading (dis)ability as an embodied defect ignores the contextual factors that manifest the inequities that construct, maintain, and constrict children's learning potential.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Andy, Adam, and Drew.
Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. And thank you, boys, for reminding me that "quitting is for weenies." You were right!

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

“I don’t know what’s special about me”

-Jayda, 1st grade girl

“This is really truly, this is special ed. I don’t care what anyone says. I’ve got the lowest of the low kids. I mean I’m the step before special ed.”

-Ms. Violet, reading interventionist

The above statements were made by a young child and an elementary school reading interventionist who participated in my dissertation research. School personnel, who were themselves working within and influenced by particular historical genres and traditions, quickly determined that Jayda, a focal child in my study, was “at risk” for reading failure. In less than two weeks of enrolling in public schooling for the first time in her young life, Jayda, a 7-year-old, African American girl who had been homeschooled by her grandmother, was perceived and labeled as deficient in literacy. Therefore, in that short time span the joy and pleasure of learning to read in her first-grade classroom alongside her peers was denied and replaced with intellectual and social exclusion, and, at times, isolation. The celebrated experiences around literacy learning stolen from Jayda were instead reserved for more privileged children. These other children had already learned to do school literacy.

In this dissertation, I am concerned with the materials that include the discourses and spaces that contributed to the indelible “at-risk” reader label ascribed to Jayda because it is (re)produced and maintained unproblematically in and beyond school borders. Furthermore, I am deeply concerned about children’s embodiment of a literate identity that such a label constructs. The potential harm in the proliferation of this ascription and other stigmatizing labels like it (e.g., “struggling,” “dyslexic,” “low”) is that these labels hinder teachers’ perceptions of children’s

learning potential; as a result, opportunities for learning and socialization in the schooling context are grossly altered leading to serious inequities. In turn, some children, as illustrated above, come to embody the misguided notion that they are not special. Research has established that stratified reading in the form of homogenous ability groups during reading instruction early on in a child's schooling career to remediate perceived deficiencies, particularly for children from marginalized communities (i.e., those from nondominant groups and those living in poverty), has reverse effects (Buttaro et al., 2010; Lleras & Rangel, 2009) with lifelong implications such as prevention in the attainment of social and economic success (Delpit, 1998; Dudley-Marling, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2015).

Upon joining the school community, Jayda's caring and nurturing first-grade teacher began to question her processing and communication abilities. While it seems intuitive to examine the teacher's beliefs or dispositions that led to these inaccurate conjectures, pointing a finger at one person does not get us very far because it locates the problem within the teacher and thus only *a* person. It is not productive to conceive of one person as responsible for an institutional structure, that, from its inception, was not constructed to provide all children equal access to a "fair" and "appropriate" education (Kliewer et al., 2006). A focus on solely interrogating teachers' conceptions about the children they teach ignores the materials, the space, and the discourses that circulate and thus impose on them particular instructional practices and ways of thinking about children. Comparatively, scholarship concerned with the "at-risk" or "struggling reader" has generally tended to focus on remediating children's organically permanent defects instead of critiquing the socio-political landscape that creates and maintains the oppressive structures of schooling. Thus, the emphasis has been on a plethora of interventions designed to remediate children's perceived literacy deficiencies rather than the

ways that schools are implicated in producing and maintaining the inequities that reify the privileged status of the language and literacy practices consistent with White, middle-class children.

In contrast, my dissertation study aims to uncover the mechanisms that operationalize the identification of a lovely child, like Jayda as “at risk” for reading failure. These sorts of classifications are becoming normal at an alarming rate—business as usual— in early childhood education and policy. Such mechanisms also allow for the equally lovely teacher of a child like Jayda to be trained, disciplined, and accustomed to the practice of assessing and labeling young children’s literacy as a static trait. In other words, this project seeks to foreground the artifacts that contribute to the production and maintenance of the “at-risk” reader status.

My motivation to develop a line of research focused on young children framed as “at - risk” or “struggling” readers stemmed from my own experiences as an underprepared early elementary classroom teacher in a district that was transitioning from a White, mostly blue-collar bedroom community to one that was urban in the sense that it was serving more African American and Latinx students, students living in poverty, and those whose first language was not English (Milner, 2013). Further, traveling across the U.S. for six years, I provided professional development to educators in reading for a national institute. In each of these roles, I experienced firsthand how teachers, administrators, and parents/caregivers¹ were working to help children for whom learning to read was difficult. After a decade of teaching, completing a master’s degree in educational technology, and traveling throughout the U.S. as a professional development provider, I realized how little I knew about the acquisition of literacy. I believed that in pursuing doctoral studies I would learn how to teach reading to

¹ I use the term “caregivers” because it is more inclusive of the range of people who care for children.

the children who faced difficulties. Put differently, I believed the reason for some children's difficulty in acquiring school literacy was a born condition; and if I could acquire knowledge of the best instructional methods and tools then I could cure children's reading ills. In some ways, this dissertation documents how I came to change my mind.

Overview of the Dissertation

I selected an alternative format for this dissertation (Duke & Beck, 1999). This first chapter is followed by three separate manuscripts and a conclusion chapter. In the introduction, I provide an overview of my dissertation study that contextualizes each of the manuscripts that follow. The manuscripts appear in the following order: (a) Constructing Reading (Dis)ability: "The Lowest of the Low Kids," (b), The Mis-Educative Experience of Assessment: You, Me, and the DRA, and (c) The Constraints of Ability-Grouped Reading Instruction: A Critical Spatial Perspective of Reading (Dis)ability. The conclusion summarizes key findings and discusses my interests and plans for publication.

Constructing Kinds of Readers: Assessing, Labeling, and Sorting Children

Previous research has found that the organization of schools and curricula communicate institutionalized beliefs about ability and (dis)ability (Artiles, Rueda, Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). Society at large makes possible the conditions that allow some children to succeed (McDermott & Varenne, 1995) while others "struggle"—and some downright fail at reading (Alvermann, 2006; Hall, 2006). Discourse in documents like policy, literacy assessments, and reading curricula can help to produce and maintain oppressive conditions through instructional practices that label and stratify children into ability groups that limit their access to equitable reading instruction and materials (Allington, 1983; Eder, 1981; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; Hiebert, 1983). The material world and the

discursive ideologies embedded within them that permeate school and the school context contribute to the process of recognizing some children as adequate and others as (in)adequate. In other words, the construction of the “struggling” or “at-risk” reader is not biological destiny wherein some children are born to learn to read with ease and better at it while others are genetically wired to struggle and not as capable. As scholarship contends, children would be better off with the eradication of the “struggling” and “at-risk” reader ascriptions; I concur (Alvermann, 2006; Collins & Ferri, 2016; Enriquez, 2014; Jones, Clarke, & Enriquez, 2010; Learned, 2016).

Similarly, reading (dis)ability is conceived differently across research paradigms (Alvermann & Malozzi, 2008). On the one hand, those operating from some paradigms generally argue that reading (dis)ability is real and a neurological condition that some children are born with (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2008). On the other hand, some researchers working from an interpretive paradigm (Alvermann & Malozzi, 2008) assert that it is socially (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Kabuto, 2016; Learned, 2016; Sleeter, 1986; Taylor, 1991; Triplett, 2007) and culturally constructed (Alvermann, 2001; 2006; Kliever & Biklen, 2001). However, studies examining reading (dis)ability within the interpretive paradigm are limited in contrast to the vast amount of research on learning (dis)abilities broadly (Alvermann & Malozzi, 2008). A smaller number of studies have explored the reading (dis)ability construct using a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) lens (Collins & Ferri, 2016; Randel, 2014). Such studies have found that in the school context students with reading (dis)ability labels are often oppressed and marginalized. These studies have also suggested that students endure social and academic isolation; yet, few studies adopt a DSE lens,

particularly in early childhood classrooms, to consider how the context itself and related material forces contribute to the construction and maintenance of the reading (dis)ability phenomenon.

Therefore, this study focuses on interrogating contexts and associated artifacts that manifest reading (dis)ability. I used different theoretical frameworks within education as well as from other disciplines like DSE (Connor et al., 2008; Gabel, 2005) and geography (Soja, 2010). This broad lens allows for a bird's eye view of the knotty constructions at the intersectionality of reading (dis)ability, children's bodies, and space. Thus, findings suggest that the reading (dis)ability construct is a complex phenomenon that is produced and maintained and across the social, cultural, and spatial landscapes (Soja, 2010).

Contextualizing the Setting: Ideas Across the Dissertation

Despite most children's curiosity and enthusiasm to attend school, Milner (2015) asks a poignant question: "How do some children *fall out of love* with school?" (p. 2; emphasis in original). He proposes that the answer is not found in the actions of a particular teacher but rather in the operation of schools. This question is the impetus for my work. That is, this dissertation seeks to explore the artifacts that make it possible that young and curious children enthusiastically arriving at schoolhouse doors are unknowingly forced into a sorting mechanism that ranks, labels, and identifies elements of their personhood (ways of being) as "at risk" or "struggling," and on the opposite end of the spectrum, "high" or "top."

This interpretive study critically explores the materials that construct the reading (dis)ability phenomenon imposed on far too many children (Erickson, 1986). In particular, I interrogate how these artifacts socially, temporally, and spatially (Soja, 2010) contribute to the construction and maintenance of the "at-risk" reader status. Relatedly, I explore the ways in which children embody notions of (in)adequacy through the accumulation of

(mis)educative experiences during a common literacy assessment (Dewey, 1938).

To examine this broad issue, I spent sixteen weeks in a first-grade classroom, mostly during English language arts instruction. Throughout this dissertation, I draw on my experiences in these spaces, as well as on written documents like state and federal policy, curricula, literacy assessments, and student assessment data.

Setting

Brantley Elementary School. The primary research site for data generation was a Title I public elementary school located in an urban township adjacent to a large Midwestern city. Brantley was the largest of four elementary schools in the district. After passing a bond issue in the late 1990s, all school buildings in the district underwent significant renovations that included classrooms, the infrastructure for technology, and a new media center for each school. I chose this site for several reasons. First, it was located in the district in which I taught. Second, I wanted to conduct research in a classroom where I knew the teacher treated children respectfully. Last, in terms of cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity, the student population was representative of many schools across the U.S.

Focal Classroom. The first-grade classroom under study was that of Ms. Louise Brown. During the time of the study (2016-17), the school served 447 students in grades K-5 with three classrooms at each grade level; 69% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced lunch. Approximately 68% of the student body was African American, 30% White, and 2% other races as reported by parents or caregivers at the time of registration. The composition of Ms. Brown's classroom was 21 students (12 girls, 9 boys). 12 were identified² as African American, 1 as Arabic, 1 as White, 1 as Hispanic, and 1 as other race. Ms. Brown, like most of the school

² The listed terms were those reported by the classroom teacher.

and district's faculty, including myself as the researcher, are predominantly White as is the teaching force nationally (Cross, 2005; Sleeter, 2001).

Chapter-by-Chapter Overview

Adopting different theoretical frames opens up “possibility, working to unsettle, destabilize, to shift assumptions,” (Kalvero, & Symes, 2007, p. 1). Therefore, I hope that this dissertation challenges and pushes my own and readers' thinking in new directions moving the conversation around reading (dis)ability forward to (re)consider the role of space (context). Reconceptualizing the reading (dis)ability construct in this way posits “new possibilities” for mainstream literacy education studies, policy, and praxis (Kalvero & Symes, 2007, p. 2). To do this, I organized the dissertation in the following way:

The second chapter is an interpretive case study that uses a critical comparative research (CCS) approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) to examine how identity artifacts shaped a low-income, African American, first-grade girl's literate identity as well as how they produced systemic barriers that stabilized it. Specifically, it explores the significance of state-level policy in shaping children's literate identity.

The third chapter addresses the issue of literacy assessment practices in a contemporary early childhood classroom. In particular, it focuses on a child labeled as “at risk” for reading failure and her teacher's experience during a multimodal literacy assessment and the information each produced about the other in shaping reading (dis)ability.

The fourth chapter provides a critical spatial perspective to consider how reading instruction is enacted across space and its role in the construction and maintenance of reading (dis)ability.

The final chapter returns to the problems of equity, materials, and instruction to explore possibilities for future research and publications.

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CHAPTER 2: Constructing Reading (Dis)ability: “The Lowest of the Low Kids”

Measuring and Labeling Children’s Reading Performance

For several decades, researchers and policy makers have documented a relationship between children’s socioeconomic status (SES) and reading performance in school (Bloom, 1964; Hernandez, 2011; Lloyd, 1978). Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth revealed that among children with two risk factors—those living in poverty and reading skills below the proficient mark— 26% did not graduate from high school in comparison to only 9% of their peers who had subpar reading scores and never experienced poverty (Hernandez, 2011). In addition, children’s third grade reading scores are a reliable predictor for children’s educational attainment, and, in some states, a gatekeeper for advancing to the next grade. Research, however, generally has not sought to untangle the nuances of the connections between reading performance and social forces such as racism, structural inequity, social class, (Jones, 2006; Milner, 2015) and perceived intellectual (dis)abilities (Kliewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006).

This article seeks to unpack some of the complicated interactions around reading and SES in particular by exploring the case of one low-income child in an urban elementary school who was identified by teachers, who were themselves working within a particular social, political, and historical context, as having reading difficulties. In order to make this determination the teachers drew on locally mandated literacy assessments developed off-site by strangers. Therefore, the process of identifying children’s reading difficulties was not enacted by anonymous “educators.” Rather the process reflects the sociopolitical landscape in which it was enacted.

Recognizing the various terms used to describe reading (dis)ability in policy, research, and practice is important because how it is named and what constitutes it are ambiguous. This issue is crucial because approximately 80% of children referred for special education services are perceived as “reading disabled” (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2010). Reading (dis)ability labels are most common in special education under the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) category, also referred to as a Learning Disability (LD). Additionally, a recent focus on dyslexia, another subgroup of SLD/LD, in policy is a term generally avoided by literacy educators, perhaps because it is so vague (Worthy, Lammert, Long, Salmerón, & Godfrey, in press). Nevertheless, researchers generally define dyslexia as a language-based difficulty that affects decoding of print (Worthy et al., in press).

As of June, 2018, only 7 states do not have dyslexia laws (Youman & Mather, 2018). Between January and March of 2018, 33 legislative bills related to dyslexia were introduced (Youman & Mather, 2018). However, after more than a century of research in various fields there is a lack of consensus on the definition of dyslexia, how to identify it, how it differs from other reading (dis)abilities, and appropriate instruction for students considered dyslexic (Worthy et al., in press). Although some states may or may not have specific dyslexia laws, several states have laws centered on third-grade reading. It is likely that the groups of children most affected by these laws are those from historically marginalized groups that have been underserved by schools.

Similarly, a sizable body of research has long documented the overrepresentation of particular groups of children in special education (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2014). For example, of the 13 categories of (dis)ability under which children can qualify for special education services, four, including LD, are subjective and

unreliable; that is, they are based on “clinical judgment” (Harry & Klinger, 2014, p. 3). The “clinical judgment” categories are not, according to Harry and Klingner (2014), based on “verifiable biological data” (p. 3). Most troubling is that when data are disaggregated by (dis)ability category, risk rates for the misidentification of African American and Native Americans for special education are higher in all three “judgment” categories (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Harry and Klingner (2014) argue that,

The categories do not necessarily reflect real disabilities within children. The variability in patterns of disability designation over time and place, and the intense debate over the meaning and identification of SLD support the perspective that the categories are reliant on definition and interpretation, which, in turn, are influenced by social and political agendas of various states, groups, and individuals. (p. 9).

Research Questions

A current policy response to the achievement gap in early childhood education centers on children’s third-grade reading performance. While debates about third grade reading policy remain at the local level, there is a broad spectrum of political stances in how states approach third-grade reading legislation. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia require retention for children not deemed “proficient” in reading by the end of third grade; fourteen of those states, however, offer conditional promotion to fourth grade (National Council of State Legislatures, 2018). While nine states allow for retention, they do not require it and instead relegate the decision to the local district (National Council of State Legislatures, 2018). Although three failed, in 2017, four more states introduced bills for third grade reading legislation (National Council of State Legislatures, 2018). More recently, researchers analyzed Florida’s promotion

policy to study its effects on student outcomes through high school. They found no effect on retained students' probability of graduating (Schwerdt, West, & Winters, 2015).

This study examined how state-level policies and local practices, both designed to remediate reading difficulties, work to construct a young child's literate identity as pathologized in an early childhood classroom. Rather than looking exclusively at the child's family ecology, measured cognitive capacity, or schooling context, I studied how, more broadly, artifacts, such as state and federal-level policy, reading curricula, and literacy assessments socially construct and thus limit the "kind of readers" (e.g., "proficient," "basic," "below") identities available to young children. To do this, I asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How did identity artifacts shape a low-income, African American, first-grade girl's literate identity?

Research Question 2: How did identity artifacts produce systemic barriers that stabilized a young, African American, girl's literate identity?

Framing

Common contemporary terms referencing children who do not meet grade-level expectations for reading are "struggling" or "at-risk" readers (e.g., Improving Reading Outcomes for Students with or at Risk for Reading Disabilities, 2014; Michigan's Third-Grade Reading Law, 2016). These labels have serious implications for children, including the potential to qualify for special education services under the LD/SLD category. In addition to the documented "racialization of special education" and the overrepresentation of historically marginalized children who have received labels corresponding to their perceived cognitive and mental capacity (Harry & Klingner, 2014, p. xi; cf. Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997; Sleeter, 1986), some researchers have raised concerns about the current racialization of certain tiers of Response to

Intervention (RTI) (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010) and the absence of culturally responsive instruction (Artiles et al., 2010, Kilingner & Edwards, 2006). Therefore, increased policy mandates focused on dyslexia and third-grade reading laws may exacerbate pathologizing the language and literacy practices of particular groups of children.

In addition, “at risk” for reading failure cannot be considered without highlighting the risks associated with poor schooling (Clay, 1987; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, and Chen, 1996; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Pressley & Allington, 2015). Many scholars have rejected the notion that children who experience difficulties with learning to read do so primarily because of an embodied biological or neurological condition, which is the traditional medical model that undergirds special education (Connor, 2013). For example, Clay (1987) argued that children are “learning to be disabled” by taking IQ tests that disadvantage children whose sensory perceptions may be atypical or who do not share dominant cultural norms and that the LD construct does not account for children’s educational histories or early literacy experiences prior to entering school (p. 155). On the other hand, Gee (2000), noted how in a culturally diverse second grade classroom all the White children during the “literacy block” labeled as the “best readers” were assigned a “gifted and talented teacher” (p. 117). This example illustrates the ways in which racism plays a central role in which children are deemed “good” readers and thus provided access to particular materials and instruction, even in what is considered a “liberal” school context (p. 117).

Clay’s (1987) supposition was supported in an analysis of the instructional environment as a possible cause for diagnosis of a learning (dis)ability (LD), a pivotal study by Vellutino and colleagues (1996). Their study led some scholars in the fields of learning (dis)abilities and dyslexia to reject the notion that children perceived as “learning disabled” qualify for these labels

because of a “neuro-developmental anomaly” identified by a psychometric approach, like an IQ test (Vellutino, 2004, p. 28). The authors found most children who might be diagnosed as “reading disabled” do not have cognitive deficits but are rather impaired by experience or instruction. In other words, the instructional environment is often the primary cause of the large number of children classified as LD in literacy and not children’s cognitive capacity (Clay, 1987).

The study’s results were one of the impetuses for the Response to Intervention (RTI) process introduced by Congress with the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) (Pressley & Allington, 2015). RTI was endorsed as a solution for reducing academic difficulty and enhancing the validity of the LD identification for kindergarten through third grade students (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). A hallmark of RTI is consistent progress monitoring to ensure early identification of students who are academically “struggling” so that they may receive interventions. Therefore, instruction can be eliminated as a cause for the suspected LD (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Although IDEIA 2004 no longer mandates the use of the IQ discrepancy formula for identifying a child with a LD, most states still use the discrepancy formula (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010). This issue is particularly important as dyslexia laws are becoming more prevalent.

The larger sociopolitical context in which research occurs has responded to the “struggling reader” conundrum produced by attention to the nation’s achievement gap on standardized assessments (e.g., NAEP) using a variety of research methodologies and epistemological assumptions. In a conceptual review of the “struggling reader landscape,” Kucan and Palinscar (2011) suggested topics related to “struggling reader” research have primarily

focused on policy (e.g., Allington, 2013), classroom and school-wide interventions (e.g., Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003), basic reading processes (e.g., McCandliss, Beck, Sandak, & Perfetti, 2003), and identity and engagement theories (e.g., Hall, 2007, 2009). This scholarship has uncovered a great deal about the complexities of learning to read. However, it has not examined the ways in which artifacts, like policy, may be shaping some children as “struggling” or “at risk” readers and inadvertently preventing them from accessing instructional practices supported by research.

Theoretical Framework

I draw my notion of disability from a social model of (dis)ability that understands the phenomenon of (dis)ability as a socially constructed form of oppression (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008; Gabel, 2005; Connor, & Ferri, 2014.) I use Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) theory to focus on “political, social, cultural, historical, and individual understandings of disability” (Connor et al., 2008, p. 448) through materials such as identity artifacts that construct a child’s literate identity. These identity artifacts are problematic as they incorporate common labels such as the “at risk,” “struggling,” and “deficient” reader. In the past, disability related issues were relegated and understood from a special education perspective that assumed a learning (dis)ability is a biological pathology that resides in a child’s head (Clay, 1987; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Taylor, 1991).

In contrast, DSE emerged to provide researchers with ways of theorizing about disability and related educational issues from a social model perspective (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008) that acknowledges that disabilities exist only in particular contexts as a result of particular social understandings. For example, in the present day United States, the inability to carry a tune, skip, or memorize and recite long strings of numbers are not conceived of as

(dis)abilities, but one can imagine contexts in which they could be. Interested in creating and sustaining more inclusive literacy instruction and schools, I examined how identity artifacts shaped a young child's literate identity and how they produced systemic barriers that stabilized a reading (dis)ability construct as part of her identity (Leander, 2002).

Following Leander, this study defines identity artifacts as “any instrument (material tool, embodied space, text, discourse, etc.) that mediates identity-shaping activity” (p. 201). Further, he argued that while researchers from different interpretive traditions have advanced the field's understanding of the ways in which classroom interactions construct identities that are fluid and oftentimes multiple, such a lens does not account for the ways in which identity is stabilized during these complicated interactions. Identity in this study is viewed as something that is unconsciously produced over time, embodied, and stabilized through structural constraints (Luke, 2009; Moje & Luke, 2009). Although DSE includes various theoretical approaches, this study primarily focuses on political, social, cultural, historical, and individual understandings of reading (dis)ability (Connor et al., 2008). I focus on how reading (dis)ability is made manifest and stabilized through identity artifacts. Identity artifacts considered in this study include literacy assessments (e.g., DRA, DIBELS), Response to Intervention (RTI), teacher perceptions, state-level and federal-level policies, embodied spaces, district documents, and discourse.

