Ordinary Literacies in Extraordinary Times: Creating Meaning Through Texts, Bodies, and Objects

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The theme of Social Sciences and Humanities Congress 2017, *Canada: The Next 150—On Indigenous Lands!,* was a call to reflect on the past, present, and future. When thinking about the 2017 focus, we (in North America as well as across the globe) were immersed in contentious conversations around the many extraordinary and unbelievable aspects of the US presidential election. Colonial time, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Edward Said (1978) signalled, has closed our imaginations to the cyclical and simultaneity of the past-present-future. These possibilities are replaced by narratives of progress, as a linear path towards improvement, where we can simply leave behind the atrocities of the past. Such narratives confront us as we witness increased intensities between those who are privileged and thos who are marginalized by way of embodied difference. Indeed, in the wake of the midterm elections we continue to feel on edge. Celebrities have stepped into politics and politicians are presented on the entertainment stage as they work to awaken and propel us to recognize the systematic atrocities entangled in our everyday social worlds and global grids of inequitable relations (e.g., #metoo and #BLM). These movements, in particular ways, urge us to reconsider situated historical-material embodiments of inequity that are intwined in our seemingly ordinary ways of relating.

The title of the 2017 Congress for Social Sciences and Humanities brings together "Canada" and "Indigenous Lands", calling us to notice the inequitable histories of relations that continue to shape individuals', cultures', and nations' identities. These histories include the socio-matieral and embodied affects which can divide and unite us along multiple and complex alignments. The call encouraged us to reflect on the anniversary of Canada becoming a nation while thinking ahead to the next 150 years. We asked ourselves, what could we possibly imagine for future relations on these lands and what is the role or place of literacy teaching and research in that future? As co-chairs to the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) pre-conference that year, we were drawn into these everyday extraordinaries, and we asked our contributors to think about the ways in which peope are sense-making with, through, and against embodied encounters with material objects and ever-expanding communicative platforms and textual possibilities.

By positioning ourselves as literacy researchers and educators within this context, we believe we are called to remember that literacy *is* political; literacy plays a crucial role in today's globally linked classrooms and communities. What role do our literacy practices, approaches, and pedagogies play in shaping how students come to know themselves as literate? How are educators and policy makers supported in recognizing the myriad of literacy possibilities embodied by students, particularly those that are beyond the conventional measurable benchmarks (e.g., Kuby, Spector, & Thiel, 2018).

While we recognize that we are living in extraordinary times—technologically, politically, and socially—we are also interested in capturing what our quotidian literacy engagements *do*. We are curious about the ordinary things we do as part of daily literacy practices—those that are written into curriculum, those that are measured against literacy benchmarks, as well as those that often go unnoticed—the habits and assumptions around what literacy *is*. We are also interested, importantly, in how our mundane literacy habits affect (e.g., having the capacity to change or move) us. These times require alternative ways of thinking about education, communication, and life.

To ground the conversation, we invited the contributors herein to engage the embodiment and material turns in social science research (see, for example, Enriquez, Johnson, Kontovourki, & Mallozzi, 2016; Coole & Frost, 2010) as a possible future for literacy and language research and practice. In this work, the body (as a material discursive entity) is central to the experiences and productions of language and literacy. We hoped this focus might invite us to explore how we assemble communicative and semiotic resources and creativity to make meaning as the human body interacts with material, social, and spiritual spaces through the ordinary textures of everyday life. Sara Ahmed's (2006) work, thus, became a provocateur for the pre-conference:

> Objects and bodies 'work together' as spaces for action . . . My neck gets sore, and I stretch to ease the discomfort. I pull my shoulders back every now and then as the posture I assume (a bad posture I am sure) is a huddle: I huddle over the table as I repeat the action (the banging of keys with the tips of my fingers); the action shapes me and leaves its impression, through *bodily sensations* . . . I write, and in performing this work I might yet become my *object*—become a writer, with a writer's *body*, and a writer's tendencies. (p. 57, emphasis added)

In her above passage, Ahmed (2006) animates for us the ways in which our bodies, as well as our desired identities, are physically and figuratively shaped in dynamic intra-action with particular materials. Her desire to become a writer is contoured through her relation with the desk she is sitting at to perform the writing; the desk makes possible the very act of writing and becoming a writer. The very ordinary act of sitting at a desk to "write" constitutes who she can become. The ways in which her body responds to the repetitive actions of reaching for the keys to type in a seated position change her. The quote, again as a provocateur, braids together the themes taken up in this special issue: the body, the material, and the ordinary in extraordinary literacy times.