A DSE approach to research exposes the pervasive medical model of (dis)ability that assumes a learning (dis)ability is a deficiency that resides in the head of the individual (Gergen, 1990; Reid & Valle, 2004). This model of reading (dis)ability assumes perceived cognitive shortcomings can be measured, defined, and cured (Connor, 2014). Conversely, Smagorinsky (2016) argued that “the whole body contributes to how people think and feel” (n.p.) From a Vygotskian perspective, then, he suggests the social environments must be analyzed to

understand how contexts influence an individual's development both culturally and historically (Smagorinsky, 2016). This analysis intentionally rejects the notion that forms of (dis)ability are solely "in the head."

However, a DSE lens focuses attention on the struggles that some mainstream students face in developing school literacies precisely because of efforts to remediate their perceived failings, such as, for example, targeted intervention efforts (Collins & Ferri, 2016). Additionally, DSE acknowledges the marginalization that occurs when individuals are ascribed reading (dis)ability labels (Randel, 2014), which is an important tenet of a DSE approach. According to Randel (2014), critical theories about disability are seldom used to frame research about reading (dis)ability. Thus, "using a DSE lens, researchers and educators can view students with reading disability labels as part of a group of students who are positioned in schools as othered, marginalized, stereotyped, and often segregated" (p. 53). Following this call, I use DSE theory in this study to understand how identity artifacts shaped the construction of a child as reading (dis)abled in a first-grade classroom.

Method

From a DSE perspective, identity is a social construct that is produced in some social contexts and by particular artifacts that stabilize it. In other words, artifacts in the school context stabilize or achieve children's literate identity as fixed. This 16-week-long qualitative case study used a critical comparative research (CCS) approach informed by a process-oriented understanding that allowed me to iteratively trace artifacts as they became relevant to the study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Bartlett and Vavrus challenge the traditional narrow boundaries that researchers draw around case studies, calling on researchers to consider the ways that "global, national, and local dimensions" of a phenomena impact a particular case (Bartlett & Vavrus,

2017 p. 1). Adopting this methodological stance allowed me to consider the ways that state laws and policies, in particular, impacted the literacy artifacts shaping the focal child's experience, alongside of close-to-the-classroom phenomena, such as instruction and assessment.

I explored the ways in which materials, including state and federal policy, shaped a child's literate identity and produced barriers that stabilized a reading (dis)ability label. Although identities are fluid they are also fixed; this study was interested in the source of particular artifacts and how they shape and stabilize a child's literate identity. Next, I provide descriptions of the local policy around reading specific to the place and time of the study, the community context, and participants before describing methods used in data generation and analysis.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted at Brantley Elementary (all names are pseudonyms), a Title I school located in Morrison, a small town adjacent to a large city in Michigan. At the time of this study, the principal reported that 69% of students qualified for meal assistance (personal communication, November 19, 2017). Concurrently, in the state of Michigan, a hotly debated bill establishing the "Third-Grade Reading Law" was signed into law by Governor, Rick Snyder, on October 6, 2016. It aims to ensure that more students are proficient in English language arts on the third-grade state assessment. The law's official language mandates that a child whose reading score is "one year deficient at the end of third grade" may be retained (Michigan Third-Grade Reading law, 2016). The district was already feeling the impact of the law that went into effect the year following the study.

Similarly, the artifacts (i.e., scripted reading curricula) in use at the time of this study were purchased in compliance with federal mandates from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 2002). In the decade following the passage of NCLB (2002), many districts like

Brantley, where more than 50 percent of all students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, adopted scripted reading programs. To receive Title I funding from the U.S. federal government, these schools had to satisfy particular regulations; specifically, participating schools had to use the funding for a comprehensive school reform program based on literacy research singled out as exemplary. The National Reading Panel (NRP) considered literacy research exemplary if it was based on “scientific research evidence” (Pressley, Duke, & Boling, 2004). A small set of scripted reading programs was explicitly recommended as part of these regulations (Ede, 2006). Thus, during the study I observed Ms. Brown and Ms. Violet use materials purchased under federal policy.

The Brantley Annual Education Report for 2016 disclosed that the staff analyzed student achievement data in the core subjects and developed school improvement³ goals and strategies. One goal germane to this study is, “literacy instruction has included “walk to learn” workshop groups to read and spell at instructional levels (“James Public School”, p. 1, 2016). Teachers and students referred to this portion of the day as “reading workshop” during which children were assigned to an ability group for reading instruction. This instruction was in addition to the whole-group core reading that took place in the classroom. Ability groups met four days per week for 45 minutes in various spaces throughout the school.

School and Participants

Room 3, the first-grade classroom where I generated data, included 21 children (12 were identified⁴ as African American, 1 as Arabic, 1 as White, 1 as Hispanic, and 1 as other race). The racial diversity of the children in the classroom reflected that of the school. According to the

³ To protect the school’s identity, I did not include the School Improvement Plan in references.

⁴ The listed terms were those reported by the classroom teacher reflecting school registration documents presented to parents/caregivers.

school principal, parents/caregivers self-identified their child's race when they registered for school. During the 2016-17 school year, data collected by school administration reported that the building served 447 students in grades K-5. The school's student population was 68% African American, 30% Caucasian, and 2% other races.

Focal Child Participant

Jayda (7-year-old, African American, girl). Jayda joined Ms. Brown's first-grade classroom one week before I began the study (mid-February). Prior to joining Brantley, Jayda's Grandmother shared with the school that she was no longer able to homeschool her. During the study, Jayda's grandparents were her legal guardians. Although Jayda was quiet while working and during social interactions in the classroom, the other children included her in conversations and at recess. She often raised her hand to volunteer during class discussions. On several occasions, I observed Jayda during "intervention" with the school's reading interventionist and the other children in the group. This small group of four children from three different first-grade classrooms met four days per week for 30 minutes. In these sessions, I observed Jayda listening to the teacher, the other students, and willingly participate. For example, she choral read sight words aloud, named letters and sounds, read aloud when called upon, and when a story was part of the lesson, she regularly volunteered to share self-to-text connections.

Focal Adult Participants

Ms. Brown (39-year-old, White American, woman). The teacher in Room 3 was Ms. Brown. This study took place in the district where I taught for 10 years. Additionally, when Ms. Brown was hired I was tenured and beginning my fifth year, thus I served as her mentor. Because of our longstanding relationship, I had already established her trust. When I approached Ms. Brown about the possibility of her classroom as a site for my dissertation research she was

enthusiastic about the opportunity to reflect on her practice. She went out of her way to assist me with gathering materials, answering questions, and opened her classroom. At the time of the study, she was completing her 17th year as an elementary teacher in the district. Ms. Brown began her career at a different elementary school in the district for nine years where she taught first and third grade but was at Brantley for the last eight years in first grade.

Ms. Brown was representative of the predominately White teaching staff at the school and the larger district. She served on the School Improvement Committee. Ms. Brown regularly collaborated with the other two first-grade teachers in the building as well as the school reading interventionist, Ms. Violet during “reading workshop time.” In an interview, Ms. Brown shared with me that although “teaching is so hard” and she wished that “the stress wasn’t so bad, ...I wouldn’t want to do anything else.” She also expressed frustration, saying that she and her colleagues were “trying to advocate for these kids, and we’ve gotten resistance and that’s what’s hard.” She was also attuned to each child’s individual needs and familial circumstances. Some of the children and their families in the classroom experienced trauma, and therefore so did Ms. Brown. Moreover, it was not uncommon to see Ms. Brown hugging the children in the classroom as well as those in the upper grades who regularly visited their former first-grade teacher.

Ms. Violet (51-year-old, White American, woman). Ms. Violet was the school’s reading interventionist at the time of the study. She was completing her 18th year at Brantley. With a master’s degree in learning disabilities, Ms. Violet taught several grades including special education. In the interactions, I observed between Ms. Violet and children in the building, she appeared to be warm, encouraging, and soft spoken. The staff liked her and often asked for ideas on how to best help children not reading at grade level.

Ms. Grove (46-year-old, White American, woman). Ms. Grove was in her seventh year

as the building principal during this project. Previously, she taught fourth and fifth grade in another school in the district as well as served as a reading interventionist for nine years in various buildings. Ms. Grove had a friendly, professional demeanor and was highly visible in the building. For instance, I often saw her visiting with children during lunch or showing new families around the building. She was well-liked by the staff. On many occasions, Ms. Brown commented that while Ms. Grove held high expectations for the school staff, she was supportive and respected their professional judgment. Ms. Gove also welcomed me into the building and always made herself available to answer questions.

Researcher (44-year-old, White American, woman). I conducted education research in a racial and cultural community different from my own; thus, I drew on Milner's (2007) framework for raising researchers' racial and cultural consciousness while doing this work. The framework consists of researching the self; researching the self in relation to others; engaging in reflection and representation; and shifting from self to system (p. 395). He argued that when researchers ignore their own positionality and others' "racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world," they risk "misrepresentations, misinformation, and misrepresentation of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems" (p. 388). In all stages of this qualitative inquiry, I repeatedly examined the dangers that could mediate policy that might benefit reading instruction and achievement for historically marginalized students. In the process of researching the self, Milner (2007) asks the researcher to pose racially and culturally grounded questions about themselves. Therefore, in reflexively responding to those questions (see Milner, 2007), I recognized that as a former employee in the same district, I perpetuated the inequitable literacy instruction practices that I observed at Brantley. As I analyzed the data, I saw a reflection of my own past teacher identity manifested in the

curriculum materials I used that were grounded in deficit understandings of race and culture.

As a former teacher turned researcher, I taught public and private school for over 10 years as a primary classroom teacher, a K-5 school media specialist and technology teacher, and a middle school Spanish teacher. In addition, I provided professional development to educators across the U.S. with a national institute for over six years. I taught both undergraduate and master's literacy courses at a large Midwestern university. In each position, I participated in the reinscription of a problematic discourse and pedagogy that constructs students as (dis)abled readers (e.g., "low," "high," "average").

Data Sources

Data were generated through observation (n=98 hours), interviewing, video and audio recording, field notes, and the collection of material artifacts (e.g., assignments, literacy assessment protocols, lesson plans, special education evaluation summary). I conducted and transcribed one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the children, Ms. Brown, Ms. Violet, and the building principal. While the interviews with the children averaged between eight to ten minutes, the interviews with school personnel were between 30 and 90 minutes. During each interview, I used an interview protocol; however, the questions varied according to participant responses. The interviews all took place in the school. Additionally, I engaged in informal conversations with the teacher and reading interventionist, and principal each time I visited and we exchanged emails regularly (during and after the study ended) if I had follow up questions. When I observed the English Language Arts (ELA) block 3x/week, I audio- and/or video-recorded each session.

Data Analysis

To understand how identity artifacts produced systemic barriers that shaped a young

child's literate identity, I analyzed the corpus of data from this study in several recursive phases to identify themes and patterns. First, I read each interview transcript, field notes, and relevant identity artifacts at least twice. The identity artifacts analyzed were literacy assessment protocols, children's work, reading lesson plans, district, school, and classroom newsletters, email correspondences between school personnel and myself, interview transcripts, the state's Third-Grade reading law, and field notes. During the second pass of data, I wrote memos about particular artifacts that mediated identity-shaping for my focal child and her classmates as kinds of readers. For example, I noted how literacy assessments used in the classroom like DIBELS produced labels for children's language and literacy practices according to their scores as well as how those labels became a sorting mechanism for ability reading groups (e.g., "at or below benchmark," "well below benchmark").

Guiding my thinking during this initial analysis were tenets of DSE research that contextualize (dis)ability "within political and social spheres" (Connor et al., 2008, p. 448). Therefore, Drawing on DSE theory the following questions to guided my analysis: 1. How did identity artifacts shape a low-income, African American, first-grade girl's literate identity? 2. How did identity artifacts produce systemic barriers that stabilized a young, African American, girl's literate identity?

State and locally-mandated assessments in Ms. Brown's classroom were compulsory. Thus, children's language and literacy practices were measured and interpreted according to the DRA, DIBELS, and teacher observations. Using the data from these assessments, the teachers then ability-grouped children for individualized reading instruction that they referred to as "reading workshop time" or what is currently referred to as Tier 2 of RTI instruction. Through my analysis, for instance, I noticed that the groups were not only formed according to assessment

results (e.g., “high,” “medium,” “low”) but also discursively named as such; consequently, the children were referred to and identified as “the highs,” “middle,” “the lows,” and the “low lows” by teachers in conversation with each other. Last, in my analysis, the ways in which Ms. Brown interpreted some children’s speech and language as impaired became apparent (*see Table 1*).

Table 1. Examples of Codes Related to Identity Artifacts

Code	Definition	Example
1. Social	The teachers’ interpretations of children’s literacy	Ms. Brown and school personnel used assessment data for individualized instruction. They named the groups according to children’s skill levels as well as identified the children as such (e.g., “high,” “low, low”).
2. Political	Identity artifacts produced through policy that shaped children’s literate identities	The state’s new “Third-Grade Reading Law” provided a definition for reading “deficiency” according to standardized testing.
3. Cultural	Historically and culturally situated materials that shaped the children’s literate identities	Children’s language and literacy practices are assessed through writing prompts. Expectations of the dominant culture determined children’s literate identities.

Findings

In this study, I was guided by two research questions. First, I asked: How did identity artifacts shape a low-income, African American, first-grade girl’s literate identity? Next, I considered: How did identity artifacts produce systemic barriers that stabilized a young, African American, girl’s literate identity? In the first section, I highlight how new state policy around children’s third-grade reading scores on state ELA assessments shaped the district’s understanding of reading (dis)ability. In doing so, I explain how the new law affected the school district’s reading curriculum and literacy instruction and assessment practices, which foreground the ways that the law not only shaped but also stabilized Jayda’s literate identity before a legal retention policy went into effect. Next, I illuminate how district-mandated literacy assessments

were key identity artifacts that shaped teachers' perceptions and discourse and thus Jada's literate identity, as a (dis)abled reader. The last finding focuses in on the ways that time was an identity artifact that shaped Jayda's literate identity and stabilized it.



Figure 1. Identity Artifacts That Constructed Jayda as a (Dis)abled Reader

Findings 1: State-Level Policy

At the time of the study, the district's teachers and administrators were coping with an identity artifact that was (re)shaping current assessment, instruction, and curriculum as well as children's literate identity children's literate identity. The state's new "Third-Grade Reading Law," which would go into effect the following school year (2017-18), presented the district with increased pressure to guarantee that all children were "proficient" readers by third grade; and, retain those who are not. For example, the law states "An early literacy coach shall support and provide initial and ongoing professional development to teachers in all of the following ...

identifying and addressing reading deficiency” (Michigan Third-Grade Reading Law, 2016). The law creates a schism between the “deficient” and “proficient” reader. A set of assumptions inherent in the law is that if a child comes to school without a particular set of language and literacy practices and does not acquire them by the end of third grade, they are “deficient” in reading. The law also assumes that children throughout the state have all had equal access to schooling experiences with teachers who possess expert knowledge of reading instruction, high expectations for all children under their care, and schools with the necessary resources (e.g., professional development, curriculum) guarantying that all children reach proficiency by the end of third grade.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) website released a Third-Grade Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document. The first item listed, and thus what I inferred as the most requested topic, is the law’s definition of “deficiency.” It is defined as “scoring below grade level, or being determined to be at-risk of reading failure based on a screening assessment, diagnostic assessment, standardized summative assessment, or progress monitoring” (Michigan Department of Education, p. 1., n.d.). The need for the law’s clarification of reading “deficiency” and “at risk” for reading “failure” evidences the lack of agreement on a definition and criteria for a specific learning (dis)ability (SLD) among policy makers, researchers, (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Vellutino et al., 2004), and the federal government (see IDEIA 2004). This point is illustrated when as of February 2018, the Michigan DOE had not yet determined the criteria for “one year deficient” on the ELA portion of the state-level assessment.

At Brantley, for example, the district directed what summative assessments (e.g., DRA, DIBELS) teachers administered for reading. When Ms. Brown assessed Jayda’s reading progress at the end of first grade, her scores on both assessments marked her as behind the rest of the

children. These scores were interpreted by school faculty as indicators of her intellectual ability triggering conversations about retention. The Third-Grade Reading Law was an identity artifact that shaped Jayda as reading (dis)abled because despite entering school for the first time later in the year and making documented progress in reading, she did not meet end-of-year benchmarks. Still undetermined by the state, the impending law regulates the district's ability to promote "at risk" or "deficient" readers to fourth grade. Until Jayda achieved grade-level expectations, state policy stabilized her literate identity.

Findings 2: District-Level Policy

The pressure exerted on the district from the new law was exemplified in a monthly district newsletter distributed to all staff that Ms. Brown shared with me dated February 13, 2017:

In response to the 3rd Grade Reading Law, ... the Heights School District has hit the ground running to ensure all 3rd grade students will be reading at grade level. Our current kindergartners will be the first class to feel the effects of this law. In 2020, those who do not pass the ELA portion of the M-STEP [state-level assessment] in 3rd grade would be the first students to be retained.

Additionally, the newsletter reported that according to the previous year's M-STEP data, the law would have required the district to retain as many as 50% of the previous year's third-grade students. When I interviewed the principal, Ms. Grove, she expressed the district's frustration with inconsistent tests scores among its third-grade students. She stated that despite knowing "the staff is working their tails off," reading scores were "40% proficiency, 50% proficiency, maybe 30% one year, just that up down, up down, up down, up down." According to Ms. Grove, a combination of irregular reading achievement test results and the "state's laying down the law on the reading law of third-grade retentions," the district sought to "capture students" and "move the needle on their reading rapidly."

The district previously adopted a core basal reading curriculum under Reading First (RF), also the part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 2001) that was dedicated to ensuring all children learn to read by third grade. Yet, a decade later children's reading achievement scores were erratic. In an effort to stabilize test scores and proactively thwart the potential costs of retention imposed by the state's new Third-Grade Reading Law, the district purchased another scripted reading curriculum, Success for All (SFA). Thus, SFA would replace the existing basal curriculum the following year.

Ms. Grove explained that the district viewed the \$500,000 purchase as a solution for “getting on a tight model of literacy that really fills the holes for when kids come in at different ages and times.” She, along with a committee of teachers and administrators felt SFA would address student mobility within the district. “So, like how many second graders and first graders did we start in the last few weeks, what gaps do many of them have? It's not just, pile on a bunch of interventions, we have a system in place to lock em' right in there.” In other words, district administrators and Ms. Grove perceived SFA as a sustainable approach to remediating children's deficiencies like knowledge gaps and mobility. She did not discuss the law's oversight to address the systemic inequities that affected the children within the school and across the state.

However, in Jayda's case, the school decided to remediate her perceived knowledge gaps with retention and another year of first grade “under the tight model of literacy” that Ms. Gove and the district believed SFA guarantees. The district, like all within the state, felt pressure to intensely focus on preparing children for the state's third-grade ELA assessment. Although the Third-Grade Reading Law had not yet gone into effect, it was a powerful identity artifact that shaped the literate identity of some children as lacking—or as the law states and in relation to Jayda, “one year deficient” (MCL 380.1280f, 2016) and a liability for the district.

It makes sense then that assuming a reading deficiency resides in a child's head that can be fixed might also speculate the associated home environment can be mediated. For example, the monthly newsletter to all staff noted that district academic data indicated:

Student transiency negatively impacts student achievement. The district administrative team has been working on developing a district-wide process to minimize the negative impact transiency brings to students and families.

Although school attendance is undoubtedly a variable that influences children's success with school literacy, "transiency" is most likely not a factor families or schools can control. The district's resolution to diagnose children's mobility aligns with the medicalized concept of reading (dis)ability by assuming "at risk" for reading failure is a result of the child's familial residence and not the school's assessment or instructional practices, inequitable policy, or society more broadly. This assumption pathologizes children and their families. It is unlikely that families choose mobility or have a choice about its impact on their child's academic performance and emotional/social well-being. The "walk to learn" reading groups at Brantley impacted children with high mobility in that some were moved multiple times daily within the school context; thus, the children were not provided stability during school hours.

District-level policy was an identity artifact aimed at increasing the reading proficiency for children "at risk" of reading failure. The district's commitment to "hit the ground running" with the adoption of a new basal reading curriculum to "fill the holes for when kids come in at different ages and times" shaped Jayda as a (dis)abled reader. Moreover, the developing processes for attendance to remediate children's reading is one example of how district policy produced a deficit model framework that stabilized Jayda's perceived deficiencies as naturalistic. The same social construction of reading (dis)ability was also reified in state policy (i.e., the Third-Grade Reading Law).

Findings 3: Grade-Level Practices

Multiple identity artifacts in the form of literacy assessments and teacher perceptions socially constructed the children in the classroom as a particular kind of reader. Therefore, school personnel administered the assessments, interpreted the results, and developed their own labels that corresponded with the protocols. For example, at the start of each card marking period, the three first-grade teachers and Ms. Violet met and analyzed literacy assessment data and personal observations of the children in first grade to plan reading instruction. Teachers used two different district-mandated literacy assessments. First, four times throughout the school year, they administered the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to measure children's reading level, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Each child was then assigned a numerical score in comparison to predetermined benchmark goals set by the publisher for all children at different points in time during first grade.

The second assessment given three times per year was the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Skills (DIBELS). It tested seven elements such as phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle and included published guidelines for children's performance indicated as "at or above benchmark," "below benchmark," or "well below benchmark." These performance bands corresponded with recommendations for the type of support needed. A child who scored "below benchmark," for instance, required "intensive support." Although the teachers provided instruction that matched the recommendations based on DIBELS and DRA scores as well as their own observations during instruction, their interpretation of the data resulted in their construction of specific labels for reading workshop groups and children's specific learning needs (e.g., "high," "medium," "low," "low, low") that consequently and perhaps unknowingly, shaped children's literate identity.

At planning meetings for reading instruction, the teachers discussed assessment data results and their personal observations of children. First, they divided all first-graders into a range of six to eight ability-based groups for “reading workshop” time. According to Ms. Brown and Ms. Violet, the workshop model was the school’s implementation of the RTI model. At the same time, in line with the Michigan Department of Education, the school district was working toward implementing a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to better align reading instruction for Tiers 1, 2, and 3 of RTI.

At Brantley, each first-grade teacher provided core reading instruction in their own classroom five days per week for approximately 30 minutes using a basal reading curriculum and whole-group approach in addition to reading workshop. Therefore, according to Ms. Brown, all children experienced “whole group instruction, reading workshop time, and then intervention.” The benefit of the school’s RTI model, in Ms. Brown’s opinion, was that all children received a double dose of reading but at their individual level. Hence, those children in need of additional support in the form of “intervention” had expert instruction with sustained “progress monitoring.”

The names of the groups corresponded to children’s perceived reading abilities according to DRA and DIBELS scores as well as teacher perceptions. For instance, if the students were “low” or performing “at level” they met with a certified teacher like Ms. Brown or one of the other first-grade teachers. If they were “low, low” Ms. Violet provided intervention. The “highs” used Accelerated Reader™ in the school library supervised by Title I staff, usually a school parent paid an hourly wage. In one of the planning meetings I observed, while discussing the reading workshop group placements for the final card marking period, the teachers referred to and identified the children according to the group they were assigned. Some children were

labeled the “lows,” and some were the “highs.” Others, like Jayda, were “low, low.”

In an interview, Ms. Violet shared her assumptions about the learning abilities of the “low, low” group of children who regularly worked with her. While describing the reading intervention group that she instructed she stated, “this really truly, this is special ed. I don’t care what anybody says. I’ve got the lowest of low kids. I mean I’m the step before special ed.” Exercising human judgment and perhaps influenced by identity artifacts herself, Ms. Violet assumed that the “lowest of low kids” had limited learning potential and would eventually be certified as learning disabled. Grade-level instruction and assessment practices influenced teacher perceptions and thus shaped Jayda as a (dis)abled reader. Furthermore, the “walk to learn” literacy instruction model embedded in Brantley’s 2016 School Improvement goals for reading and spelling instruction was an identity artifact that stabilized Jayda’s literate identity as the “lowest of the low kids” in first grade by limiting her access to learn alongside other children modeling the reading practices that school personnel were convinced she was incapable of learning. Mandated grade-level practices made it nearly impossible for school personnel to see Jayda’s strengths and that she *was* learning to read but at a pace not legitimated by the materials.

Findings 4: Classroom-Level Interactions

Ms. Brown also referred to the “low, low” readers who worked with Ms. Groves as “at risk-readers.” For example, Ms. Brown provided me a typed list of the first and last names of the children in the class. A handwritten star appeared next to seven of the 21 names identifying specific children as “at risk for reading.” Seven days before my arrival (mid-February), a vibrant and not yet, formally diagnosed (dis)abled learner, Jayda, joined Room 3. However, Ms. Brown’s actions suggested that she did not view Jayda’s language and literacy abilities as strengths. Next to her name was a star—an indication that her language and literacy skills were,

according to Ms. Brown's perceptions, not at grade level. I inquired about Jayda's reading status. Not having administered any of the mandated first-grade literacy assessments, Ms. Brown shared with me her personal observation that while Jayda transitioned into the classroom socially, she was concerned about her ability to process language although Jayda spoke regularly, that was in her opinion, an indication that she was cognitively impaired. She felt that Jayda was not able to process directions with multiple steps.

Considering Jayda joined the classroom so late in the school year, Ms. Brown felt that her skills were too "low" for the established reading workshop groups. Therefore, Jayda's reading plan was different from her classmates and the remaining children in first grade. She participated in core instruction in the classroom for 30 minutes each day, saw Ms. Violet, and worked one-on-one four days a week for 45 minutes with a retired teacher from a local parochial school hired with Title I funds. In addition, Ms. Brown requested a Speech/Language Impairment (SLI) evaluation that qualified Jayda for speech and language services. Ms. Brown mentioned that when she contacted Jayda's grandparents about signing paperwork for the evaluation, her grandmother expressed similar concerns. Jayda was pulled out of the classroom up to three times per day for various "interventions."

Children's (in)ability to attain grade-level literacy expectations during first grade shaped their literate identity. Time, therefore, was a culturally constructed identity artifact that shaped Jayda as "at risk." On my first day in Room 3 the children and Ms. Brown celebrated being in school for 100 days. In keeping with the day's theme, I also observed another lesson incorporating the number 100 during writing workshop, a component of daily whole-group literacy instruction. With hats intact, the children enthusiastically gathered around Ms. Brown on the familiar meeting area rug positioned in front of the Smart Board where she introduced the

themed writing topic and a short mini-lesson about writing mechanics (e.g., capitalization, finger spaces) and how to present ideas (e.g., topic sentence, details).

Next, the children received a worksheet and the following directions: If I had one hundred dollars... *Draw your picture in the middle. Write a story about what you would buy if you had one hundred dollars and why.* After discussing and modeling the prompt, she directed the children to their seats to write while soft music played in the background. As I circulated around the classroom many children offered to share their responses as I listened. When I approached Jayda, I noticed that she followed directions and drew a detailed illustration of a joyful self in the middle of the paper. I asked her if she wanted to share what she wrote and she shook her head “no.” Another child in the classroom, Will, (a White, 7-year-old, monolingual, male) eagerly approached me wanting to share his story.

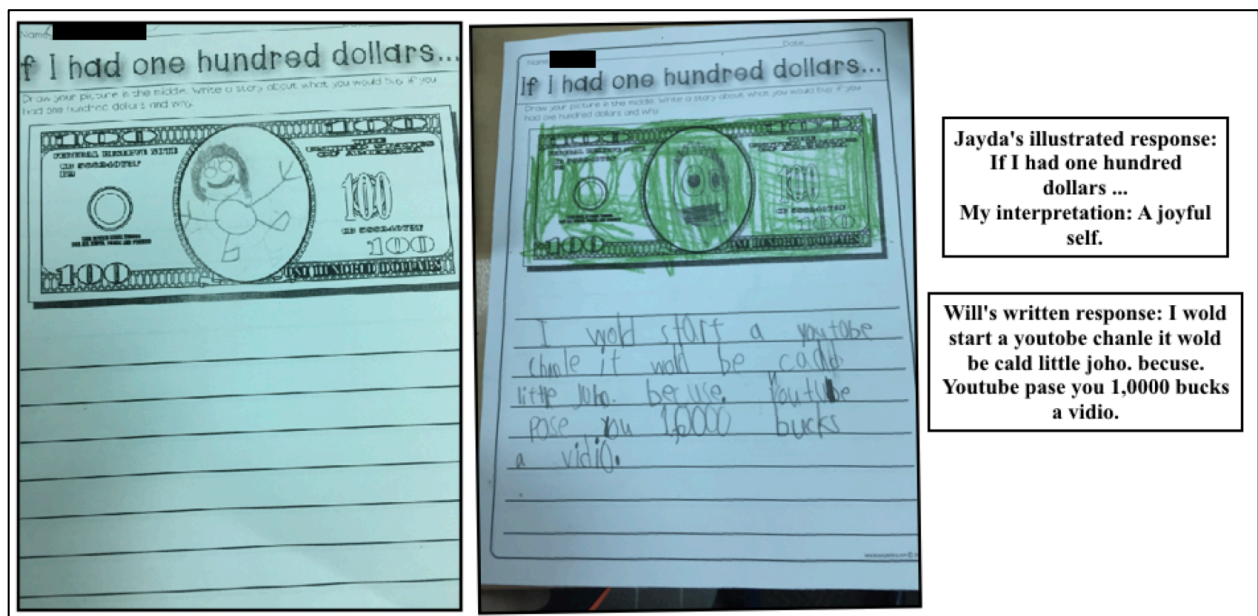


Figure 2. Jayda's and Will's Responses to the 100's Day Writing Prompt

A similar writing prompt was given four weeks later that Ms. Brown evaluated according to district grade-level expectations as data for third quarter report cards. Thus, the assignment served as an identity artifact that Ms. Brown used to assess and define the status of children's

literate identity at a distinct point in time. The temporal boundaries for the evaluation of this writing prompt were arbitrary, particularly for Jayda as her prior experiences with school writing were unknown and could only be accounted for within a timeframe of four weeks. Ms. Brown perceived Jayda as cognitively impaired. This belief surfaced in a statement she made to me that “she will probably end up in special ed.,” therefore the writing artifact crystallized the “at risk reading” identity. Likewise, Will’s assessed writing performance maintained his status and identity as the “highest reader” in the classroom.

The district’s first-grade writing objectives⁵ and consequently Ms. Brown, did not account for Jayda’s limited time in a school setting (eight days) nor did it recognize or build on the language and literacy experiences she already had. Rather the same prevailing narrow definition of literacy and literacy development that is based on the “normally” developing child who is typically White and middle-class that underpinned the state’s new reading bill was also embedded within the curriculum and Ms. Brown’s perceptions. Hence, this view of literacy influenced Ms. Brown’s persistent focus on what Jayda had not yet accomplished instead of her learning potential. In less than a marking period, Jayda’s prior language and literacy experiences intersected with temporality. In other words, these identity artifacts operationalized the social construction of reading (dis)ability held by Ms. Brown. Despite that she enrolled later in the school year providing the school with limited knowledge of prior schooling experiences, there was nothing in place to mediate grade-level expectations.

The assessment writing prompt specifically asked the children to form and write an opinion about their favorite game. Temporally, by the end of the third marking period, the

⁵ According to Ms. Brown, the district’s grade-level expectations are aligned with the Common Core State Standards for Language Arts and Literacy (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

district mandated that first graders were expected to answer the prompt with a topic sentence, supported by three or more details and end with a closing sentence. What follows are (see *Figure 3*) Jayda's and Will's responses to the prompt. Whereas Will met grade-level expectations communicating his favorite game with a topic sentence supported by three supporting details and a closing sentence, in four weeks Jayda progressed to attempting to answer the prompt.

For instance, she began stating her opinion with a capital letter followed by "lik" accurately representing a beginning, middle, and ending sound. She also wrote and correctly spelled the high frequency word "too." When Ms. Brown filled out the rubric for the assignment, (see *Figure 4*) she did not recognize that Jayda did in fact write a capital "I." Emphasizing the identification of children who were "at risk of reading failure" and whose progress was monitored within a tightly controlled timeframe created a deficit framework from which children's language and literacy practices were viewed. This framework made it difficult for Ms. Brown and other school personnel to recognize Jayda's strengths and progress.

The purpose of this analysis was not to analyze the children's writing line by line; however, Jayda's response illustrates literacy growth in a short amount of time. The rubric Ms. Brown used to evaluate the children's writing (see *Figure 4*) that aligned with the first-grade ELA CCSS did not document the progress Jayda made. Grade-level expectations, time, and Ms. Brown's perceptions shaped Jayda's literate identity during classroom-level interactions. These classroom interactions, however, stabilized Jayda as reading (dis)abled because she did not have access to consistent writing instruction or opportunities to practice. Notably, beginning in March Jayda regularly missed writing instruction with Ms. Brown and the opportunity to use multimodal devices (e.g., Chromebooks, iPads) because she received multiple "interventions,"

although who provided the services remained sporadic. The technology could have assisted her with communicating her ideas according to school literacy expectations (i.e., grade-level expectations) during writing.

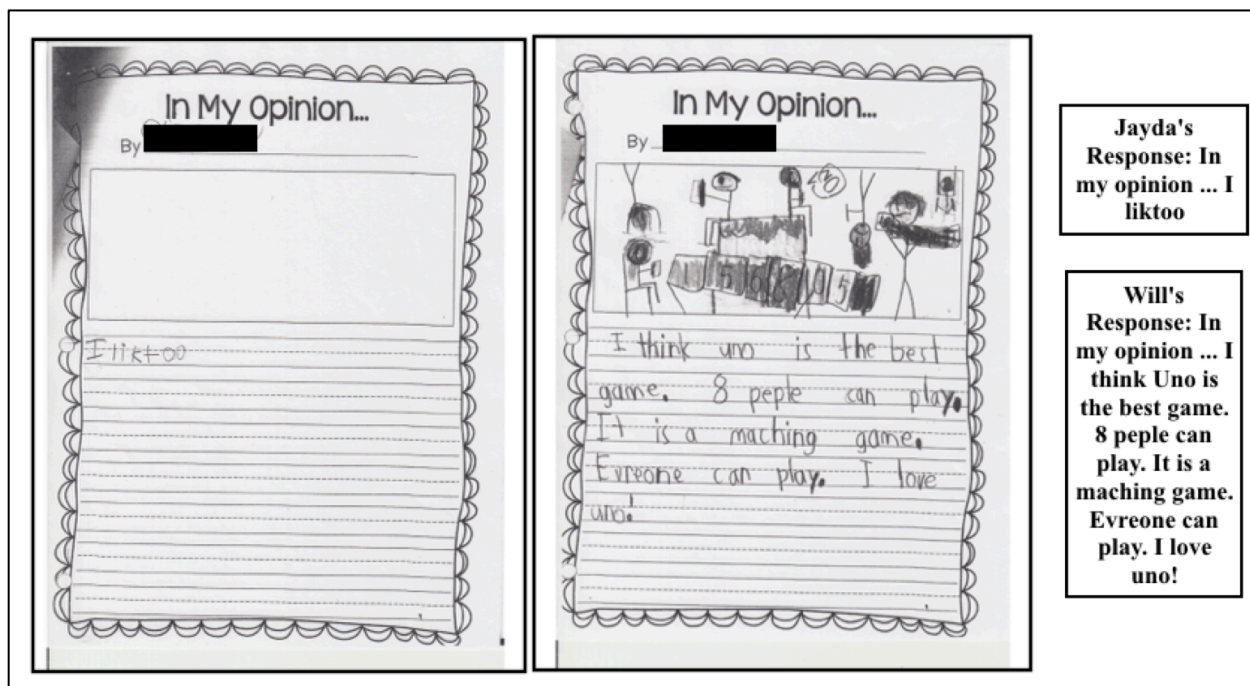


Figure 3. Jayda's and Will's Response to the Opinion Writing Prompt

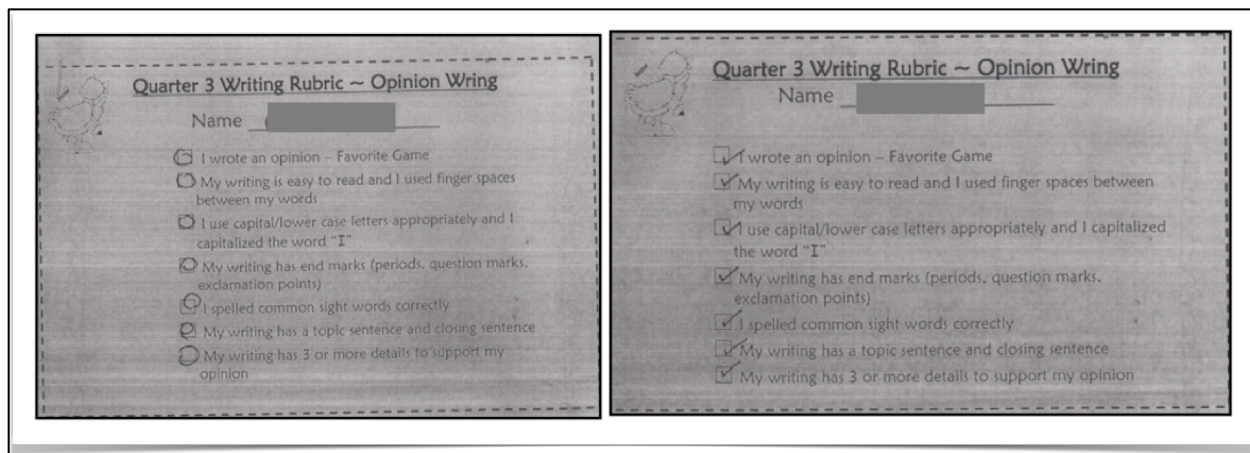


Figure 4. Jayda's and Will's Rubrics for Opinion Writing

Implications and Significance

Research has explored “struggling” or “at risk” readers in a variety of contexts as well as interventions aimed at children identified and labeled in these ways according to school literacy standards. This deficit perspective reflects a belief that some children “have” a LD because of innate characteristics limiting their acquisition of literacy (Johnston, 2011). Therefore, additional studies exploring the materials and social interactions in school that socially construct some children, particularly at a young and impressionable age, as reading (dis)abled are important for exposing the social, cultural, and political barriers to equitable learning opportunities for all children. While researchers from different interpretive traditions have advanced the field’s understanding of the ways that classroom interactions construct identities that are fluid, and oftentimes multiple, such a lens does not account for the ways that identity is stabilized during these complex interactions (Leander, 2002).

The power of formal institutions of education to recognize some children as learning (dis)abled influences their subsequent life opportunities. Additionally, the knowledge to prevent most children from becoming (dis)abled in literacy is readily available (Johnston, 2011). With an increasingly diverse student population among U.S. schools, it is imperative that schools work to create and sustain reading instruction that understands and is inclusive of the full range of human diversity as well as the ability to identify and navigate the systemic barriers that prevent it. Therefore, in my analysis I examined the identity artifacts that constructed Jayda, a low-income child in an urban first-grade classroom, as an inadequate reader.

The school district’s engagement with identity artifacts both within and outside boundaries beyond their control, provided me the opportunity to uncover the “cultural tools shaped by the identities of those who develop them” (Crumpler, 2017, p. 123). As a White

former first-grade teacher in the district where I conducted this study and a mentor to Ms. Brown early in her teaching career, I share identities with those who helped develop the cultural tools that this analysis highlighted. Therefore, my identities often limit my ability to see particular literacy assessments and instructional practices as problematic. Because these identify artifacts are pervasive, they seem “normalized.” Using a DSE lens provided me a critical analytic tool that made visible the identity artifacts that conceptualized Jayda as a child with a reading (dis)ability within her first eight days in school. It also offered me insight into the “identifications of ability based on assessments of competence in academic literacies” that are “used as markers for who belongs in particular classroom communities” (Collins & Ferri, 2016, p. 11).

The literacy assessments used at Brantley greatly influenced teachers’ deterministic beliefs about children’s ability to learn to read and the ability-group pedagogy adopted by the school as part of a school improvement effort. However, teachers’ beliefs are influenced by a deterministic system in which their participation in particular practices such as assessment is compulsory. The Third-Grade Reading Law was an identity artifact that was undergirded by an understanding of reading “deficiency” as a (dis)ability that exists within the individual child. Therefore, the school’s job is to “fix,” “cure,” or “remediate” their cognitive shortcomings.

The biological conceptualization of reading (dis)ability is inferred through the law’s use of a medicalized discourse that shapes young children’s literate identity. “Deficiency,” “failure,” “monitoring,” “diagnostic,” and “screening” are examples of language akin to describing an examination that someone with high cholesterol might experience. For example, a blood test is used as a “screening” tool for cholesterol levels. If the LD (i.e., “bad” cholesterol) is elevated, a doctor may suggest additional “diagnostic” testing or more frequent bloodwork for careful

“monitoring” of one’s health. The medical profession and doctors are typically respected resources for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Similarly, the law impacts young children; thus, the language of medicine imparts authority, power, and for some, trust that the diagnostic assessments are accurate. I acknowledge that “individual differences may have neurological, biological, cognitive, or psychological aspects” (Reid & Valle, 2004, p. 468). However, I contend that the language and literacy practices of far too many children, like Jayda, are inaccurately portrayed as deficient that result in the reading (dis)ability label. It is therefore “incumbent” on educators, academics, and policy makers to “work diligently to learn to implement inclusion well,” both in classrooms and professional discourses (Reid & Valle, 2004, p. 468).

By adopting a DSE perspective of reading (dis)ability, this study exposes the complex ways in which “(dis)ability lies in the interaction between the child’s characteristics and the context” (Connor, 2013, p. 500). In this study, I argued that context includes more than the school; identity artifacts such as policy impacted Jayda’s literate identity as the “lowest of the low kids” in first grade.” Similarly, in response to arbitrarily-defined labels (SLD/LD) and the “social reproduction model” that is applied to special education (Clay, 1987, p. 155), researchers have argued that most students’ underachievement in reading is affected by the inequities within the instructional environment (Pressley & Allington, 2015; Vellutino et al., 1996). By tracking and sorting children into differentiated groups for reading instruction, even at the primary level, coerces schools into becoming active agents in perpetuating social and economic inequalities (Oakes, 1986). Other scholars have noted that while expert instruction is central, teachers’ beliefs and human interaction also matter (Johnston, 2011).

The current policy context in Michigan and several other states throughout the U.S.

assume that holding school districts and teachers accountable for students' third-grade reading scores will result in a decrease in the achievement gap. Furthermore, at the federal level, IDEIA 2004 and the endorsement of RTI as a vehicle for improving the instructional environment had, in this study, a reverse effect. In Jayda's case, entering public schooling for the first time late in the school year, the school's constraints in accounting for her prior experiences with language and literacy practices, and Ms. Brown's perceptions of her cognitive limitations immediately launched her into Tier 2 instruction.

In addition, Jayda received multiple interventions from a myriad of individuals who instead of working together to develop a coherent learning plan for her, focused on identifying what she was not yet able to do. Thus, despite experiencing piecemeal instruction and traversing a variety of interventions and teachers, Jayda made progress in reading and writing. These gains were, however, were not sufficient for year-end grade-level expectations. I contend that Jayda's experiences suggest that along with the school and teachers, she would be better served with changes in policy and the development of an educational environment and conditions that promote more inclusive literacy instruction, assessment practices, and curricular materials that do not pathologize young children who do not fit into a "prescribed schedule of personal and academic development" (Harry & Klingner, 2014, p. 192).

Imposed state level laws and policies were identity artifacts that significantly influenced Jayda's schooling experiences and the social construction of her literate identity as the "lowest of low kids" in first grade. Therefore, they also shaped teachers' praxis. Rather than focus on a particular teacher, school, or the curricula, this study necessitates a closer examination of the broader socio-political landscape. I argue that Jayda's experiences suggest that researchers, policy makers, teacher educators, and teachers need to interrogate the macro and microsystems

within which schools operate to (re)construct more equitable and inclusive literacy learning for all children.

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CHAPTER 3: The Mis-Educative Experience of Assessment: You, Me, and the DRA

“Cultural representations of the body are historical, but there is also an experience of embodiment that can only be understood by grasping the body as a lived experience.”