Recalling that language is a body technique (Bourdieu, 1991), our attention to the body in literacy engagements is simultaneously an acknowledgement and expansion or re-thinking of the discursive emphases in literacy teaching and learning.

In the first article, "Fleeting Encounters and Brick Walls: Animating Embodied Literacies in Our Everyday Relations," Rachael Bell, Katelyn Copage, Matt Rogers, and Pam Whitty (the keynote provocateurs for the pre-conference, this issue) invite us into their ongoing conversations propelled by the conference call for papers. Through the braiding of their individual and co-articulated voices, each author takes us through how the everyday, seemingly ordinary and un-noteworthy literacy experiences accumulate and become embodied through time. In their narratives, sometimes an individual event punctuates a memory culled through sentiments delimiting what a body can do; they invite

the reader to witness fleeting encounters in their own lives and to rethink our responsibilities to be present in the moment, to disrupt and question the easy answers, and, indeed, the easy questions. Theirs is an ethical call to dwell, as a pedagogy of pause, to turn our attention to the easy slippages into the way things are.

In a differently oriented call to action, Roessingh and Bence (this issue) turn our attention to the sometimes difficult discussions around necessarily repetitive practices in a time when pedagogies of repetition and rote skills have been dismissed as limiting. Their article, "Embodied Cognition: Laying the Foundation for Early Language and Literacy," reminds the reader of the often-overlooked importance of holding a pen(cil) for fluid articulation of ideas. They animate the interconnections between the brain and body (specifically the hands) in shaping the contours of literacy learning in the early years. Through a thorough analysis of the linkages, Roessingh and Bence offer situated practices for educators to support early writers in deveoloping a variety of manual dexterities through play-based pedagogies in support of cultivating writerly dispositions.

While Roessingh and Bence (this issue) invite us to think about the implications of recent technological shifts, with the increase of "writing" on keyboards and tablets, McGlynn-Stewart et al. (this issue), consider how we might engage tablets as intentional sites of literacy learning. In their article, "Open-Ended Apps in Kingergarten: Identity Exploration Through Digital Role-Play," the authors amplify the generative possibilities new technologies can offer in cultivating imaginative identity positions for kindergarteners to embody in the moment. What the article offers is an "and…and" orientation to the tried-and-true literacy practices in early years classrooms (e.g., role-playing) and the offerings of new technologies (e.g., tablets). Importantly, this article makes concerted effort to avoid pitting new technologies against historically positioned "best practices". Indeed, one takeaway is the creative ways in which the kindergarten children embodied the tablets as necessary aspects of their role-playing.

Shelley Jones (this issue), in the fourth article, "Educators' Explorations With Gender Performatives and Orientations: A Participatory Action Research Project in West Nile Sub-Region, Uganda," brings the focus back to questions of repetition, this time in the problematics of normative gender performances within patriarchal systems. Jones takes the reader through a week-long educator professional learning series that was focused on gender equality in Uganda. Through a critical consideration of the ways in which gender shapes our grids of relations to humans and non-human others, she amplifies the difficulties and possibiltiies enacted in drawing out how gender performatives shape textual engagements. The educators who participated in the professional learning are physically and figuratively affected by the uncovering of previously unquestioned gender performatives, and the everyday ways in which they embodied limiting gender possibilities for themselves and their students.

Finally, Kevin McBean and Ingrid Johnston (this issue) share their experiences, questions, and embodied discomforts in selecting alternative texts, ones situated outside the conventional English literature canon, for a Grade 10 English Langauge Arts (ELA) classroom in Alberta. In some ways, we might note how extraordinarily *ordinary* whole-class text selection is in the ELA classroom, and yet through their explication, we are invited to reconsider the political importance, as well as the potential vulnerabilities, in choosing texts that push us (teachers and students alike) outside of "our" "known

worlds"—the ways in which our bodies are affected when we are invited into texts that challenge who we think we are.