- (Turner, 2008, p. 12)

Reading Bodies in Assessing Early Childhood Literacy

The goal of this article is to examine the embodied experience of a literacy assessment for a young child labeled “at risk” for reading failure in an elementary classroom. This project builds on previous studies that have used video in early childhood contexts to explore ways that children’s and teachers’ bodies produce multimodal cues, such as speech, writing, gaze, and gesture, in pedagogical interactions (Jewitt, 2003; Norris, 2004; Parks & Schmeichel, 2014). The particular context for this study was a common reading assessment, the running record (Clay, 1985). Multimodality encompasses communication, representation, and interaction in order to account for the ways that humans make meaning with more than language (Jewitt, 2014). The relationship between bodies, literacy, and assessment is important in an era where educators are confronted with increased demands for enhanced child outcomes, high-stakes testing, standardization, and accountability, which all tend to narrow our understandings of meaning making in literacy (Reid & Kagan, 2015). A turn toward the body in literacy education research (e.g., Bucholz, 2015; Jones, 2013; Luke, 1992) foregrounds the ways that children use multiple modes to make and convey meaning to understand themselves as literate in complex and sophisticated ways (Jewitt, 2014; Norris, 2004).

When teaching and learning are viewed as multimodal (Jewitt, 2003), the body is understood as a lived experience (Turner, 2008). In other words, pedagogies, which also include assessments, are bodied through corporeal performance, becoming embodied as the body integrates them. Related affect may or may not be observed (Jones, 2016). The danger is that

once an experience is acquired as part of the body, it may live active or dormant for years after the pedagogical encounter (Jones, 2016). In this way, bodies become semiotic resources that children and teachers draw on during or after pedagogical experiences for making meaning and communicating (Jewitt, 2014).

Although attention to children's bodies during assessment is not a solution for identifying every factor that impacts a child's reading performance, it illuminates the body's multimodal representations of "knowing" (Parks & Schmeichel, 2014; Perry & Medina, 2011). Analyzing children's bodies during a literacy assessment offers insight into the experience of the assessment and to the interpretations of assessment results (Johnston, 2005). It is possible, for instance, that when assessments rely completely on linguistic data, perceptions of children's performance may be inaccurate and thus underestimate children's assets as well as their learning potential. What if children's bodies produce non-verbal cues during a running record assessment that demonstrate that they recognize their own errors while reading aloud, even if their speech does not reveal this knowledge? And what if teachers' focus on following scripted protocols during the assessment prevents them from noticing a child's non-verbal cues, particularly when they convey discomfort?

Assessment and Marginalized Children

The issue of assessing young children is important as many contemporary elementary schools assess children's language and literacy before they enter without consideration for previous access to school literacy (Shepard, 1994; Yoon, 2015). Kindergarten "readiness" testing of young children's perceived literacy abilities is restricted to a narrow definition of what it means to be literate (e.g., letter identification, phonemic awareness, letter-writing) according to local and federally-mandated assessment tools (Yoon, 2015). For example, upon analysis of

assessment data school personnel used stigmatizing labels referring to some kindergarten children in the classroom as “below average” readers and writers (Yoon, 2015, p. 364). The children inscribed as such were racially and economically divergent from their White teachers. These assessment practices framed the children’s language and literacies as fixed (and problematic) traits. This study foregrounds the complexities of defining and measuring “readiness” by means of literacy assessments that rank, sort, and produce determinist labels for children.

Likewise, assessment tools like the ubiquitous Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) typically assess sanctioned ways of speaking, reading, and writing; hence, they misinterpret some children’s language and literacy practices and distort perceptions of their learning capacity (e.g., Dyson, 2013; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Heath, 1983; Jones, 2006). When young children enter school for the first time and are assessed, it is crucial that educators understand the complex nature of assessment and analysis as they inform perceptions about the assumed potential of the children they teach. An intended consequence of these assessments is how children might, in turn, assess and embody notions of themselves as not literate citizens of the school community. These beliefs are maintained when assessment results are interpreted as the accurate measures of their ability to learn. A false interpretation can, for many children, result in (in)equitable learning structures (e.g., ability grouping, differentiated instruction), limited access to materials and teachers with expert knowledge in reading instruction, and determinist labels that assume ability is fixed (e.g., “at risk,” “struggling reader”). Thus, it is imperative that children’s performance on commercial literacy assessments as well as how those results are interpreted are understood in the broader context.

The pressure on teachers to ensure children's reading performance satisfies predetermined requirements for reading proficiency congruent with federal (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress) and local assessments (e.g., the Developmental Reading Assessment) has moved the focus away from children as young and developing beings, sidelining concern for their emotional, social, and physical well-being—and the pleasure and excitement of learning to read (Dyson, 2013; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Shepard, 1994). The issue of assessment is of particular concern for children affected by structural and system inequities such as those who are living in poverty, whose first language is not English, or who are of color because they have historically and disproportionately endured its negative impacts (Milner, 2015). Early childhood researchers have documented a pervasive deficit discourse (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995) present in the framing of young children's language and literacy practices in educational research, policy, and instructional practices (Dyson, 2015; Michaels, 2013). The result is practices designed to remediate children perceived as “at risk” rather than question the context and the materials within that render them “deficient” (Dyson, 2015; Michaels, 2013).

Affordances of Video Work in Early Childhood Research

Researchers frequently use video when conducting assessment interviews of young children, but even with video, researchers often rely primarily on linguistic and textual data to make meaning of interactions (Parks & Schmeichel, 2014). The tendency to ignore non-linguistic data is problematic because it prevents researchers from exploring their embodied experiences (Colls & Hörschelmann, 2009). Frequently, educators attend to children's embodiment only when they are perceived as disobedient and in need of intervention (Colls & Hörschelmann, 2009; Luke, 1992).

When Parks, a White, middle-class woman, did attend to embodied experience in her analysis of mathematical assessment interviews with a group of low-income, rural, African American preschool children, she found that the multimodal analysis illuminated clear tensions between her (i.e., the researcher) and some of the children she interviewed. For example, some children used non-linguistic modes of communication such as non-verbal cues of discomfort. One four-year-old child quietly said he wanted to return to his classroom during an interview with Parks. She responded by inviting him to play with Lego blocks. The child shook his head, stood up, and again, said he wanted to return to his classroom. Although she honored his request and escorted him back to class, when she analyzed the video, Parks was surprised that she missed the child's first non-verbal cues of discomfort.

Similarly, when educators administer literacy assessments, they may be missing or unaware of nonverbal cues of discomfort that impact children's performance and their overall results. Varying power relations between majority researchers or teachers conducting assessment interviews with minority children (whether based on race, language, class or other markers of difference) may not only make children feel uncomfortable, but may also influence the types of responses they provide (Parks & Schmeichel, 2014). It may be the case that even minority children who are familiar with a majority teacher conducting an assessment might feel discomfort due to varying power relations and cultural differences. In turn, children's performance on such assessments might be impacted. To date, there is little research exploring these impacts or the role of the body more widely in literacy education (Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Luke, 1992), despite calls to do so (Bucholz, 2015; Jones, 2013; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Luke, 1992; Perry & Medina, 2011). To address this need, this study seeks to answer the following

research question: How did an African-American, first-grade child labeled as “at risk” of reading failure and her White teacher experience a multimodal literacy assessment in embodied ways?

Running Records: (De)contextualized Reading

Running records are a familiar literacy assessment for children’s reading progress originating in New Zealand schools as part of the Reading Recovery program (Clay, 1985; Fawson et al., 2006). Reading Recovery was developed for children who do not learn to read because they have prior experiences that misalign with school literacy and for those perceived as intrinsically impaired but capable of learning to read and write (Clay, 1987). Running records, which are central to the Reading Recovery program, are documented records of how children read a short or whole story, which note strengths and challenges as they occur (Clay, 1987). In U.S. schools, running records are used across grade levels to monitor student progress and diagnose reading difficulties (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Building on Clay’s (1987) work, for example, Allington (2006) proposed a version of running records to help children find “just right books” (p. 57).

Teachers are expected to use reading assessments to inform instructional decisions, particularly with heightened pressure from federal and state legislation (e.g., Response to Intervention) to implement reliable assessments that monitor students’ progress like running records (Fawson et al., 2006). Research on effective schools indicates that running records are used not only to document children’s growth in reading (Pressley et al., 2001; Ross, 2004), but to also identify children who require additional support in the form of interventions (Fawson et al., 2006). Assessment tools and processes that aid in reliably evaluating children’s early reading behaviors allows teachers to intervene early on as research confirms the importance of early intervention for the prevention of reading failure in young children (Fawson et al., 2006; Snow,

Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Thus, running records serve as a benchmark for standardized reading assessment across grade levels in elementary schools (Fawson et al., 2006).

Research has differed on how running records should be administered and how results should be interpreted. For example, results from a study of a running record assessment involving first-grade students and teachers indicated that each student assessed with running records should read a minimum of three *passages* for a reliable score (Fawson et al., 2006). Clay (1990) maintained that a running record should be used to record how the child reads *a book* independently that has already been introduced in some way (e.g., during a read aloud) because it allows the teacher to see how a reader is bringing together different processes and skills. When schools adopt a fixed set of books (e.g., Developmental Reading Assessment) to assess children's reading, their cultural backgrounds and experiences are disprivileged because teachers cannot make responsive choices about assessment texts (Souto-Manning & Martel, 2016). As a result, children's language and literacy abilities are assessed using books that contain information or stories that they may not be interested in, familiar with, or motivated to read.

While Clay (2001) acknowledged the importance of teachers' attention to cultural and experiential diversity, her primary concerns were the perceptual and cognitive challenges that may affect the reading process (Compton-Lily, 2006). In a case study of a first-grade African American boy, Devon, with whom she worked as a Reading Recovery teacher, Compton-Lily (2006) supported his reading and writing by leveraging his media, childhood, and cultural resources. She suggested school literacy learning experiences are situated within social and cultural contexts bound up in issues of race and gender. Devon was aware of the ways in which his race and gender positioned him as an (in)adequate literacy learner in school. This case further demonstrates that researchers, educators, and policy makers must better understand the

intersectionality of race, gender, literacy, embodiment, and identity for all children.

The goal of educational assessment is optimal instruction for all children and such practices are effective if they achieve this goal, yet this goal requires teachers receive expert training at evaluating children's literacy development to help them flourish (Johnston, 1987). A hallmark of excellent teachers is that they regularly assess the students under their care (Pressley & Allington, 2015). That is, they know each child well and watch their progress providing the appropriate and necessary instruction to every student in the classroom as needed. When teachers use scripted running records at isolated moments, they run the risk of producing an inauthentic understanding of children's literacy development. This result is the antithesis of Clay's (1985) purpose for the qualitative inquiry into the processes a child uses to understand the message in a text.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Educational philosophy has historically occupied two positions regarding the purpose and process of education (Dewey, 1938). Proponents of "progressive" or "new education" emphasized a theory of education that viewed the individual learner's development "from within, by, and for experience" (p. 28). Dewey (1938, p. 17) contrasted progressivism with a traditional philosophy of education that underscores the individual learner's "natural endowments," and considers education a process in which natural inclination is replaced by learning the habits of the institution. The new philosophy of education Dewey described was committed to an empirical philosophy that accomplished its goals for the learner and society by building on the learner's life experiences. This belief required a deep understanding of experience and an assumption that not all experiences are educative (Dewey, 1938). Suggesting that the solution to this complex matter was a careful and deliberate philosophy of the social factors that constitute

individual experience, Dewey (1938) developed the theory of experience as a constructive approach to conducting progressive education—for conceptualizing purposes, methods, and subject-matter. Two principles, continuity and interaction, frame the theory of experience; therefore, they guide the analysis and interpretation of the value of an educational experience for the individual child (Dewey, 1938).

The “principle of continuity” is the first principle of the theory of experience that distinguishes experiences that are educationally worthwhile (e.g., “educative”) from those that are not (e.g., “mis-educative”) (Dewey, 1938, p. 51). A mis-educative experience is defined as preventing or altering growth for further experience (Dewey, 1938). For instance, if an emergent reader is learning to figure out an unknown word in a print-based text and only taught the strategy of sounding out unknown words (e.g., visual cue) then they may not acquire the variety of strategies that are necessary for identifying words in texts (Pressley & Allington, 2015).

Whereas the experience of learning strategies to sound out unknown words is educative for decoding print-based text, it can also be argued that if it is the only experience offered for decoding new words, it is mis-educative in that it impedes the child’s ability to comprehend future texts that require the use of other strategies for comprehension. This example illustrates how it is not enough for the learner to have an experience or activity in experience; instead, everything is dependent upon the “*quality*” of the experience and its “*effect*” on later experiences (Dewey, 1938, p. 27; emphasis in original). A key point for understanding the theory of experience and its application is that every experience builds on those that came before, and a new experience will modify the quality of those that follow.

Interaction is the second principle of the theory of experience. Objective (e.g., environmental) and internal (e.g., within the mind and body) conditions inherent in the

interaction of an experience are equally important for interpreting its educational value (Dewey, 1938). Experience is the result of interaction; therefore, education is a social process. The interaction of objective and external factors form a “*situation*” (Dewey, 1938, p. 42; emphasis in original). This point is highlighted during a commonly administered protocol that measures children’s perceived ability to recognize the letters of a print-based alphabet in an early elementary classroom. The number of letters the child orally produces are quantified.

The number is measured against predetermined norms of children of similar age and time span. Often in standardized environments, the social and cultural factors that influence a child’s language and literacy development and practices before entering school are not considered. Thus, the children whose scores do not align with these benchmarks are often viewed as cognitively deficient. In this sense only the internal conditions that form the situation are considered.

Similarly, Dewey (1938) argued that internal conditions temporarily exist and an overreliance on these factors “fix the whole educational process” (p. 41). In other words, children’s (in)ability to recite the alphabet is perceived as fixed. Dewey (1938) argued that the problem with traditional education was not that it ignored the external conditions of an experience, or “whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had” (p. 44). On the contrary, it paid little attention to the internal conditions that determine the type of experience had.

Literacy assessments like a running record administered with commercially produced materials (Developmental Reading Assessment) are imposed experiences for many children and teachers in early childhood classrooms. Hence, this project sought to examine the experience of assessment using the DRA for a first-grade child and her teacher in an urban elementary classroom who was perceived as below grade level and retained. According to Dewey (1938),

the educator's role is to provide generative and enjoyable experiences for children for growth so that future experiences are desired. However, he also asserted that any theory and related practices "is dogmatic which is not based upon critical examination of its own underlying principles" (p. 22).

I was interested in using a theory of experience to critically interrogate the principles that undergird a locally-mandated, widely used, scripted literacy assessment practice in an early childhood classroom. This interest grew out of a desire to investigate young children's bodies in early child childhood classrooms, specifically what gets done to them over which they have little control and a personal yearning to transform (in)equitable assessment and instructional practices. The theory of experience presupposes an "organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Therefore, the theory offers a lens for understanding how educational experiences also affect the oft ignored body.

Method

In this study, I used a multimodal approach to analyzing data (Jewitt, 2014; Norris, 2004). Whereas the use of video in educational research has primarily been limited to providing instructional films and observational analysis, Tobin and Hsueh (2007) assert that expanded notions of video as a research tool improves social science. Furthermore, technological developments offer new approaches for data collection and analysis that make it easier to consider the role of embodied interactions (Flewitt, Hampel, Hauck, & Lancaster, 2014). Next, I describe the context for the study followed by data generation and data analysis.

Context of the Investigation

Ms. Brown's first-grade classroom was part of a Title I public elementary school located in an urban township adjacent to a large Midwestern city. The school's student population at

Brantley Elementary was economically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. During the time of the study (2016-17), the school served 447 students in grades K-5 with three classrooms at each grade level; 69% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced lunch. Approximately 68% of the student body was African American, 30% White, and 2% other races as reported by parents or caregivers at the time of registration. The composition of Ms. Brown's classroom was 21 students (12 girls, 9 boys). 12 were identified⁶ as African American, 1 as Arabic, 1 as White, 1 as Hispanic, and 1 as other race.

Literacy Assessments and Instruction

Ms. Brown administered two district-mandated literacy assessments: the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), given at the beginning of the year and at the end of each grading period for a total of five times, and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), administered three times per year. She also used a basal reading curriculum purchased by the district under the federal government's 2002 Reading First initiative. Most of the children received 30 minutes of core reading instruction in the classroom that Ms. Brown delivered to the whole class during the morning after writing instruction. According to Ms. Brown, her writing curriculum consisted of a variation of materials from Teachers Pay Teachers, Lucy Calkins, and, as she stated in an interview, those that were "her own." She noted that although the first-grade teachers used multiple resources, they fulfilled the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts by teaching children how to write narrative, opinion, and nonfiction/informational pieces (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

In the afternoon, the first-grade teachers implemented a reading workshop model

⁶ The listed terms were those reported by the classroom teacher.

developed as one of Brantley's School Improvement Plan goals. Referred to as "walk to learn" because children moved to new locations throughout the school, the program sought to help children read and spell at a variety of instructional levels. According to Ms. Brown, all children received Tier 1 instruction in the classroom and a "double dose" of reading "at their level" (i.e., Tier 2) during the afternoon when students "walked to learn" in ability groups. The first-grade teachers met at the beginning of each grading period to analyze and discuss DRA and DIBELS assessment data, and, teacher observations to create the ability groups for reading groups.

Participants

Jayda. At the time of the study Jayda, an African American, 7-year old girl, was enrolled in the school and placed in Ms. Brown's classroom eight days prior to the start of this project. Jayda qualified for meal assistance and lived with her grandparents who were her legal guardians. Prior to attending Brantley, Jayda was homeschooled by her grandmother, who said she could no longer do it. I was interested in Jayda because without assessing her literacy, Ms. Brown labeled her as an "at-risk" reader within her first eight days in school.

In addition, Ms. Brown told me on the first day of the study that Jayda had issues with processing language; thus, she requested that the speech and language teacher evaluate her. The speech and language teacher observed Jayda and agreed that she would qualify and benefit from services. Ms. Brown approached Jayda's grandparents about special education testing to receive services for a Speech/Language Impairment (SLI) six weeks after her arrival which she qualified for. I observed Jayda to be kind, quiet, and observant. Jayda often greeted me when I arrived, and I regularly complimented her on her clothing and accessories usually consisting of pink and purple ensembles with hints of sparkle.

Ms. Brown. A White woman, Ms. Brown was 39-years old at the time of the study and

finishing her 17th year of teaching. She taught at a different school in the district for nine years where she taught first and third grade but spend the last eight years in first grade at Brantley. Ms. Brown held leadership positions throughout her career most recently as a member of the School Improvement Committee. The staff at Brantley including the building principal and district administrators were predominantly White.

Ms. Brown commuted 45 minutes each way to work and told me more than once that her parents often asked why she did not find a job closer to home. She felt that this was the place where she belonged and could not imagine herself anywhere else. Also, she was at the top of the district pay scale, which was among the highest in the state. Ms. Brown was well-liked by the children and many of her past students regularly stopped by for a visit or hug. On several occasions, I observed Ms. Brown provide additional assistance to families in need of clothing and food. She went out of her way to establish a relationship with Jayda's grandparents and told me it was important to her that they trusted her.

Researcher. I identify as a White woman and was 44-years old at the time of the study. I had a prior relationship with Ms. Brown and the school district prior as I was an employee for a decade and served as Ms. Brown's mentor 17 years ago at the start of her teaching career. On a personal level, we are friends and share acquaintances. As a former elementary teacher, media specialist, and professional development provider for a national reading institute turned researcher and teacher educator at a large Midwestern university, I have participated in literacy assessment and instruction practices that position children as (in)adequate readers. My own experiences therefore influenced my interpretation and analysis of the data.

Because I conducted this research in a racial and cultural community different than my own, I drew on Milner's (2007) framework for raising researchers' racial and cultural

consciousness to guide this work. The framework offered me a lens for considering my own positionality and in relation to others' "racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world," (Milner, 2007, p. 388). When researchers ignore their positionality, they risk imposed the misrepresentation of individuals, the communities in which the live, the institutions attended, and the systems that perpetuate injustices (Milner, 2007). In all stages of this qualitative inquiry, I repeatedly examined how literacy assessments affected the achievement for the child participants in the study and my understandings in relation to my positionality.

Data Sources

Multimodal data generation requires a fluid and diversity approach that should reflect the theoretical interest of the investigation (Flewitt et al., 2014). Thus, to answer my research question, I observed the English Language Arts (ELA) block 3x/ week (n=98 hours) and generated multimodal data for each session as well as DRA assessments for all children in Ms. Brown's classroom in March and only the focal participant, Jayda, in May. I audio- and/or video-recorded each session. Data were also generated through interviewing, video and audio recording, field notes, and the collection of materials (e.g., assignments, literacy assessment protocols, lesson plans, Department of Health and Human services documents, special education evaluation summary). I conducted and transcribed separate one-on-one semi-structured interviews with Ms. Brown and Jayda. I also employed multimodal transcription techniques and transcribed the March DRA assessment between Ms. Brown and Jayda (9 minutes and 45 seconds). I engaged in informal conversations with Ms. Brown, the reading interventionist, and building principal each time I visited and we exchanged emails regularly if I had follow up questions.

Data Analysis

To understand how a child identified as “at risk” for reading in a first-grade classroom produced verbal and non-verbal cues during the DRA, I recorded the assessment using a video camera. Next, I watched the video twice without stopping. While I watched it a third time, I memoed about things I noticed. For instance, I noted Jayda’s gaze avoided Ms. Brown throughout the assessment and that she rarely smiled.

On the other hand, Ms. Brown’s gaze focused on the pre-printed recording sheet that she took notes on. I then watched the video again and stopped every 10 seconds and took a screenshot. Placing the screenshots in chronological order in a table using Keynote presentation offered a photo record of the assessment. Using Parks and Schmeichel’s (2014) study as a model, I developed a protocol for transcription focused on six modes: language, gaze, mouth, proximity, posture, and gesture. I selected these modes because they appeared in each frame that offered rich data for a fine-grain analysis of Jayda’s and Ms. Brown’s bodies during the assessment.

After I completed the verbal transcription I watched the video again and took screenshots but this time at five-second intervals beginning at 0:00. I repeated this step because when I looked at the first set of screenshots and watched the video again, I realized there were important interactions that I wanted to analyze but had not captured in the previous transcription. There were, for example, instances where Jayda made an error while reading and self-corrected and I wanted to examine the details in these small moments.

After taking screenshots at 5-second intervals, I once again placed them in a table and matched the linguistic data with the corresponding frames. To make sure these aligned correctly, I watched and listened to the video at least three more times. Next, I began to transcribe the modes that I selected. I first transcribed the data for Jayda and then Ms. Brown, which required

frequent stops, rewatching, and adjusting my analysis and notes accordingly. Finally, after transcribing the data I read through the transcription several times and returned to the theory of experience where I answered the following question: How did an African-American, first-grade child labeled as “at risk” of reading failure and her White teacher experience a multimodal literacy assessment in embodied ways? In what ways did Ms. Brown produce non-verbal cues about Jayda’s reading status during the DRA? As I read the through the data at each pass, I memoed and developed two initial codes to make sense of the data: mis-educative experiences and embodying “at-risk” reader status.

Findings

Findings 1: The Continuity of Experience + Interaction = (Em)bodied Reading Errors

While experiencing the DRA, Jayda produced verbal and non-verbal cues indicating that she was aware and self-conscious of her reading errors. Although Ms. Brown told Jayda she was “proud of her,” Jayda was learning to embody the “at-risk” reader status. For example, she produced two non-verbal cues that indicated she was embodying this status. First, her body appeared nervous throughout the assessment as she bounced up and down in the chair. The bouncing was more pronounced when she made an error, even though she self-corrected most of them. Jayda’s body seemed to indicate that she believed self-correcting was not a positive reading behavior, and may have stemmed from the continuity of mis-educative and embodied experiences with school literacy and influenced her performance during this first encounter with the DRA. For example, the stigma of exclusion and “intervention” during reading workshop and missed opportunities to learn alongside peers may have taught her that she was an (in)adequate learner. Jayda’s gaze remained intently focused on Ms. Brown’s recording sheet throughout the assessment, suggesting that her previous literacy experiences had taught her this assessment

would have important consequences for her learning in the future.

Dewey's second principle in his theory of experience requires analysis of the interaction of objective and internal conditions that form a situation (Dewey, 1938). Objective conditions, Dewey argued, consists of the conditions that interact with personal demands for creating the experience. He further suggested that the educator could regulate objective conditions. Objective conditions encompass a wide range of materials and efforts, from the teacher's tone of voice to books, or as Dewey (1938) put it, the "total *social* set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged" (p. 45; emphasis in original). The experience of literacy assessment for Jayda and Ms. Brown was (mis)educative for both because the objective and internal conditions of the situation (i.e., literacy assessment) were unbalanced (Dewey, 1938).

First, the set-up of the situation required that Ms. Brown assess children with the mandated scripted DRA materials. She did not have choice in materials or administering the assessment. Reading curricula and assessment programs are a for-profit industry that have existed for decades. The decisions made about children due to their performance on them remain problematic. It can be argued that any teacher, whether they are or are not using a scripted running record will be focused on recording what the child verbally produces because that is the purpose of the assessment. However, Clay (2017) argued that a running record should capture everything a child does with such as their eyes and hands because everything the child said and did reveals something about how they are approaching and making meaning.

The concern is the educational value of the experience of literacy assessment for the child and teacher, particularly when it is believed that the results are indicative of future levels of achievement. The experience of assessment for both Jayda and Ms. Brown was mis-educative in that it ignored internal conditions such as the ways that each other's bodies produced non-

linguistic cues that were equally important in the ways that these conditions interacted during assessment. Hence, the cues complicate Ms. Brown's interpretation and reliance solely on Jayda's verbal cues. The non-linguistic cues that her body produced during the running record were crucial, particularly because she showed signs of distress such as (in)adequacy, discomfort, and (mis)perceived notions of errors while reading. Learning contexts that produce these behaviors while young children experience literacy instruction and assessment contradict Dewey's (1938) definition of educative experiences. Furthermore, it is problematic that as a first-grader learning to read, Jayda did not produce verbal or non-verbal cues of joy or excitement.

In the transcript that follows, Jayda read the unfamiliar text to Ms. Brown. Within only 75 seconds, she self-corrected three times. Self-correcting is a reading behavior suggesting the individual child is self-monitoring and noticing discrepancies in what they read and the meaning and is seeking to understand the text (Clay, 2017). This episode of Jayda reading during the DRA began at 4 minutes and 25 seconds and ended at 5 minutes and 40 seconds. The transcript is not atypical from what might transpire during a running record. Although Ms. Brown administered the assessment as Jayda's assigned classroom teacher, she worked with her during whole-group core reading instruction with a basal curriculum and was thus not informed about the daily instruction Jayda experienced outside the classroom.

Jayda: Look at me. I can, I mean, I-I-look at me, said the boy. I can s-s-s-wing. Look at me, I mean, said the girl. I can skate. Look at me. I-I mean, she said. I can climb. Look at me. W-w-w. (6 second pause.)

Ms. Brown: Point to the words as you read.

Jayda: Look at us.

When she made the first error in this episode, Jayda self-corrected herself and she shook

her head side to side indicating that the word she read did not sound right. In other words, she embodied the error and produced non-verbal cues that she was aware of the error and proceeded to fix it. At the same time, Ms. Brown smiled. However, because Jayda's gaze was fixed on the text and Ms. Brown's gaze was focused on the mechanics of recording Jayda's errors while reading on a pre-printed scoring sheet, neither saw or read the other's non-verbal cues. Thus, Jayda did not receive the message that errors are a natural part of reading and that the self-correction was a positive reading behavior. This instance could have been something specific Ms. Brown might have commented on when she reminded Jayda of her competence as a reader.

Suggesting authors and publishers produced pre-printed texts to make the running records assessment process easier for teachers, Clay (2017) advocated teachers avoid two things during a running record assessment, pre-printed recording sheets and voice recording. The pre-printed text, according to Clay (2017), diverts the teacher's attention away from how the child is arriving at particular decisions to understand a text. Children's problem-solving strategies while reading texts are diverse and do not easily conform to a published layout (Clay, 2017). She further posited that observations of children reading only a few select texts and pre-printed scoring sheets does not provide the useful information that is necessary in capturing behaviors to interpret what the child was doing.

The DRA set up requires the physical arrangement of bodies and materials such that it is likely that both people interact more with the physical materials than with each other. *Figure 5* illustrates Jayda's and Ms. Brown's gaze during the first 9 seconds of the episode. Neither made eye contact or looked at the other's body for non-verbal cues that provided information that may have intervened as (mis)perceptions were developing for both teacher and child. Jayda used several important fix-up strategies while she read that Ms. Brown was not able to capture

because they were not part of the script. And, Jayda did not see Ms. Brown smile when she self-corrected. The visual message Jayda received was that she was being evaluated.

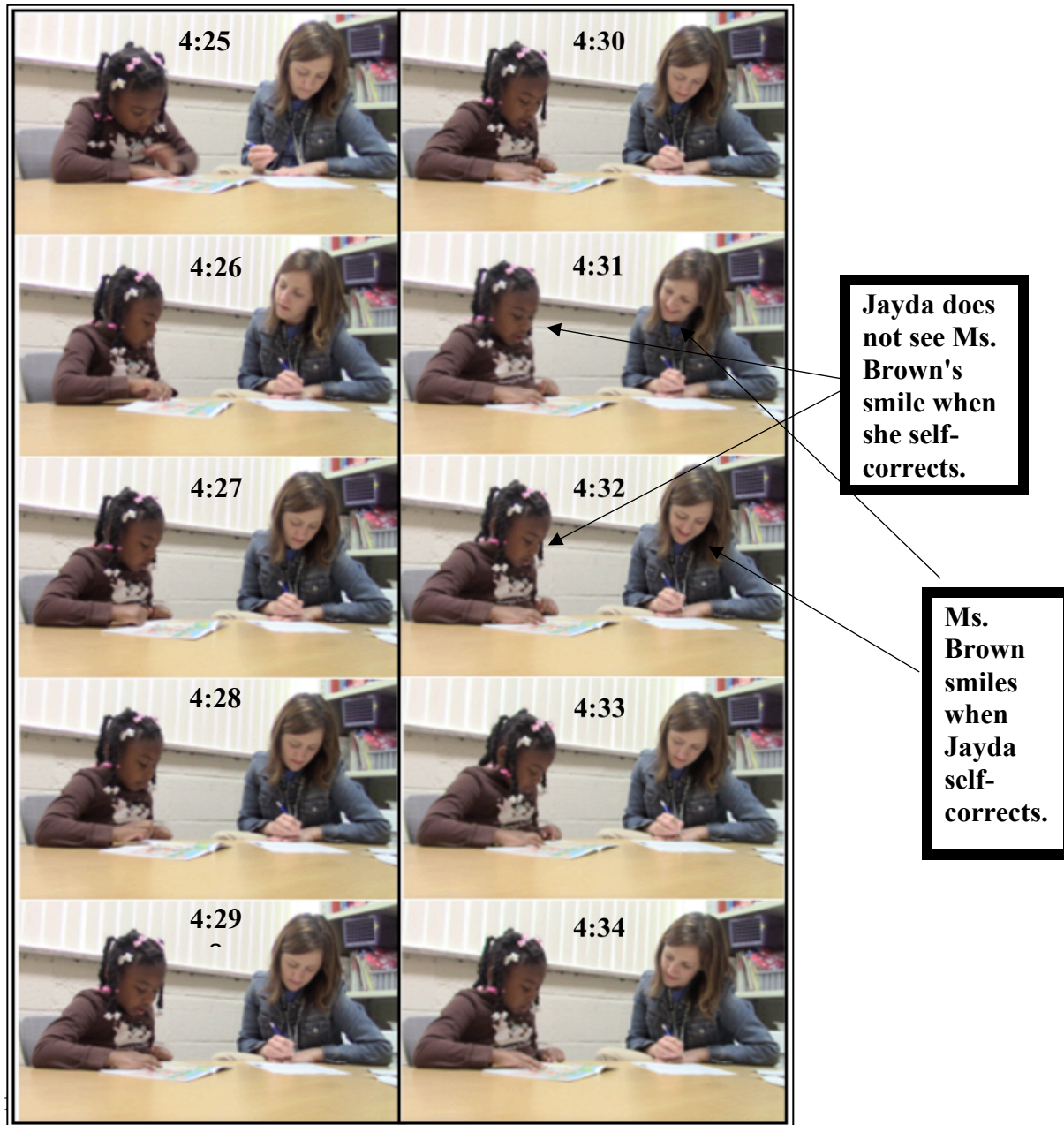


Figure 5. Jayda's and Ms. Brown's Gaze (9 seconds)

Jayda, for example, looked at the pictures regularly to help her with unknown words. There were some instances where she searched the page for picture clues but Ms. Brown did not

see her use this strategy. She looked up to offer help such as “point to the words,” as documented in the transcript. Ms. Brown waited for 6 seconds, for instance, before telling Jayda to “point to the words” while reading. Jayda’s errors were most likely not due to concepts of print that includes one to one correspondence with text but rather inexperience in learning to use other reading strategies other than sounding out words (i.e., phonics). Therefore, the assessment demonstrates that she has learned to use the strategies she has been taught and those that have not.

The assessment results affirmed that Jayda was well below grade level and required intervention. For the remainder of the year she experienced isolated reading instruction with Ms. Williams and upon completion of the lesson she joined the lowest reading group with four other first-grade children identified as such. Since the “walk to learn” reading groups began after she left the classroom to work with Ms. Williams, Jayda typically came in during the last 10 of the 45-minute lesson. Thus, the portion of the lesson she attended was designed for the other children in the group and if it met her learning needs it was by chance. The first-grade teachers rotated who taught this group with instruction focused on, for example, skills like speaking sounds as quickly as possible, practicing sight words in isolation, and phonemic awareness activities. When the children read, they did not have a choice and were given black and white paper books that were folded, and stapled while children in the highest group chose books from the school library.

Neither Ms. Williams nor the reading specialist, who worked with Jayda and the other children in a small group identified as “low,” used running records to inform their instruction. The lessons I observed with the reading specialist had few opportunities to read connected text. Instead, Jayda experienced a mix of scripted reading curricula developed for “at-risk” readers

that the district purchased. Most of the instructional time was spent on scripted skills lesson that focused on phonemic awareness and phonics. At times, the children were directed to copy simple sentences from a whiteboard and fill in the blank in a journal (e.g., I like to....). Children read leveled books in a round-robin format wherein each child took a turn reading the text aloud while the others listened until it was their turn.

Jayda's status as an "at-risk" reader prevented her from equitable reading instruction. Because she was pulled out of the classroom as many as three times per day for various interventions, she frequently missed writing instruction in the classroom with Ms. Brown and her peers. Reading instruction consisted of exclusion and missed opportunities to learn in heterogeneous settings where she could "grow into" reading behaviors (Connor, 2013, p. 501). In conclusion, Jayda's experience during the DRA assessment distorted growth for further experience because the continuity of her experiences with school literacy negatively impacted her performance, her misunderstanding of making and self-correcting a reading errors, and the ways in which school personnel perceived her capacity to learn as limited.

Findings 2: The Continuity of Mis-Educative Experiences and the At-Risk Reader Status

In a short amount of time, Jayda accumulated several mis-educative and embodied experiences about her academic status that affected her assessment of herself as well as those assessing her. These experiences included an observed DRA and her daily experiences with reading instruction. Ms. Brown administered this iteration of the DRA in late March before the end of the third grading period. This was Jayda's first experience with formative assessment in a school context; however, her unfamiliarity with the process was not accounted for in the assessment protocol nor in the interpretation of the results. The DRA assessment was another mis-educative experience for Jayda and Ms. Brown. First, it limited Jayda's opportunities for

equitable reading instruction. Second, it distorted Ms. Brown's perceptions of Jayda's academic potential.

Within two weeks of Jayda's arrival in Ms. Brown's classroom and prior to any summative testing, Ms. Brown, the building principal, and Ms. Violet decided that Ms. Williams, a local retired parochial school teacher, would be hired and paid with Title I funds to work one-on-one with Jayda. Ms. Brown perceived Jayda's reading skills as too low for placement or accommodation in the existing first-grade reading groups. Despite that little was known about Jayda's history of access to school literacy she was marked as at an "at-risk" reader. Hence, Jayda's embodied experience during the "walk to learn" afternoon reading groups was exclusion and (in)adequacy in contrast to her peers whose demonstrated literacy on mandated assessments was sufficient for placement in an ability group with other first-grade children.

These ability groups met for 45-minutes each afternoon four days per week (Monday-Thursday). Jayda did not "walk to learn" alongside other children. Instead, Ms. Williams picked her up at the classroom each afternoon during this block of time and worked with her in the school library. At times, Jayda's facial expression appeared happy when Ms. Williams arrived and she jumped to her feet with a smile. In contrast, there were instances where her head slumped and her facial expression appeared embarrassed or ashamed.

I observed a few interactions between Ms. Williams and Jayda. Ms. Williams was always warm and friendly and referred to Jayda as a capable learner. For example, one day upon her arrival Ms. Williams requested a "bright and shining star" to which Jayda immediately smiled and met her at the door holding her hand as they left the classroom. The theory of experience presupposes that past experiences affect future experiences; and, they did.

The following transcript in Table 2 describes three consecutive episodes that occurred

near the end of the 10-minute assessment, after Ms. Brown closed the book that Jayda read aloud and placed it on the table between the two of them. Jayda communicated her discomfort with the assessment in several ways. For example, she avoided Ms. Brown's gaze by focusing on the materials on the table, bounced up and down in the chair, nervously rubbed her hands together, abstained from engaging in conversation, and held her lips together in a thin flat line without smiling indicating the unpleasantness of the experience.

At nine minutes, Ms. Brown praised Jayda's reading for a second time prior to asking her to read one more page 15 seconds later; Jayda agreed. Ms. Brown told Jayda that she was "very proud" of her reading and that she "worked really hard." With a serious tone in her voice, Ms. Brown, looked directly at Jayda's face and eyes and leaned in closely with her torso turned toward her while verbally assigned her competence as a reader. Ms. Brown may have sensed Jayda's resistance and her non-verbal refusal in acknowledging the compliments and encouragement because she gently and quickly tapped her arm instead of, for example, hugging her during this interaction.

This five-second episode is one of the few times during the assessment that Ms. Brown's gaze focused on Jayda instead of the pre-printed recording sheet she marked. However, Jayda avoided Ms. Brown's gaze and did not smile while receiving this praise. In fact, Jayda nervously bounced up and down in her chair and held her gaze on the book that was used to assess her reading. She then moved her gaze in the opposite direction of Ms. Brown's body seated next to her. Ms. Brown continued encouraging Jayda to "keep it up" and noted, "I love when Ms. Williams comes to me and tells me so many great things that you're doing." The lack of specificity about the "great things" Jayda did with Ms. Williams may have convinced Jayda that what Ms. Brown told her was not true and further solidified the (in)adequate and thus embodied

reading status assigned to her.

Table 2. DRA Assessment, 3 Episodes, 15 seconds

Time (in minutes and seconds)	Mode Jayda	Mode Ms. Brown
<p data-bbox="462 417 526 449">9:00</p> 	<p data-bbox="808 422 1114 743">Gaze: At the cover of the book used to assess her reading on the table between Jayda and the teacher. Looks to the left away from Ms. B. when she says, "I'm very proud of your reading."</p> <p data-bbox="808 785 1089 852">Mouth: Lips straight, mouth closed.</p> <p data-bbox="808 894 1105 1108">Posture: Sitting in a chair at the edge of the table next to Ms. B, facing forward, bouncing slightly up and down in chair.</p> <p data-bbox="808 1150 1081 1218">Proximity: Learning back.</p> <p data-bbox="808 1260 1101 1514">Gesture: Arms and elbows resting on table, rubbing hands together, nods head up and down (affirmatively) as Ms. B. praises her reading.</p>	<p data-bbox="1136 422 1419 705">Gaze: At Jayda's face, then moves to the paper on the table where she is recording and assessing Jayda's reading, blinks eyes several times.</p> <p data-bbox="1136 747 1406 961">Mouth: Lips straight, mouth moving when speaking; corners of mouth turned up, slightly smiling.</p> <p data-bbox="1136 1003 1409 1398">Posture: Sitting in a chair at the edge of the table next to Jayda, arms crossed and resting on the table, pencil placed on the table. Right hand in a fist resting on the table. Left hand resting on right arm.</p> <p data-bbox="1136 1440 1406 1549">Proximity: Leans forward when tapping Jayda's arm.</p> <p data-bbox="1136 1591 1419 1766">Gesture: Uncrosses arms and quickly and gently taps Jayda's left arm with her right hand.</p>

Table 2 (cont'd)



Time (in minutes and seconds)	Mode Jayda	Mode Ms. Brown
<p data-bbox="462 310 527 342">9:05</p> 	<p data-bbox="808 310 1115 600">Gaze: At the book on the table used to assess her reading placed between Jayda and Ms. Brown, once quickly at Ms. Brown's eyes, then to the left of the book.</p> <p data-bbox="808 642 1089 709">Mouth: Lips straight, mouth closed.</p> <p data-bbox="808 751 1110 968">Posture: Sitting in a chair at the edge of the table next to Ms. B., facing forward, bouncing noticeably up and down in chair.</p> <p data-bbox="808 1010 1081 1077">Proximity: Learning forward.</p> <p data-bbox="808 1119 1073 1367">Gesture: Arms and elbows resting on table, rubbing hands together, nods head affirmatively when Ms. B. says, "You know that?"</p>	<p data-bbox="1138 310 1360 422">Gaze: At Jayda's face; blinks eyes several times.</p> <p data-bbox="1138 464 1419 680">Mouth: Lips straight, mouth moving when speaking, corners of mouth slightly turned up, slightly smiling.</p> <p data-bbox="1138 722 1406 968">Posture: Sitting in a chair at the edge of the table next to Jayda, arms crossed and resting on the table, pencil in left hand.</p> <p data-bbox="1138 1010 1403 1077">Proximity: Leaning forward.</p> <p data-bbox="1138 1119 1403 1262">Gesture: Tilts head toward Jayda's face, lifts eyebrows slightly.</p>

Table 2. (cont'd)

Time (in minutes and seconds)	Mode Jayda	Mode Ms. Brown
<p>9:10</p> 	<p>Gaze: At the table, at the book on the table used to assess her reading, then at the assessment paper on the table in front of Ms. B.</p> <p>Mouth: Lips together, mouth moving when speaking.</p> <p>Posture: sitting in chair at the table next to Ms. B., facing forward, bouncing in chair.</p> <p>Proximity: Leaning forward.</p> <p>Gesture: Arms and elbows resting on the table, nervously rubbing hands together placed on the table.</p>	<p>Gaze: At Jayda, then at book on the table used to assess Jayda's reading.</p> <p>Mouth: Lips straight, mouth moving when speaking.</p> <p>Posture: Sitting in a chair at the table next to Jayda.</p> <p>Proximity: Leaning forward with right shoulder forward.</p> <p>Gesture: Taps Jayda's left wrist with her right hand when she tells her, "Keep it up, okay?"; opens book up with both hands for further assessment.</p>

Jayda's non-verbal cues suggesting her suspicion that Ms. Brown's feedback about her reading competence during the DRA were confirmed by some documents that Ms. Brown shared with me in late May. I learned that Jayda's grandparents applied for Supplemental Security Income disability benefits for Jayda as they were appointed legal guardians by the state. By federal law, the Department of Health and Human Services must first make determinations on the claim for disability. Ms. Brown received a fax from the state approximately three months from the date that Jayda enrolled in school and was placed in her classroom. The cover letter

indicated that it would be helpful if information about her school activities could be provided by someone (e.g., teacher, counselor, or social worker) who knew Jayda well by completing and the returning the accompanying questionnaire.

The “Teacher Questionnaire” consisted of eight pages. Page 2 of the document required that Ms. Brown rate Jayda’s ability to acquire and use information. Despite being told by Ms. Brown during the DRA assessment in late March that she was “proud of her” because of the “great things” she did while working with Ms. Williams, this questionnaire provides evidence that these statements were false. According to her responses, Ms. Brown considered Jayda’s reading performance below grade level and not adequately meeting school expectations. Furthermore, Ms. Brown request Jayda was tested and qualified for speech and language services approximately six weeks after beginning school.

In another section of the questionnaire entitled, “Interacting and Relating with Others,” the directions required that a familiar listener of the child’s speech rate how much of the child’s speech they understood on the first attempt. Interestingly, Ms. Brown indicated that she was familiar with “Almost All” of Jayda’s speech on her first attempt to communicate. Although Ms. Brown was concerned about Jayda’s speech and ability to process language upon Jayda’s arrival, she rated her as having “No problem” in several other related areas on the questionnaire. Some of those statements were, for instance, “Relating experiences and telling stories,” “Using language appropriate to the situation and listener,” and “Introducing and maintaining relevant and appropriate topics of conversation.” Conversely, on a 1-5 scale with 1 indicating “No problem” and 5 “A very serious problem,” Ms. Brown rated Jayda as having a “Slight problem” with “Using adequate vocabulary and grammar to express thoughts/ideas in general, everyday conversation.” This rating is not surprising because Ms. Brown’s actions demonstrated that she

believed Jayda had a limited capacity to learn that was fixed and unalterable despite knowing little about her prior learning experiences.