We hope that through the articles in this special issue, readers will allow themselves to think about their ordinary literacy engagements as embodied entanglements with circulating socio-material-historical discourses, texts, and objects on every level. While each of the articles takes up the focus in variant ways, together they allow us to note the complexities and importance of focusing on the body in literacy education and research.

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Fleeting Encounters & Brick walls: Animating Embodied Literacies in Our Everyday Relations

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Abstract

Rachael, Katelyn, Pam and Matt take up Sara Ahmed's (2012) *concepts of fleeting encounters and brick walls* as they reflect on the feminist and decolonizing nature of their work. This paper is the product of months of conversation between the co-authors. Through the use of autoethnographical and participatory approaches, the authors seek to invite the reader into a co-constructed space where mutual support and inspiration shape the future actions of the participants as they grapple with their ethical responsibilities as learners and educators.

Welcome to Our Conversational Space
Rachael, Katelyn, Pam & Matt

We deeply appreciated the privilege of having been invited as provocateurs for the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) 2017 pre-conference plenary panel. We are Rachael, Katelyn, Pam and Matt—critical literacies graduate students and professors at the University of New Brunswick Fredericton (UNBF), located on the unpurchased and unceded territory of the Wolastoqey peoples. The university itself is situated just above the Wolastoq River, now referred to as the Saint John River—renamed in 1604 by Samuel Champlain when he entered the Wolustoq River on the Feast of Saint Jean the Baptiste. Actions are now being taken to reclaim the river's original name.

At the LRRC pre-conference in 2017, we found a welcoming and engaging group of "exquisite conversationalists". Thank you for that. At that time, we collectively assembled our individual processes taking up Sara Ahmed's (2012) concepts of fleeting encounters and *brick walls*. Fleeting encounters and *brick walls*, then and now, materialize/d differently for each of us. Rachael, Katelyn and Pam took/take a critical auto/biographic/approach to our embodied materializations working within feminist-critical-Indigenous ways of being and knowing. Matt works within critical-feminist frameworks to understand and address cyberviolence through verbatim participatory filmmaking with young women. At this time, in revisiting our collective work, we take the opportunity to deepen our thinking of fleeting encounters and *brick walls* as these concepts

animate/embody literacies with/in our everyday relations. Each of us animate particular questions put forward in the call for papers, and briefly articulated below. Our format is once again intended to be conversational with ourselves, and with readers-viewers as we consider the provocations inherent in these questions. Perhaps, you will notice intersections across the questions that provoked us, especially those relating to the collapsing of long-standing Eurocentric ways of being, knowing, and acting, what Marie Battiste (2013) refers to as "cognitive imperialism" currently undergoing significant epistemic and ontological implosion.

Rachael is provoked by historical stories of literate bodies that continue to circulate. She takes us into her everyday life to consider creative/alternative ways of knowing and making- meaning that embodied literacies can open up and/or renew. *Katelyn* also is provoked by historical stories of literate bodies that continue to circulate, and how a multiplicity of meanings animate intimate moments of lived lives. *Pam* is thinking/feeling with the intensity of affect experienced with particular pedagogical processes in the context of residential schooling narratives, and the agentic capacity of these narratives to rupture historical grand narratives. And *Matt* takes us into a collaborative project that opens possibilities and complexities of using verbatim participatory filmmaking with youth to address issues of cyberviolence in the lives of young women and girls in New Brunswick. In order to identify, understand, and resist social, discursive, and institutional issues and *brick walls*, he is particularly interested in exposing and disrupting paternalistic discursive practices that insidiously make their presence felt when young filmmakers engage with texts, ideas, and other bodies.

Shared Story, Shared Embodiment Through Online Encounters

Rachael

I come from Miramichi, New Brunswick. I have been told that the word Miramichi comes from the Mi'kmaq for "river with a varied and plentiful bounty". The city of Miramichi encompasses a small section of that river, and is found just downriver of two Mi'kmaq reserves, and upriver from a third. In the middle lies my city, where a jumble of communities with distinct Irish, Scottish, Francophone, Catholic, and Protestant identities were amalgamated into one city 22 years ago. For most of my life, the area has been in economic decline, and the people of the city have worked together and against one another in an attempt to maintain the lives they built there, all without acknowledgement of the unceded lands on which they and their ancestors built their lives and thrived for many years before this particular downturn. The Miramichi River lies within unsurrendered Mi'kmaq territory, and my people settled on it only 200 years ago.

I recently returned to live on the river, after eight intermittent years of post-secondary education. I sit often in a new coffee shop, in a building that was a 19th century bank, a meeting space, a bowling alley, and now repurposed into something so of-the-moment on top of decades of history and stories. I can feel those stories in the building as I try to focus on my graduate work. They are stories of the settlers who came here, took land that did not belong to them, worked hard to clear away trees and build roads, and eventually gained enough stability and capital to build a bank out of red bricks made from the mud of the river. Their morals exhorted them to civilize this place, to impose order, to build square buildings on straight roads along a river that twists and widens, ebbs and rolls, provides life in its movement and its offerings, and kills and destroys without warning. The

stories of these settlers that echo through this building are my own stories, and I layer on top of their ethic of duty, civic pride, and progress the acknowledgement that my ability to sit here and type on a laptop and think about colonialism and feminism and emancipatory education is thanks to the oppression they enacted on the local Mi'kmaq communities.

My awareness of these layers of meaning has grown over the years since I left the river at 18. I cannot locate my learning of these critical literacies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and histories to a particular course I took, book I read, conversation I had, or tumblr thread I browsed. But I know that I embody them thanks to the Internet. Although for most of my life I lacked awareness of it, Miramichi's working class culture perpetuated a hegemony of White masculinity. People are valued for how hard they work, and hard work only qualifies if it is physical in nature. Working at the mill, hauling timber through the woods, welding in the shop. These trades were the backbone of our economy, and their doors were closed to women. To want to sit and read, then, and not to go outside to pile wood or shovel snow, was seen as lazy and gratuitous. Texts—whether books, movies, or otherwise—existed purely for enjoyment. A level of shame pervaded my body for reading, for doing well in school, and for turning to the Internet to find my way around the *brick walls* that my community created. There, I sought disruption, and there, with millions of other women and girls, I found it. Together, we fangirled over our favourite books, created transformative works of art, and raged against publishers, television writers, and film directors for failing to represent the diversity we could see in our online communities, in our real lives.

Jessalyn Keller and danah boyd as well as many others have written about girls and the Internet—the ways they use it to mediate their identities, to control their own narratives, to become activists (Keller, 2015; 2012: boyd 2014). Through social media, they narrate their identities and foster conversation and activism. But the Internet also offers a space for the fleeting encounters with the individual actors that Sara Ahmed wrote about; although community and long-lasting relationships develop and exist, fleeting encounters are much more common and can be embodied in lasting ways. Popular discourse would have us believe that the Internet is a place of barriers and abuse—and it is true that the exclusions and violences of offline spaces are often reproduced there—but, it is my intention to focus here on the overlooked positive discourse. The conversations and community that happen among women and girls on the Internet gave me something I could not find elsewhere in my life, and this is something it offers to many. I maneuvered around my *brick wall* by finding these communities, but my avoidance of the *brick wall* did not cause it to disappear—just as the systems of oppression at work in our world do not disappear online. Ahmed wrote that "*in* reflecting on what exists, it withdraws from an immersion, such that an existence is transformed" (2012, p. 174). I would theorize that by creating online communities separate from their lived experiences, women construct the opportunity to leave behind certain embodiments and can reflect on the ways the world acts on them and they interact with the world. They are given the opportunity in these spaces to actively reflect on their experiences without the ongoing negotiations with the *brick walls* that exist in physical spaces. Whether on their personal blog or in spaces like *Rookie Magazine*, dedicated to producing content by and for adolescent girls, women have the opportunity to put their thoughts together in their own time, to shape them, to make them look the way they want, free from the constraints of academic expectations, of peer review, of formatting requirements, or even the expectation of a coherent narrative.

An example that brings this into sharp relief comes to mind: in *Rookie*, Mariam Ansar writes about an experience she had as a high school student in her classroom, when a boy made a sexist joke that she did not find funny (2017). She raised her voice to speak against him, which only drew the mocking of her peers. Mariam needed the support of her teacher in that moment, but she did not receive it. In public spaces, including school spaces, we can often be confronted by unexpected resistance and as teachers and as critical thinkers, we can let ourselves down in how we react to these moments. The moment solidified for her that despite her tears in the wake of this moment, she would continue to speak up in defence of her fellow women, fellow Muslims, and fellow people of colour.