On a different page, Ms. Brown noted Jayda's DRA level 3 in May, her written language was below grade level, and she received 15-30 minutes of speech and language support between four and eight times per month. According to Ms. Brown, the district purchased DRA kits aligning benchmarks with the publisher's recommendations. The levels begin at 1 and increase in even numbers after 3. For instance, a level 3 is the end goal for kindergarten and baseline data for beginning first grade. DRA benchmarks for first-grade were 4 in November, 8 in December, 12 in March, and 16 in May/June with the "typical" student expected to jump two levels. However, the one point gain is remarkable considering the reading instruction Jayda experienced was not a coordinated effort. She worked with Ms. Brown, Ms. Williams, and sporadically in a group with three other first-grade children identified as "low" with the school's reading specialist. During the months of April and May the building principal assigned the reading specialist state assessment duties; thus, Jayda stopped seeing her after March.

Jayda's reticence in acknowledging Ms. Brown's insistence that she was "proud" of her reading during the literacy assessment demonstrates that while she may not have met the DRA first-grade milestones, she critically "read" how the continuity of mis-educative experiences positioned her literate development. Jayda's assessment and multimodal representation of Ms. Brown's false appraisal suggests an embodied acquisition of a literacy more complex than a discrete set of decontextualized skills—critical literacy. In other words, she used non-linguistic modes to powerfully communicate a critical "reading" of the ways that school framed and shaped her as an (in)adequate reader. Jayda's keen awareness of her reading status was substantiated in late May when Ms. Brown recommended retention.

Discussion/Implications

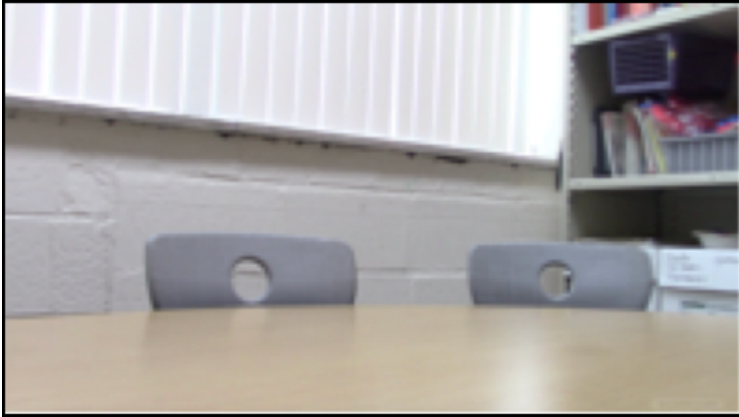


Figure 6. The Power of Assessment

Classroom evaluation requires that teachers adopt the role of advocate (Johnston, 1987). In assuming this role, the teacher sits next to the child at a “comparable height, engaging in eye contact, and waits to be offered the child’s work. This role conveys respect, recognizable control by both parties, and a recognition that the learner’s concerns deserve serious consideration” (Johnston, 1987, p. 747). In the same article, the author argued that the preceding description of evaluation liberates the teacher and student from the “disempowering and isolating burden of centralized, accountability testing” (Johnston, 1987, p. 747). However, in this article I argue that increased testing in early childhood classrooms and the restricted ways that assessment tools like running records are used to monitor children’s progress and identify children “at risk” for reading failure disrespect children, particularly their bodies. The photograph above (*see Figure 4*) was included to demonstrate the fixity and power of a literacy assessment that was approximately 10 minutes in length but that determined a young child’s reading status and future learning trajectory.

Assessment of children’s literacy at younger ages has become routine and thus normalized. The practice of using literacy assessments as reliable tools to rank, sort, and label young’s children’s perceived literacy for differentiated reading instruction, progress monitoring,

and the identification of “at-risk” readers is taken for granted. This point is illustrated in that most of the research on running records has focused on the tool itself and not the children they purport to help. For example, studies have looked at the effects of running records and early literacy achievement (Ross, 2004), preparing preservice teachers to use running records for instruction (Gillett & Ellington, 2017), and how to attain generalizable results (Fawson et al., 2006). While these studies have contributed important information about running records as a tool none have looked at how children experience the assessment interaction. This issue is problematic particularly when running records continue to have such currency in schools.

While standardization, homogenization, and expectations for young children’s reading performance continue to increase, the ways of speaking, reading, and composing—being literate—remain diverse, nonlinear, and unpredictable. The complexities of race, poverty, and education are overlooked when standard benchmarks for reading development are instituted for all children. Moreover, the student population in U.S. schools is linguistically and culturally more diverse than ever before. An underlying belief that many schools hold is that scripted assessments like the DRA reliably predict children’s biological differences and their learning potential regardless of their prior learning experiences or racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or social background. Thus, a child’s performance on a running record assessment in the middle of first grade, for instance, problematically indicates whether their pattern of development is “normal.”

Similarly, ascribing a child, a numerical reading level (e.g., DRA level 3) further normalizes the process of assessing, sorting, and ranking children. This process removes the human aspect of advocacy for children as they are translated into a number. This issue is critical because the ways in which assessment materials shape and label young children as a particular

kind of reader (e.g., “at risk,” “high”) will affect their lives in terms of access to P-16 schooling, employment, housing, and healthcare. These determinist labels and the underlying belief that some children are born readers while others are not therefore have lifelong implications.

Most crucial is how children in turn perceive themselves as literate and embody imposed reading identities whether in school or years after the pedagogical experience (Jones, 2016). The continuity of mis-educative experiences in school have the potential to harm children’s belief in themselves as capable learners at a young age or throughout their lives in various ways. At seven-years-old, Jayda has already embodied a fraught relationship with reading because of her early literacy experiences, which will continue to shape her future interactions. Compton-Lily (2006) contends, “children’s personal histories as readers, their past successes, the official criteria for determining reading competence, and their current struggles all contribute to the ways in which children identify themselves as readers.” Moreover, access to equitable literacy instruction based on assessed reading ability as measured and determined by literacy assessment tools not only contribute to children’s evolving literate identities, but are potentially harmful and perhaps embodied.

In this study, I observed Jayda’s body produce several non-verbal cues that she was distressed, self-conscious of making a reading error that she self-corrected, and embodying an “at-risk” reader status that Ms. Brown was unaware of. Jayda’s nervousness and sense that she was being evaluated during the literacy assessment prevented her from noticing that her self-corrections were a positive reading behavior. Because of her discomfort, she avoided Ms. Brown’s gaze. When young children’s bodies are ignored while being assessed, their social, emotional, and physical well-being are neglected. This issue is important in the current

sociopolitical context where the expectations for young children's literacy achievement is progressively increasing.

A principle of progressive education is preparing children for dual life roles, first by helping children reach their full learning potential, and second, by advancing a democratic society (Dewey, 1938). This philosophy held that children learn from life experiences; therefore, "education is essentially a social process" (Dewey, 1938, p. 58). In opposition to the Cartesian mind/body split, a theory of experience unifies the body and mind during the teaching and learning processes. Whereas some experiences are educative others are not. Regardless, continuity holds that all past and present experiences affect future experiences. Experiences are thus embodied and potentially (re)surface at any point in time (Jones, 2016). It cannot be left to chance that such experiences reemerge daily or later in a child's life because the potential affect is devastating. Therefore, a turn toward bodies in early childhood research, policy, and pedagogy validates, respects, and advocates *for* children.

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CHAPTER 4: The Constraints of Ability-Grouped Reading: A Critical Spatial Perspective of Reading (Dis)ability

“Human-being-in-the-world as well as what ontologists call “becoming,” the living out of our lives, are essentially social, temporal, and spatial.”
- (Soja, 2010, p. 70)

Spatially Reading (Dis)ability

During an informal discussion of the school district’s newly adopted scripted reading curriculum—which required all K-5 children in the building to simultaneously move to an assigned space within the school for homogenous ability-grouped reading instruction—one first grade teacher said the program was not helping her low-achieving readers adopt the reading strategies they so badly needed. She wondered whether such children might benefit from observing their more capable peers model those strategies in mixed ability groups. Her comment piqued my interest in delving deeper into the ways space in this school was entangled with reading instruction.

Soon thereafter I embarked on a seemingly endless inquiry into the inviting, *“spatial turn* affecting nearly all human sciences” (Soja, 2010, p. 3). I was searching for a theoretical framework that would help me disentangle the knotty constructions at the intersectionality of reading (dis)ability and space enmeshed in my dissertation data.

In this article, I examine how children were maneuvered across school space during reading instruction in ways that operationalized an “at-risk⁷” reader status for some children and a “gold star” reader status for others. I argue that the spatialities of ability-grouped reading produced and maintained exclusionary practices that exacerbated instead of eliminated some children’s perceived reading deficiencies, and that it maintained particular reading labels and

⁷ I do not condone this problematic language that is used to describe young children’s literacy. “This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you” (Rich, 1971, p. 16).

literate identities for children (e.g., “high,” “low,” “low, low”). I use the phrase “at risk” for reading failure to refer to the children in the United States whose literacy development is incongruent with a “linear list of skills” (Dyson, 2015, p. 202). I selected this term among others (e.g., “struggling reader,” “below-grade-level,” “dyslexic”) because of its currency in state-level policy centered on third-grade reading achievement in the state and district where I conducted the study. This project sought to interrogate the “unexamined assumptions about the very structures that maintain the existence of a reading disability,” including space, as well as culture and time, as a tripartite dialectic that produces and maintains it (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2008, p. 489; Soja, 2010).

Configuring Elementary Reading Instruction: Ability Grouping and Guided Reading

How teachers can differentiate reading instruction in elementary school to help all children reach their maximum learning potential, while at the same time, eliminate the number of children identified as learning (dis)abled is a topic that has perplexed literacy educators, researchers, and policy makers for decades. A common practice in contemporary elementary classrooms is to assess and measure children’s perceived literacy using assessment protocols, typically mandated by the district, and then sort children into homogeneous ability groups. In fact, within-class ability grouping during reading instruction is the most common form of grouping in the primary grades (Buttaro et al., 2010). The lines between “ability grouping” and “guided reading,” a familiar element of many reading programs in the U.S. (Ford & Opitz, 2011), blur but should not be conflated. Guided reading is “planned, intentional, focused instruction where the teacher helps students, usually in small group settings, learn more about the reading process” (Ford & Opitz, 2011, p. 229). Furthermore, whereas “flexible and dynamic” are hallmarks of “guided reading” groups as articulated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), ability-

grouped reading is not (Maloch et al., 2013). However, many classrooms use a guided reading structure along with ability grouping of children.

Ability grouping is one of many tracking practices (Oakes, 1992); hence, it is placement of “students in ability-based groups within and across classes for selected subjects or in self-contained ability-homogenous classrooms” (p.12). Although guided reading is often viewed as a new practice, “it is anything but revolutionary” (Ford & Opitz, 2011, p. 225). In fact, research has argued that guided reading groups are a “modern example of ability grouping” (Ford & Opitz, 2011; Maloch et al., 2013), p. 306). Despite a substantial body of research arguing against ability grouping (e.g., Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; Oakes, 1992, 2005; Slavin, 1987) and more recently, current practices of guided reading (e.g., Ford & Opitz, 2008; Maloch et al., 2013), many schools continue to implement both models as best practice for reading instruction.

Several studies in the 1970s and 1980s (Allington, 1983; Eder, 1981; Hiebert, 1983; Weinstein, 1976) examined reading groups in single elementary classrooms with “bleak” outcomes concerning the emotional, social, behavioral, and achievement for children placed in “low” reading groups (Maloch et al., 2013, p. 277). However, a paucity in research followed these studies with few exceptions (e.g., Bennett, 1991; Ireson & Hallam, 1999) around this topic. Scholars have revisited ability-group reading practices, specifically around issues of race/ethnicity and class (e.g., Buttaro et al., 2010; Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Lleras & Rangel, 2009).

In their work with elementary classroom teachers, Maloch and colleagues (2013) noted an increase in teachers who grouped students by ability for reading instruction; thus, they conjectured such practice was the result of pressure from high-stakes assessment and district

mandates for increased achievement. A cross-case analysis of two first-grade teachers demonstrated that despite what the flexibility proponents of guided reading called for, most children remained in the same groups all year. For instance, during an interview, children were asked what kind of reader their teacher would say they are. While a few children said a “good reader,” one child reported “great reader” (Maloch, 2013 p. 297). However, one child responded that he was, “I and J...Mostly I” (Maloch, 2013, p. 297). “I” and “J” reflected children’s guided reading level and group placement. This illustration exemplifies the problematic ways that children were not only aware of reading levels but defined their literate identity accordingly.

Sharing similar concerns with consistent gaps in reading between different racial and ethnic groups, scholars analyzed national data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study and investigated the correlation between racial and ethnic composition of schools and ability grouping practices as early as kindergarten (Buttaro et al., 2010; Lleras & Rangel, 2009). Whereas Lleras and Rangel (2009) examined ability grouping for reading and the impact on the achievement gains specifically among African American and Hispanic children during elementary school, Buttaro and colleagues (2010) focused on within-class ability grouping for reading instruction. Results indicated that African American and Hispanic children put in lower groups for reading instruction learned significantly less than higher-grouped children compared to non-grouped children (Lleras & Rangel, 2009). In addition, according to standardized reading achievement test score results, higher-grouped students learn only slightly more than their lower-grouped peers over the first few years of school. Buttaro and colleagues. (2010) contend that ability grouping in the early grades may be one of the structural factors that lead to tracking in secondary education, or what is referred to as “de facto tracking” (p. 1328). The researchers

questioned the practice of ability grouping beginning in kindergarten, particularly in schools serving minoritized children (Buttaro et al., 2010; Lleras & Rangel, 2009).

A Topographical Survey of Reading (Dis)ability

I acknowledge that some scholars treat reading (dis)ability as “real;” however, in adopting a poststructural stance, I see (dis)ability, as a subjective manifestation of the social, cultural, and spatial. Reading (dis)ability⁸ is an elusive construct illustrated by its various labels (e.g., dyslexia, learning disability, specific learning disability) and lack of agreement on a definition among academics and researchers as well as how to identify children perceived as such (Gabriel, 2018; Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008; Vellutino et al., 1996). Scholars have argued that reading (dis)ability is socially (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Kabuto, 2016; Mc-Gill Franzen, 1987; Triplett, 2007) and culturally constructed (Alvermann, 2001, 2006; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). Juxtaposed with a cultural lens that argues every member of a culture has the potential to be considered “disabled” but by whom and for whom are questions of power and dominance (McDermott & Varenne, 1995), a social construction analysis of (dis)ability posits that “learning and learning problems” are located in the “context of human relations and activity” (Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 482). Likewise, some researchers posit that for most children, the imposed descriptor of reading (dis)ability is not fixed but likely the result of poor teaching and not an “organically based learning disability” that poses a risk for long-term reading difficulties (Clay, 1987; Pressley & Allington, 2015; Vellutino, 2010, p. 5).

This issue is crucial because in 2015-16, 34% of students that received special education services had specific learning disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In

⁸ Reading (dis)ability is the most common label under the learning disability (LD) category in special education and is also referred to as a specific learning disability (SLD).

addition, some children's race/ethnicity puts them at greater risk of speculation that their language and literacy practices are not adequate for school despite that these children communicate just fine with people who speak like themselves (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Notably, while 14% of the students served under IDEIA during the 2015-16 school year were White, the remaining 86% were not (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Research has highlighted the overrepresentation of specific racial/ethnic groups receiving special education services (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Sleeter, 1986). For example, an inordinate number of culturally and linguistically diverse children are placed in special education in urban contexts (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Blanchett, Klinger, & Harry, 2009; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Therefore, Harry and Klinger (2014) argued that the categories (i.e., LD, SLD) "do not necessarily reflect real disabilities within children" but rather are "influenced by social and political agendas of various states, groups, and individuals" (p. 9).

Taking heed of Jones and colleagues's (2016) invitation to "engage theories of spatiality informed by critical human geography," the present study foregrounds politics of space to "reimagine research and practice," (p. 3). Working from a political agenda, this project pushes the conversation in literacy beyond the social and cultural constructions of reading (dis)ability to also consider the spatial (Gulson & Symes, 2007; Soja, 2010). According to McGregor (2003), new understandings of space in relation to schooling mean that "space is seen as *relational*, both producing and a product of interconnecting social practices," (p. 354; emphasis in original). Furthermore, literacy researchers have renewed interest in (re)vising ability-grouped reading practices asserting that it is an old practice of segregation disguised in new discourse (e.g., "guided reading") (Maloch et al., 2013, p. 306). My analysis was directed toward the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How was reading instruction enacted across space in an urban first-grade classroom?

Research Question 2: In what ways did space operationalize the reading (dis)ability construct in an urban first-grade classroom?

Theoretical Grounding

Across the social sciences there has been a turn toward space that a small but growing number of schools in education are taking up (Armstrong, 2007; Gulson & Symes, 2007; Soja, 2010). Sheehy and Leander (2004) claimed education scholars interested in culture are turning to space to understand and explain sociocultural practices and processes. Studies index how perceived space is the “material manifestation of social practice” (Thompson, 2007, p. 113). Places like classrooms and suburban malls are social spaces wherein literacy practice happens. (Sheehy & Leander, 2004).

Thus, literacy education scholars are advocating for a reconceptualization of space as an “active and relational verb” to “theorize space as a social product and process” within literacy studies (Sheehy & Leander, 2004, p. 1). The spatial lens is wide aiming to illuminate the instability and dynamic nature of physical space in order to examine and explain power (Sheehy & Leander, 2004). For example, exploring identity across multiple out-of-school social spaces including the city and a suburban shopping mall with Latinx youth, Moje (2004) explained how diverse terrain allowed youth to perform their ethnic identity differently. The ethnic community space in which youth lived dominated their textual choices (e.g., books and newspapers) and literacy practices (e.g., searching the internet) regardless of space. On the other hand, Hirst (2004) mapped the hybridity of elementary students’ literacy practices within the social milieu of a second-language Indonesian classroom (Language Other Than English) using Bakhtin’s notion

of the chronotope (time-space). Findings demonstrated that because second-language learning is a process of acquiring cultural resources and discursive practices, the identities of students and teachers are constructed in the LOTE classroom, which is a heterotopia—an “other” place— that is spatially constructed and separated from privileged spaces. The LOTE classroom is akin to the special education wing that is often found in U.S. schools where identified children are segregated for instruction.

Therefore, in this study, I navigated disparate disciplines to explore the geography of reading instruction—its enactment across space—and how ability-grouped reading instruction has spatialities that isolate and (dis)able particular children producing and maintaining the reading (dis)ability construct. The merging of aspects of critical spatial theory and Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) provides a more inclusive and topographical understanding of reading (dis)ability in early childhood classrooms. First, I draw on critical spatial theory as a framework because its purpose is usefulness in praxis, specifically to achieve “freedom from oppression and domination” (Soja, 2010, p. 69). It is further asserted that because thinking about the interrelated historical and social aspects of life have pushed a critical spatial perspective to the background in mainstream social science and philosophy it has also shaped popular imagination (Soja, 2010). In other words, space is typically perceived as the place where injustice happens but not as a force of it.

Critical Spatial Theory

A critical spatial perspective presupposes that an “ontological triad” exists from which all human knowledge follows (Soja, 2010, p. 71). Referred to as a “triple dialectic,” it encompasses the social/societal, the temporal/historical, and the spatial/geographical (Soja, 2010, p. 70). Epistemologically, knowledge of reading (dis)ability has typically been studied and therefore

understood through social and temporal lenses neglecting the spatial. This issue is important for “new ontological beginnings” because “...we are enmeshed in efforts to shape the spaces in which we live while at the same time these established and evolving spaces are shaping our lives in many different ways” (Soja, 2010, p. 71). Although a critical spatial perspective may foreground a particular theme, an “ontological balance” is always maintained (Soja, 2010, p. 71). The emphasis on the spatial is important to understand the crux of a critical spatial perspective; we are embedded in the geographies that surround as much as we are social actors shaping individual biographies and collective histories (Soja, 2010).

Spatial Justice. A key tenet of a critical spatial perspective is that justice, however defined, is socially and spatially constructed and evolves over time (Soja, 2010). A goal of this theory is to “stimulate new ways of thinking about and acting to change the unjust geographies of which we live” (Soja, 2010, p. 5). As such, the spatial theory of justice is built on the premise that empirical analysis is followed by practice and extended to also include social action in concert with spatial justice. Because my primary concern in this study was illuminating the inequitable learning opportunities as a result of ability-grouping practices in early childhood classrooms during reading instruction, this theory pushes my thinking and ethical responsibility as a researcher and teacher educator toward social action (e.g., opportunities to self-select reading material, access to certified teachers, social outcomes related to grouping structures). Thus, in the discussion section I address implications for praxis, research, and policy.

An additional principle for describing the spatiality of human life in a theory that pursues spatial justice is recognizing that because geography organically develops in uneven and unpredictable ways, spatial inequalities are inevitable. “The (social) inculcation of injustice into our geographies (and histories) arises in a most basic way...” such that “there can never be

perfect equality across geographical space in any meaningful attribute of human existence” (Soja, 2010, p. 71). For instance, in any given classroom there will be differences among the materials, the space, and the number of children attending school daily. Some of these elements, such as a lack of supplies (e.g., paper, crayons, books), is an example of an inequality of social injustice because an adequate supply of materials is necessary for learning in contemporary classrooms. On the other hand, the square footage of three different first-grade classrooms in a building may be different in mere inches and therefore not contribute to inequality of social justice because the small difference in measured space does not impact the children’s or the teacher’s emotional, social, or cognitive well-being. In this example I do not, however, mean to suggest that the configuration of the square footage does not matter; it does.

The main point here is that, in some instances, uneven geographies lead to the creation and maintenance of social inequalities and thus social and spatial injustices. A first step toward spatial justice then requires a deeper examination “of the uneven geographies of power and privilege to determine which forms of spatial injustice warrant the greatest attention” (Soja, 2010, p. 73). For example, if some children perceived as “high” first-grade readers have opportunities to choose which books they wish to read during ability-group reading instruction located in the school library while others do not, one could argue that the situation exemplifies spatial injustice. This example elucidates a fundamental principle of human spatial organization, which is that geographically uneven development (access to self-select books) inevitably maintains social inequalities, and therefore social and spatial injustices (Soja, 2010). The geographic differentiation of the children experiencing reading instruction in locations where some freely choose books and some do not presents a disadvantage for some children. This point is crucial because geographic differentiation has oppressive and exploitative effects over long

periods of time rooted in and reflecting pervasive societal divisions like those based on race, class, and gender (Soja, 2010).

Disability Studies in Education (DSE)

Like critical spatial theory, DSE seeks to understand the experiences of people who have been historically marginalized and oppressed such as those ascribed disabilities in educational contexts (e.g., schools, universities), across cultures, and in historical contexts (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008, p. 441; Kitchin, 1998). However, I use DSE theory to explicitly foreground the context or “space” that affects the social and political processes of inclusion and/or exclusion that accompany the construction of reading (dis)ability (Soja, 2010). Bringing DSE and a critical spatial perspective together allows for a rich analysis of the reading (dis)ability landscape around notions of space, culture, and time.

I draw on DSE to argue that reading (dis)ability is a social construct that is “values-laden and historically/culturally situated” (Connor et al., p. 447, 2008). Furthermore, a tenet of DSE is to “contextualize disability within political and social spheres” engaging in theoretical approaches that “predominately focuses on political, social, cultural, historical, and individual understandings of disability” Connor et al., 2008, p. 448). DSE is also concerned with the deficit-driven and medicalized conceptions of disability that perceive the life experiences of many disabled people in ways that contradict their own perceptions (Connor et al., 2008). The medical model describes how (dis)ability is addressed in American schools and society more broadly (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). This medical model of (dis)ability constructs children with disabilities as physically “defective” in need of “diagnosis and treatment” (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012, p. 16).

Some researchers have examined space and disability (e.g., Gabel, Cohen, Kotel, & Pearson, 2013; Hall, 2004). Kitchin (1998) argued for recognition of the “role of space in reproducing and maintaining the processes of exclusion” that people inscribed as disabled experience (Kitchin, 1998, p. 344). The processes of exclusion are generally understood in terms of time and history (Kitchin, 1998). Thus, space is a socially produced and often overlooked element of classroom life that regulates unequal power relations (Lefebvre, 1991). In this study, DSE and a critical spatial perspective illuminate how unequal power relations traversed the unexpected nooks and crannies of school space that, for some children, produced and maintained the reading (dis)ability construct.

Method

In this interpretive observational study, I documented the ways in which reading instruction was enacted across space in a first-grade classroom (Erickson, 1986). I draw on Erickson (1986) in using the term “interpretive” to refer to participant observational research as it is inclusive of the various ways that I generated data both within and beyond the confines of other research methods (e.g., case study, ethnography) (p. 119). Interpretive observational research supports understanding human meaning in social life. This study contributes to the literature by providing a “multifaceted” interpretation of how the spatial/geographical is a part of a tripartite ontology (i.e., social/societal, temporal/historical, spatial/geographical) that produces knowledge of ability grouping practices and the reading (dis)ability construct in an early childhood classroom (Alvermann & Malozzi, 2008, p. 494; Connor et al., 2008; Soja, 2010).

The Setting

I conducted this study in a first-grade classroom at Brantley Elementary School (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Brantley was identified as a Title I school and was

located in an urban district near a large Midwestern city. Urban schools, in this study, are defined as those serving African American and Latino students, students living in poverty, and whose first language is not English (Milner, 2013). The principal reported that 69% of students qualified for meal assistance. During the year of the study, Brantley served 447 students in grades K-5; the student population was 68% African American, 30% White, and 2% other races.

A year before the study, the state's Department of Education introduced a new assessment system that scored English language arts beginning in third grade. Scores reported for the year of the study indicated that 46.1% of third-grade students at Brantley Elementary were "proficient" in English language arts. That same year, the state passed a law entitled "The Third-Grade Reading Law." Beginning with the 2019-20 school year, the law encouraged districts to retain third-grade children who score "one year deficient" on the ELA portion of the state assessment (Michigan Third-Grade Reading Law, 2016). The state also mandated that districts administer an initial assessment from an "approved" list to all students in order to identify possible areas of concern in ELA for individual students.

Participants. The first-grade teacher in the classroom where I generated data for this project was Louise Brown. Louse is a White woman who was 39-years-old at the time of the study and completing her eighteenth year of teaching with fourteen of them in first grade. There were 21 children in Louise's classroom (12 were identified⁹ as African American, 1 as Arabic, 1 as White, 1 as Hispanic, and 1 as other race). I also collaborated with Louise's grade-level partners, Kim and Melinda, who welcomed me into their classrooms and during grade-level meetings as well as lunch. At the time of the study, Kim, a White woman was mid-50s and finishing her fourteenth year of teaching. Melinda, an African American woman, was 36-years-

⁹ The listed terms were those reported by the classroom teacher reflecting school registration documents presented to parents/caregivers.

old and ending her fifth year of teaching. Additionally, I worked with the four other middle-aged White women, the building principal, school reading interventionist, the district data coordinator, and the district reading coordinator.

Researcher Subjectivity. My positionality is shaped through being a 44-year-old White woman growing up in and attending public schools in a White neighborhood. The dominant learning structure that I experienced during reading instruction as a young child in the 1970s was ability-grouping, and one that I maintained as a classroom teacher. I was in the “high” reading group throughout elementary school and in high school mostly took tracked courses labeled as “college bound.” However, I personally experienced the stigmatizing effects of placement in remedial classes as a freshman in college. I acknowledge that my interest in how space manifests reading (dis)ability is related to my personal experiences and is reflected in my analysis and writing. Consequently, my positionality as someone who has felt and lived ability-grouping instruction as a student and as a participant in perpetuating it as a teacher are strengths in that I also embody its harmful effects; hence, I am motivated to transform these practices.

Similarly, I taught various grades and content at the elementary level for ten years in the district where the study took place. Before the project, Louise and I maintained a friendship for many years that began while I taught fourth-grade in the building where she taught when the district hired her; I served as her mentor until I terminated my employment. When I approached Louise about the possibility conducting research in her classroom she was excited about the opportunity to reflect on her teaching. She invited me into her classroom any time I wished to join and was always willing to talk before class, during, and after as well as answer numerous texts and emails. While it can be argued that our friendship is a limitation to the study, I view it as a benefit. Instead of a narrow focus on how a single teacher’s practice influences reading

(dis)ability, I looked more broadly at the socio-spatial landscape that is an intimately related and often overlooked part of a larger system that oppresses and marginalizes some children, the educators who instruct them, and the space that manifests it.

Data Generation

I generated data using three methods: observation, interviews, and school/district and state/federal policy document review. While in school spaces, I was a participant-observer. I observed all aspects of Tiers 1 and 2 (Response to Intervention) reading instruction including writing, core basal instruction, ability-grouping, various reading interventions (e.g., small group and one-on-one), assessment, data analysis meetings, and planning meetings among the first-grade teachers and the school reading interventionist for ability groups. Both semi-structured and unstructured interviews were conducted in school with teachers, the building principal, the reading interventionist, and the children in Louise's classroom. Whereas the interviews with the children averaged between eight to ten minutes, the interviews with school personnel were between 30 and 90 minutes. Additionally, I analyzed state and federal policy initiatives and laws, institutional and classroom documents, photographs, and interview and observational data for crystallization.

Beginning in mid-February through the end of the school year (mid-June), I observed on average three days per week (n=98 hours). I arrived at the start of reading instruction, ate lunch with the teachers, and stayed until the end of the 45-minute afternoon ability-grouped reading instruction that involved all three first-grade classrooms. When I observed the English Language Arts (ELA) block 3x/week, I audio- and/or video-recorded each session. Further, I attended an all-school assembly, a field trip to a local zoo with the first-grade, and in-school end-of-year celebration events. I engaged in informal conversations with Louise and other school personnel

regularly and exchanged emails and texts while and after completing the study as questions arose.

Data Analysis

The data analysis occurred in different phases. In the initial phase, I read and open-coded interview transcriptions, field notes, transcriptions of data analysis and planning meetings among school personnel, and documents (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) noting moments related to my areas of interest in ability grouping, reading (dis)ability, and space. I also watched videos of ability-grouped reading during which I stopped at particular points and made screenshots of noticings such as the type and amount of space during ability-grouped instruction, reading materials, grouping size, and instructor that I then organized in presentation software for further analysis. In this pass of data I memoed about the spatiality of ability groups for reading, the process of sorting children into groups and corresponding labels, as well as how policy influenced teachers' decision making. For example, there were noticeable visible differences in the characteristics of the spaces that children in the "high" group occupied in comparison with the children in the "low" group. I observed that in each space was varied in size and location, children's access to and choice in reading materials was distinct, and differences among instructors across the groups.

Next, I developed codes that were guided by the research questions and theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While analyzing the data, I contextualized reading instruction practices in first grade at Brantley Elementary within the state but also more broadly to understand how federal policy was intertwined with space and power. In an examination of the ways that reading instruction was enacted across space and how space contributes the construction of reading (dis)ability within the classroom and school, I identified three codes for

the data: labeling ability groups, grouping by reading ability, and spatializing reading instruction. Findings disentangle the spatialities of ability-grouped reading instruction and the reading (dis)ability construct across school geography.

Findings

In the following sections, I describe two findings related to a critical spatial perspective merged with a DSE lens. First, the spatial dimensions of federal and state-level policy influenced the implementation of ability-grouped reading instruction across three first-grade classrooms at an urban school that received Title I funding. School personnel assembled these groups according to literacy assessment results that measured and quantified children's literacy. Second, a spatial hierarchy of readers such as "low," "at grade level," and "high" produced and regulated children's access to school space, materials, and credentialed and noncredentialed teachers for instruction.

It's important to recognize the way the policy context shaped reading instruction at Brantley. Moreover, the "politics of location" illuminates the ways that spaces are intentionally organized to include and exclude particular people (Kitchin, 1992; Massey, 1992, p. 66; Soja, 2010). Despite several decades of research that argued against ability-grouped reading instruction in elementary classrooms, particularly those serving poor and minority children, schools began to reinstate it in the 90s (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Maloch et al., 2013). Researchers have argued that it is an old practice guised in new discourse for contemporary classrooms in order to fulfill policy requirements.

When former President George W. Bush reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the U.S. Department of Education invited each State education agency (SEA) to request a flexibility waiver in meeting

specific requirements ("ESEA Flexibility," 2016). Conforming to federal regulations, the state DOE acquiesced by identifying Focus Schools, distinguished as the ten percent of schools across the state with the largest achievement gaps between its top 20 percent of students and its bottom 30 percent ("Focus Schools," 2018). The goal of identifying Focus Schools was to close achievement gaps within schools and statewide ("Focus Schools," 2018). Although the 2013-14 school year was the last year that the DOE identified Focus Schools, the policy had long term implications for reading instruction and the children and teachers at Brantley ("Focus Schools," 2018).

In response, Brantley's Annual Education Report (hereafter, AER) disclosed that in the state where the study was conducted, the Department of Education (DOE) identified it as a Focus School. For instance, Brantley's 2016 AER disclosed that school staff analyzed student achievement data in the core subjects and developed school improvement goals and strategies accordingly. A goal relevant to this study was, "all Brantley students will meet or exceed grade level Common Core English Language Arts expectations including reading and writing with evidence, as well as, reading and writing using complex texts." In order to meet this goal, the AER reported that "literacy instruction has included" such strategies as "walk to learn" workshop groups to read and spell at instructional levels."

Politicizing Stratified Reading Instruction and Space

The school personnel at Brantley Elementary partitioned space to group children with similar measured literacy abilities during reading instruction. At Brantley, policy was instrumental in shaping the school's improvement plan and goals; consequently, one of the school improvement plan goals was stratified reading instruction. School staff instituted ability-grouped reading in a concerted effort to close the persistent achievement gap. In this project,

power, in the form of enacted reading instruction, shaped the organization and children's embodiment of school spaces.

The first-grade teachers' enactment of "walk to learn" reading instruction, was referred to as "reading workshop,"¹⁰ occurred four days per week during the afternoon for 45 minutes. This model of reading entailed assigning children to a particular space in the school for reading instruction. Children were scattered throughout Brantley's two floors and basement. With the school's Title I funds, the building principal hired Title staff who instructed some of the groups throughout the year. For example, during the last card marking period children were sorted into one of seven groups with four of them taught by Title staff and the remaining three by the first-grade teachers. Therefore, a "walk to learn" reading structure assumed that because some children's language and literacy abilities were deficient, they should be spatially isolated and excluded from those who had already acquired school literacy practices.

The sentiment that some children's language and literacy abilities were deficient and could be remediated through an ability group model is illustrated in the metaphor "all hands on deck" that was used twice in two separate interviews that I conducted with Louise and the school's reading interventionist, Sarah. For instance, Sarah used this metaphor when she described a district mandate later that year requiring that all elementary buildings provide the workshop model for reading and math in kindergarten five days per week. She commented how, "it was all hands on deck" to ensure children meet grade-level benchmarks. A spatial reading of this mandate suggests the district advocated stratified literacy and math instruction beginning in kindergarten. "All hands on deck" was perhaps response to yet another policy; the state had

¹⁰ Both terms, "walk to learn" and "reading workshop" are used interchangeably.

recently passed the “Third-Grade Reading Law.” This metaphor insinuates that all human “hands” can teach children as long as an adult shares “deck” space with children.

On a different occasion, I asked Louise to explain the approach to reading instruction in first grade. She explained that within the district, Brantley’s model was unique because they “we had three different times we offered reading instruction” and “used all Title staff, which allowed us to have the smaller groups.” Smaller groups meant further stratified groups. For instance, based on their DRA score children could be sorted into one of seven groups. The “low” and “low, low” groups had no more than four children while the “on level” and “high” groups mostly ranged in number of children from eight to fourteen.

So we had whole-group instruction, reading workshop time, and then intervention. So, it’s [reading instruction] three different ways. No other building did it that way.” Each teacher in first grade taught core reading instruction to the whole group in their own classroom using the district-mandated basal reading curriculum five days per week for 30 minutes. Within the 30 minutes, a popular scripted model for reading instruction was used with the “at risk” children and a different second grade scripted reading curriculum was used with the “grade level” and “above” readers.

In addition to core reading instruction, Louise noted that there were two advantages to a “walk to learn” instructional arrangement. First, all children received reading instruction but “at their level,” second, the teachers had the power to regulate the groups. This meant that teacher autonomy allowed them to exercise their professional judgment. For example, if Louise felt that a particular child should “move up” or “down” because they were holding some children in the group back or vice versa, she made that decision with the support of colleagues. Louise’s

assertion was supported in a separate interview that I conducted with the building principal, Diane. When I inquired about literacy instruction at the school she told me that the district:

Adopted a core set of resources with Open Court years ago that helped build some foundations for our kids, moving on into reading and then got at what I thought was pretty skilled at using our data to provide additional intervention for everyone whether they were on grade level, above grade level, or below.

The first-grade teachers put these data analysis skills to work when they placed children in “walk to learn” reading groups based on literacy assessment results and, according to Louise, their own observations. District-mandated literacy assessments consisted of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). At the start of the year and at the beginning of each card marking the teachers administered particular assessments to children within their classroom. Next, they compiled data for all first-grade children into a spreadsheet where they ranked them from “lowest” to “highest” according to the most recent DRA scores. The children were then sorted into ability groups to which they “walked to learn” during reading workshop.

I attended a 30-minute planning meeting in which the first-grade teachers and the school’s reading interventionist assembled and mapped locations for each group for the final report card marking. Prior, each teacher entered the most recent DRA score in a shared electronic spreadsheet for each child in their classroom spatially ordering their literacy among all first-graders. According to Louise, “we were creative and used hallway space near the elevator [way from classrooms] to make it work.” Ability-grouped reading thus propagated the inclusion and exclusion of school space for particular groups of children.

The list contained the first and last names of all 63 children ranked in order from the “lowest” to the “highest” reader. At the start of the meeting, the reading interventionist, Sarah, asked if the group preferred to “start at the top or the bottom,” referring to the first-grade children’s spatial standing in terms of their perceived ability. Approximately a minute later Sarah referenced the children with the highest DRA scores as “the top, the highs.” This practice of labeling children as such is problematic because the categories of readers assumed that the tools used to measure ability (e.g., DRA) are accurate measures of not only their literacy but also their intellectual capacity and thus potential for movement into a higher group in the hierarchy.

This instructional model imposed spatial thinking on children that made it desirable to engage in a social practice in which colleagues gathered and produced a ranked list of six and seven-year-old children from 1 to 63. Such a process is comparable to ranking a graduating class of high school seniors (who are 17 and 18-years old). Schools participate in producing and maintaining boundaries that provide some children access to obtaining the literacy tools necessary for social and economic success while blocking others’ admittance.

After all 63 children were ranked from “lowest” to “highest,” they were assigned to one of seven groups based on their perceived ability and learning needs. Children that were just below grade level were referred to as the “bubble kids.” This spatialized label references where children are in relation to a criterion. Moreover, it is undergirded by the assumption that *all* children’s literacy development can be accurately measured and compared using multiple choices tests of little reliability in producing such comparisons with that of the normally developing child who is White and middle class.

According to the district reading coordinator, the “bubble” label indicated that if a child was below grade level in a particular marking period, they needed to make a marking period and

a half's growth. When discussing children's ability group placement, the teachers routinely used children's DRA score as a descriptor instead of their name. For example, while discussing how many children Title staff might reasonably manage, Kim stated, "So, how many 20s?...Do we want to give her all the 20s up to number 45?" The "20s" referred to children whose DRA score was 20 on the latest assessment and "45" was the child who ranked 45th out of 63.

The Spatial Hierarchy of Readers

At Brantley, workshop groups occurred outside the confines of the classroom walls. In other words, the ability groups were spatialized. The school's architecture was not conducive to the "walk to learn" reading workshop model because it involved several spaces throughout the school. Constructed in 1928 and renovated in the late 90s, the building had two floors and a basement. Kindergarten through second grade, one of three third-grade classrooms, the school library, and the speech and language room were on the main floor. The remaining two third-grade classrooms, fourth and fifth grade, special education, and the reading intervention classroom were located on the second floor. Despite the building's multiple levels and grade clusters, children were (re)shuffled around and across school space.

During reading workshop, children "walked to learn" for instruction in one of several locations with varying instructors that, for some children, changed at the beginning of each grading period and within a moment's notice at teachers' discretion. These spaces included: three first-grade classrooms, the school library, the reading intervention classroom on the second floor, a tiny former art supply closet attached to one of the first-grade classrooms, and the speech and language classroom for those children who qualified for services. Louise mentioned that the closet turned reading workshop space once housed a kiln as the classroom was formerly the school's art room. However, the art room was later transformed into a first-grade classroom to

accommodate a fluctuating student population. At the time of the study the closet housed a reading workshop group that currently serves as a supply room (see *Figure 7*).



Figure 7. The Former Art Supply Closet Used for “Low” Readers

Children’s geographic location during ability-grouped reading instruction contributed to their uneven literacy development. The locations in which children were placed for reading instruction were uneven spatially, materially, and instructionally. In addition, the geographically uneven learning spaces sanctioned for reading workshop led to (in)equitable learning opportunities for children that were represented in the discourse of ability. The asymmetry of

space manifested power relations in several ways. Hence, children's reading ability and status was created and maintained by a tripartite that included the social/societal, temporal/historical, and spatial/geographic (Soja, 2010).

Literacy assessment data determined the geographic region upon which children were spatially dispersed during reading workshop. Although ability-grouped reading was driven by policy, the teachers ultimately had the decision-making power that regulated space, instruction, and access to materials. While the children in the "high" group had particular privileges and a variety of materials through spatial entitlement, the other first-grade children did not. However, all children, albeit differently, experienced social and spatial injustice in that some lacked access to certified teachers, opportunities to learn from peers, .

For instance, scripted lessons from the same curriculum at different levels dominated the lessons in all ability groups. School space functioned to support the social practices of exclusion and inclusion as well didactic reading instruction conceiving of literacy as acquisition of a set of skills and strategies. The hierarchical ability-grouped reading structure socially and spatially isolated children by perceived reading ability making it difficult, if not impossible, for the children in the "low" group to attain a "high" reader position. Therefore, the social and spatial injustice of stratified reading instruction prevented children with diverse language and literacy from interaction.

Children's DRA score had a spatializing effect on their experiences during reading workshop. For instance, the score determined group placement, the instructor and their teaching credential, number of children attending, the amount of learning space, and access to materials. Louise mentioned to me that it was only guaranteed that the "low" and "low, low" groups as well as children receiving speech and language services saw certified teachers during reading

workshop. The remaining groups were taught by Title staff. For example, three children in first grade were certified for a speech and language impairment; they were also deemed “low readers.” Thus, the speech and language teacher simultaneously provided SLI services and reading instruction during reading workshop. These children were taught by certified teachers in the SLI classroom.

The “Low” and “Low, Low,” Readers. The amount of available space was an issue for the ability-grouped model at Brantley. For example, in an email from Louise at the beginning of the study she expressed Sarah’s, the school reading interventionist, concern about having me observe children in the “low, low” group during reading workshop. Louise wrote, “Sarah requested you observe in the mornings during LLI [Leveled Literacy Intervention] instead of the afternoon. She is worried about space (it’s a small room).” The “low” readers were delineated into two distinct groups with corresponding labels: the “low” and the “low, low.”

In an interview that I conducted with Sarah, she asserted that the children with whom she worked were the “lowest of low kids” and that she was “the step before special ed.” Therefore, reading workshop spatially contributed to the construction and maintenance of the reading (dis)ability construct through the determinist beliefs that these particular children were intellectually disabled, the instruction deployed, and spatial and social isolation. It was therefore assumed that the “low” readers were “at risk” but with the appropriate intervention delivered by a certified teacher, such children might achieve grade level status. The “low, low” children, however, were en route to special education. As a result, these children were excluded from their peers who exhibited the very reading behaviors they needed to acquire during reading workshop in the afternoon as well as for 30 minutes in the morning. Because Sarah’s “intervention”

classroom was on the second floor, it geographically alienated children from the rest of the lower-elementary classrooms and their peers.

In Louise's classroom, I observed that the “low, low” children who were pulled out of the classroom to meet with Sarah for intervention missed writing instruction (*see Figure 2*). Thus, the children lost the opportunity to use their phonemic awareness and sight word skills to compose with an iPad or Chromebook. Instead, I observed that the children received more of the same skills-based instruction that they received during core instruction and reading workshop with little opportunity to read connected text or compose. Although during intervention the children did have access to picture books with bright photographs, they were part of a one size fits all scripted curriculum and model of reading instruction. Moreover, during intervention children were not permitted to choose which books they wanted to read nor did they have opportunities to take them back to the classroom or home.



Figure 8. LLI Intervention for “Low, Low” Readers

The “Low” Readers. Similarly, during reading workshop in the cramped former art room supply closet, Kim, a certified first-grade teacher, taught a group of four children identified as “low” readers. In this room there was one window that looked out onto the school parking lot. I observed little wiggle room in this small closet. Scripted lessons consisted of practicing sight word reading, rapidly naming letters and sounds of the alphabet while Kim flashed cards, and reading black and white copies of books stapled at the edges. In a different lesson with another “low” group led by Louise, I observed also a similar scripted lesson almost verbatim wherein children reading black and white paper books playing “popcorn.” In popcorn, also called round robin reading, children read aloud and select the next reader as they finished a page. In both instances, children only experienced didactic reading instruction in small spaces, did not have choice in materials, and did not visit the library to check out books.

The “Grade-Level” Readers. The children who were not “low,” “the lowest of the low,” or “high,” were referred to as the “grade-level” readers or by their shared DRA score. Therefore, the teachers assumed that because these children were “at grade level” the groups could be expanded in size to accommodate more children. These groups had approximately 10-12 children, were taught by Title staff without teaching credentials, and met in a classroom or another available space. For example, during the last report card marking period while Kim met with a “low” group in the former art supply closet, one of the Title staff delivered a scripted lesson to the “at grade level” children in the adjoining classroom (*see Figure 9*). The children in the group I observed worked on a large square piece of carpet on the floor in a more expansive yet still highly regulated space or at desks. Reading materials consisted of black and white photocopied stories; thus, children did not have choice in what they read or access to school library books.



Figure 9. “Grade-Level” Readers During Ability-Grouped Reading

The “High” Readers. From my observations of the “high” group, children spent 45 minutes finding and checking out books, reading independently, and taking Accelerated Reader tests. The instructors’ role was that of management rather than reading instruction. “High” readers warranted instructors who were skilled at behavior management monitoring children’s motor activity (e.g., walking instead of running, sitting properly in chairs), voice level control, and the delivery of scripted lessons from a reading intervention curriculum. The instruction was no better but merely took place in a nicer and more open space. Instructors of this group documented children’s book choice and AR test scores ensuring sure they did not venture into the AR books below or above their level even if they were interested in or motivated to learn about a particular topic. In particular, the AR levels system spatialized children’s access to books. For example, the books marked for children with a higher reading level were located on a specific set of shelves while the “easy readers” were contained on different shelves in a different space so that when children searched for books, they were separated by their reading level.



Figure 10. “High” Reader Reading Workshop Space

Children’s perceived superiority in reading in the “high” group provided them with spatial entitlements. For example, the “high” group met in the building’s most up-to-date space (*see Figure 10*). The library’s center was surrounded by windows on the outer edge allowing passerby’s to peer out onto a quiet neighborhood street lined with aging oak trees. On a blue sky-filled day, the sun’s rays streamed in through the expansive set of window panes illuminating rows and rows of neatly organized, categorized, and labeled books waiting to be indulged by curious minds, reserved for “top” readers. The room was the school’s hub where the enthusiastic chatter of children engaged in learning was heard. I often observed several children and adults sharing the space while hard at work on various projects whether sitting in groups at round and rectangular tables, sprawled out on the floor elbow to elbow, or curled up on a cozy couch.

Although children assigned to this location usually sat where they wished and visited quietly with peers and had access to library books, their selection of materials was spatially regulated. Within the “top” reader group, DRA scores determined children’s access to particular

books as well as the corresponding space they embodied while perusing the shelves during reading workshop. As such, children chose their reading materials solely from the library's Accelerated Reader (AR) book collection. For instance, if a child was interested in and motivated to read a book above their "reading level," and not in the AR collection, they had to make a different choice within their perceived "range" and from the shelves containing the designated books.

The AR book collection had a spatial hierarchy so that children could understand that the corresponding labels attached to library walls directed them to the space that occupied the books at their "level." For example, the "E" Books represented "Everybody Books" that were "Easy, Picture, Fun." On the other hand, some children chose "Easy Readers." Accelerated Reader books were easily recognized as the spines adorned colored tape that corresponded with particular reading levels. The specific spatialization of the AR book collection created and maintained children's reading status and access to materials. It also prevented them from accessing books that they were interested in and most likely motivated to read independently.



Figure 11. A "High" Reader Taking an Accelerated Reader Test

After children read their AR book they took a test on a computer and received a print report that went to the classroom teacher (*see Figure 11*). Further, children in this group regularly left with books that they transported across space including their home if they desired. Additionally, they had the option of reading AR books in the classroom when time permitted. The “top” readers, also labeled “gold readers,” were recognized and rewarded publicly of their superior reading status. This status was acquired once children passed 20 Accelerated Reader quizzes earning them an ice cream party (*see Figure 12*). First grade was not encouraged to participate; however, Louise told me she pushed for them to be included when she felt they were ready when they read above grade level and independently.

In conclusion, across the “walk to learn” ability-groups at Brantley Elementary children shared inequities as they experienced learning to read. Some children had more spatial privilege and access to beautiful books that they could self-select in the school library while others learned in a cramped art supply closet with only reproductions of books specifically written to introduce a contrived list of sight words or a particular phonics skill. Instruction from certified teachers was reserved for the “low” children because, according to school personnel, they had the greatest need for remediation; if the school did not demonstrate quantified gains in closing the achievement gap among its children then the district faced state punishment. Stratifying children for reading instruction denied all involved opportunities to interact socially with their peers around reading and texts as well the pleasure of trying on and playing out literacy. Within the school walls, spatial neighborhoods were constructed in which particular children were invited to live out their literate identity.

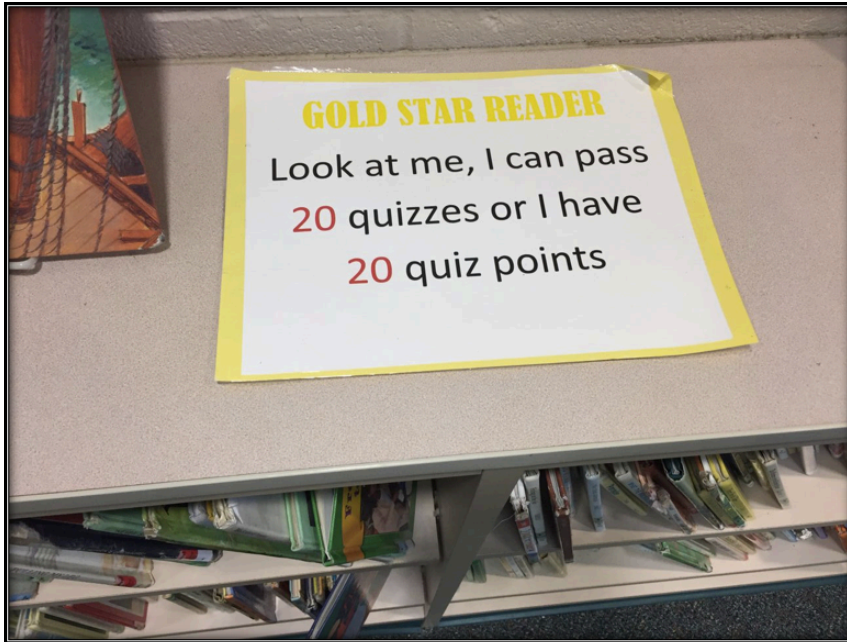


Figure 12. “Gold Star” Reader Status

Conclusion

Literacy education scholars have investigated the expansive “struggling reader landscape” from different epistemological paradigms employing various research methods (Kucan & Palinscar, p. 341). Historically, different terms (e.g., “LD,” “struggling reader,” “at risk,”) have been used to describe children who experience difficulties in learning to read and write the printed word in school. Despite the variety in terminology, the main argument against their use and proliferation is that such labels assume a child’s intellectual potential and ability are fixed. In turn, these labels create and perpetuate the notion that there is a normal or right way for children to develop literacy. Each ascription tends to locate the child’s perceived struggle with development as an embodied biological inheritance that ignores the “geographical inequalities” that produce and maintain it. The fact that scholars, researchers, and policy makers have not agreed on a definition, a diagnostic procedure, or how to remediate children perceived as “struggling readers” should raise suspicion.

While research has focused on developing and testing interventions based on children’s

perceived deficiencies (e.g., Allington, 2006; Vellutino et al., 1996), it has not fully explored the ways in which space operationalizes and maintains the reading (dis)ability construct. Hence, “all forms of knowledge production, from epistemology to theory formation, empirical analysis, and practical application are always simultaneously and interactively social, historically, and spatial” (Soja, 2010, p. 71). This study sought to “rebalance” the “ontological triad” by foregrounding the often overlooked element of space. As Clay (1987) eloquently stated, through school instruction, too many are children “learning to be disabled” (p. 155). A spatial reading of the “walk to learn” literacy model in first grade and later endorsed for kindergarten foregrounds how the physical arrangements of school are “deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of identities, differences, and power relations” (Armstrong, 2007, p. 95).

In this article, I have argued that exposing the spatial structures and underlying assumptions, which are that some children are cognitively deficient with minimum learning potential and should be socially and spatially isolated from their intellectually superior peers. Therefore, as Stanovich (1986) argued, the Matthew Effect takes hold and the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” is applicable to ability-grouped reading. The exposition of the structures that oppress and marginalize particular groups of children from obtaining “citizenship in the literate community” is an important step toward achieving social and spatial justice in school spaces (Kliwer et al., 2006, p. 164). Whereas research has examined the ways in which reading (dis)ability is socially (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Kabuto, 2016; Triplett, 2007) and culturally constructed (Alvermann, 2001, 2006) as well as children’s embodiment of the “struggling reader” identity (Enriquez, 2014), it has not specifically examined how the landscape itself regulates power and thus contributes to the construction and maintenance of reading (dis)ability.

A discovery in this study's findings was how ability-grouped reading instruction foregrounded some children's learning needs but not others. Children on the "low" and "high" ends of the literacy spectrum were the locus of teachers' attention. Absent from observed discussions among school staff was helping children perceived as "at grade level" reach their maximum learning potential. These children remained largely invisible with their intellectual potential perhaps underestimated. Similarly, while the "top" readers' spatial entitlements provided them more access to school space, materials, and privileges, these children along with their "at grade level" peers were taught by Title staff who were not certified teachers. This issue is important because, "substantial research evidence suggests that well-prepared, capable teachers have the largest impact on student achievement" (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 7).

This finding poses new concerns with ability-grouped reading: Who is planning instruction and executing ability-grouped reading in schools? And what are their teaching credentials and professional development opportunities? Such topics are crucial, particularly in schools that receive Title I funding. Other researchers have commented that there has been an increased effort to provide Title I services in the general education classroom to better align with reading programs within a school (Schuman, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000). With limited and diminishing funds schools are forced to develop plans for reading instruction that may involve placing children who require expert instruction from teachers qualified to provide it rather than adults without teaching credentials.

Relegating children to ability groups where they are taught by instructors without credentials is not only an illogical idea, but it deemphasizes the complexities of teaching. Such a model also undermines the expert instruction required for the very small number of children who may need additional support in learning to read for a variety of reasons that are outside the scope

of this paper (Allington, 2006; Pressley & Allington, 2015). If “expert instruction is more likely from a well-trained teacher than from a volunteer or paraprofessional” then the conception that Title staff lead ability-grouped reading for any group of children regardless of their perceived literacy is an issue that deserves attention (Allington, 2006, p. 168).

Ranking, counting, and sorting children as numbers in a group instead of humans with names, feelings, and dynamic literate identities is comparable to labeling and sorting edible (e.g., shiny) apples from the nonedible (e.g., bruised) based on particular characteristics at the supermarket. For example, the buyer typically sorts through the fruit to find the consumable apples. Those are the apples without holes or bruises. Some apples may appear to have been attacked by an insect and thus receive a more thorough examination before purchasing. Similarly, in the context of Brantley, children whose literacy passed muster were adequate; those whose literacy appeared defective were more closely inspected. The difference between sorting apples and children is obvious; however, the danger in doing so is not. Sorting through a large group of children like a bushel of apples based on perceived intellectual ability for tracking purposes has serious lifelong implications and is a practice that deserves scrutiny (e.g., Oakes, 1992). Perhaps reducing children to a number that identifies them for ranking as a particular “kind of reader” (e.g., “top, high,” “below grade level,” “at risk”) naturalized and normalized teacher’s decision making for reading workshop.

Exploring smartness in a kindergarten classroom, Hatt (2012) argued that contrary to some teachers’ beliefs, smartness is not a biological capacity but a cultural construct. Likewise, this project’s findings suggest that children’s minds and bodies do not manifest reading (dis)ability. Rather, it is a construct that is not purely social or cultural but rather one that is also bound up in the spatialities of reading instruction. Our knowledge of reading (dis)ability then, is

enmeshed in a tripartite dialectic consisting of the social, temporal, and spatial (Soja, 2010). A critical spatial perspective merged with DSE illuminates the ways in which ability-grouped reading in an early childhood classroom was a structure that contributed to the construction and maintenance of social and spatial injustice for all children involved. Only when space is foregrounded can we begin the arduous process of “seeking spatial justice” for inclusivity in early childhood classrooms (Soja, 2010, p. 1).

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CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Scholars have argued the construction of some children's identities in institutions, such as schools, contribute to lifelong oppression and marginalization (Connor, 2013; Gee, 2015; Jones, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This dissertation suggests that despite researchers' calls to end the use of terms like "struggling reader," they continue to appear in curricula, policy documents, research, and professional materials written for the teachers who instruct the children perceived in these ways (Enriquez, Jones, & Clarke, 2010). In addition, such terms generally accompany other descriptors (e.g., socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, home language) that are used to predict and restrict children's learning potential (Enriquez, Jones, & Clarke, 2010). This study found, for example, that regardless of their status as a particular kind of reader (e.g., "at grade level," "low") children's learning potential was restricted through homogenous ability-grouped reading instruction. Research demonstrates that the conception of the "struggling reader" can result in "self-fulfilling prophecies, leading to withdrawn behavior and negative feelings about reading, education, and themselves" (Enriquez, Jones, & Clarke, 2010). As this dissertation illustrated, children come to embody the "at-risk" reader status through their interactions with materials, discourses, and spaces.

To push back against deficit notions of children's language and literacy in early childhood education, my scholarship and pedagogy are centered on inclusion, constructivism, and critique. Thus, one overarching question guides my work: *What modes for reading instruction in early childhood classrooms are inclusive and also honor individual and group identities?* My ultimate goal is to develop an inclusive and caring community that values the natural range of human diversity in early childhood classrooms. Similarly, my work across the dissertation seeks to illuminate the myriad ways that schools are implicated in producing and

maintaining inequities that marginalize and oppress children according to race, class, and language (Dudley-Marling, 1997; Soja 2010). Specifically, I aim to show how materials and the embodied experiences that occur across the school landscape manifest reading (dis)ability and the spatialities of inclusion and exclusion. From a critical stance, I see (dis)ability, as a subjective manifestation of the social, cultural, and spatial.

In a chapter on the interest in cross-disciplinary approaches to social research, Armstrong (2007) wrote:

...ideas about space and place are potentially powerful in transforming the way we can understand processes of exclusion and inclusion in education, particularly in relation to children and young people constructed as ‘other’ on the grounds of difference through the policies, discourses, and structures which make up what are referred to as ‘education systems.’ (p. 95).

In order to open up possibilities for creating more equitable learning communities, in this dissertation I took a bird’s eye view of reading (dis)ability by using various theoretical lenses paired with qualitative methods. I intentionally borrowed from disabilities studies in education (DSE) and geography to inform this work. First, scholars suggest that DSE, a dynamic and emerging field of academic scholarship, is a forum for social/educational activism and scholarship (Connor et al., 2008). Second, DSE aims to both create and maintain inclusive and accessible schools (Connor et al., 2008).

Similarly, Soja (20010) contends one’s interests can be advanced through a critical spatial perspective. Thus, in this dissertation I “foregrounded a critical spatial perspective” to “ignite a radical reconfiguration of literacy studies and education theory” (Soja, 2004, preface). Joined together, DSE and a critical spatial perspective of reading (dis)ability

illuminate the ways in which phenomenon are not only socially and culturally constructed (Connor et al., 2008), but also spatially (Soja, 2010). Multiple perspectives complicate not only the understanding of a problem, but also issues around solutions.

As a former classroom teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, I approached this work recognizing that I have actively participated in producing and reproducing the reading (dis)ability construct. Therefore, my understanding of these issues is an incomplete work in progress that evolves through deliberate reflection and action. In my work as a researcher, teacher educator, and scholar-activist, I acknowledge that my knowledge of these issues are always evolving. It is my hope that through the dissertation I will join other scholars interested in eliminating the reading (dis)ability construct that plagues so many children. In turn, I am interested in maintaining a research trajectory that is centered on increased inclusion for all children in early childhood reading instruction.

Within and Beyond Dissertation Boundaries: Publications and Future Research

I will draw on dissertation data to produce additional articles focused on reading (dis)ability using space as a theoretical lens. For instance, I am interested in using a critical spatial perspective to examine Brantley's use of and funding for the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS). The program was introduced with the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act as a behavioral change strategy (IDEIA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) (Gartin & Murdick, 2001). Additionally, I interviewed school staff over the last year while they implemented the Success For All (SFA) reading program. I visited the school twice since completing data generation and teachers shared several concerns about the program and some children's lack of progress. Preliminary analysis of dissertation data generated suggests the district purchased the program in response to the state's

new Third-Grade Reading Law. Because I am a native, longtime resident, and educator in the state, I am interested in following up on the law's implementation. I will be interested to pursue this line of research in the Upper Peninsula as well.

Currently, I plan to send chapters two, three, and four from the dissertation out for publication. I envision sending the first article of my dissertation (Chapter 2) entitled, "Constructing Reading (Dis)ability: The "Lowest of the Low Kids,"" to Harvard Educational Review. I believe this journal is appropriate because it welcomes articles that reflect on teaching and practice in the U.S. and abroad. Moving away from locating reading (dis)ability within the child's head as intellectual deficiency, this chapter focused on how identity artifacts shaped a low-income, African American, first- grade girl's literate identity as well as how they produced systemic barriers that stabilized it. In particular, it explored the impact of state-level policy in shaping her literate identity. This chapter highlights how teachers' actions do not occur in a vacuum and must be considered across a broad landscape to include policy.

Next, the second article (Chapter 3), intended for submission to the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, interrogates literacy assessment practices. In this chapter, I examined the embodied experience of a literacy assessment for a young child labeled "at risk" for reading failure and her teacher in an elementary classroom. This project involved the use of video as a tool in early childhood research. Furthermore, I outlined how Jayda was learning to embody the "at-risk" reader status. Because this study used multimodal video analysis it could potentially interested a broad range of disciplines in the field of early childhood. This work is important to share because it questions the practice of literacy assessments as reliable tools to rank, sort, and label young's children's perceived literacy for differentiated reading instruction, progress monitoring, and the identification of "at-risk" readers.

The final article (Chapter 4), to be submitted to the journal *Reading Research Quarterly*, critically examines ability-grouped reading instruction in early childhood classrooms. I believe this manuscript contributes something new to the literature because it merges two theories across disciplines, DSE and geography, to show how for some children, unequal power relations in school space produced and maintained the reading (dis)ability construct. In addition, this work is important because it opens up discussion around policy and its relationship to the inequitable learning opportunities in classrooms, particularly during literacy instruction.

Moving Forward

Throughout the dissertation I have experienced moments of clarity and moments of utter confusion. What has been most salient is that for most my career as an educator I was unaware of the profound influence of materials. I did not understand the adverse effects of policy on the children I taught and how I taught them. Thus, I am committed to incorporating policy, specifically around literacy, in the courses I teach as well as in my scholarship. For instance, when analyzing inequities in school classrooms my focus is centered on tracing the lines of power to expose the structures within which they operate. At the same time, while it may be easier to critique the mechanisms that operationalize injustices within schools like literacy assessments, reading (dis)ability, and ability-grouped reading instruction, I also acknowledge that seeking and implementing solutions is not easy and messy work.

Moreover, I believe that such work first requires a multifaceted understanding of the issue. I do not mean to suggest, however, that this work cannot be done; on the contrary, I am deeply committed to these issues. In addition, transforming current practices in a

particular space is complex. In this study because I conducted research in a district where I was formerly employed and had personal relationships with the people in the study and used a critical lens, many tensions emerged and remain. Perhaps these tensions are the snafu of research that no epistemology or method can solve. The dissertation experience has made me aware of these tensions.

At times, it was difficult to witness practices and hear language that I believed to be harmful. I heard many conversations, for instance, while eating lunch in the teacher's lounge that were unsettling. What I hope has kept me grounded is knowing that if the roles were reversed and Ms. Brown had conducted research in my classroom, I would have most likely been complicit in the very practices that disturbed me. In other words, I recognize the privilege afforded me as a White, middle-class, woman pursuing graduate studies at a nationally ranked institution. Yet, I am still left wrangling with an internal conflict. In what ways, if at all, do I present my findings from the dissertation with the people in the context where I conducted the study? Do I share with a school that has not asked? What are my ethical and moral commitments and responsibilities as a researcher and as a caring individual?

Keeping these tensions in mind, I will seek opportunities to extend my research by working alongside educators in the community in which I will be employed to engage in action research with a shared goal of navigating federal and state policy while maintaining equitable literacy instruction practices. An issue that is important to me as a researcher is finding and establishing a relationship with a school that is interested in collaborating. The work and relationship must be mutually beneficial. Likewise, I could see myself working alongside teachers who are interested in issues around equity, reading, and inclusion in elementary

classrooms; thus, I am interested in establishing partnerships with teachers and/or administrators to present our work at state and/or national conferences as well as writing for publication. Because I will be working in a predominately White, rural community I anticipate opportunities to expand my research in communities in which particular children are often overlooked and ignored in research—White children living in poverty. More specifically, I am interested in amplifying both the voices of the children and the educators in these communities.

In a provocative article in which the authors critique guided reading, Ford and Opitz (2011) suggest that to expand the view of what can occur during guided reading it is first important to view its discrete parts “as a mosaic and understand the ways in which the parts contribute to an overall vision of the guided reading experience” (p. 237). This metaphor illustrates the purpose of my dissertation. In order to have an overall vision of the reading (dis)ability phenomenon it is imperative to understand the many discrete parts—policy, curricula, assessment, bodies, instruction, space, discourse— as a mosaic.

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