This was a fleeting encounter that Mariam embodied immediately. It was also a generative encounter. In writing about her experience, Mariam was able to take back control of her narrative—although she could not change the reaction of her classroom peers or of her teachers in her physical environment, she could bring the reader through her feelings as those events happened and demonstrate their affect. Mariam's ability to write about this moment generates more fleeting encounters. Those for people like myself, who have a responsibility to understand the need for allyship and for supporting people who are chipping away at the *brick wall*. Such stories are important for people who face *brick walls* similar to the ones that Mariam faces, empowering them in the knowledge that speaking up is difficult and not always worth it in the moment, but can generate the drive to do it again. And for Mariam, although she was not validated in the moment of her resistance by anyone in the room with her, she can have the fleeting encounters offered by commenters on her piece—those who take a moment just to hear her story, and accept it. No one attempts to soften her narrative, no one tries to make excuses.

Although I sit in a coffee shop, far away from where Mariam experienced and shared this encounter, I now encounter her story. I now carry an awareness of her experience and of the ways that such experiences can be encountered, disrupted, and acted upon. Mariam's reflection, like the stories of so many women we can now encounter online, gives us new literacies for encountering our own lives and for looking at the lives around us, allowing us to continue to open ourselves up to new stories and to give us the courage and power to face our *brick walls*.

Embodying Educational Literacies Like a Good Squaw

Katelyn

My perspective is the result of an accumulation of experiences as a Mi'kmaw and English woman within our education system. I continue this conversation by sharing with you now a few of the ways I have come to know myself as embodying *brick wall* ideologies that have made it difficult, at best, to find space for myself in the many levels of Canada's academic world. I was really taken with the questions: what historical stories of literate bodies, or what it means to be literate, continue to circulate? and how do a multiplicity of meanings animate intimate moments of lived lives? I am particularly interested in exploring these two questions in relation to my experience of participating in Canada's public school system as an Indigenous female living and learning in Mi'kma'ki. The literacies I've come to embody are the unforeseen and long-lasting consequences of my education, and have reared themselves in some of the most intimate realms of my life.

Encouraging elementary school embodiments. I attended Shubenacadie Elementary School, in which every student took the Mi'kmaw Studies class offered. I remember learning traditional stories, how to weave baskets, simple beadwork, and basic language skills for things such as numbers, animals, and short phrases. We spent hours playing the traditional game Waltes. Within the walls of this classroom I was given my first opportunity to hit the hide of a drum. This class was made possible by two female Elders from my community, Becky Julian and Mary Bernard, and every student participated, not just those from the reserve. To these two women, my learning spirit has an endless amount of gratitude, as these are the educators responsible for my resiliency in knowing that Indigenous knowledges deserve their own respective and respected spaces in our public-school systems. However, there have been other experiences that contradict the embodied respect I initially was taught in elementary school, and it is those experiences, I now realize, I've embodied deeply.

Racist math jokes and safer spaces—high school is a weird place. We are going to fast forward to high school, as there was zero academic Indigenous content throughout my middle schooling. I attended Hants East Rural High School (HERH), which was the closest high school to the reserve, so there has always been a high concentration of Mi'kmaq students contributing to the student body population (my father, aunt, and grandfather also attended this school). There were (and are still are) no Mi'kmaq teachers; we had a Mi'kmaq guidance counselor, my uncle, who holds the position to this day. He is a great support for our students, but at the end of the day, he is there to listen to the students, offering guidance and support from his office; he is not in the classrooms where a lot of damaging actions and ideologies are represented, dismissed, and/or left to fester, leading to harmful embodiments by students, Indigenous and otherwise.

In high school, there was one course with Indigenous content titled Native Studies 10. It was an elective, not recommended, and most of the students were from my community, Sipekne'katik. The teacher who taught the course while I attended HERH was not an Indigenous educator but an African Canadian man who admitted, often, that he did not know first-hand what he was teaching, but he was most certainly better than nothing at all. As a Black man in Nova Scotia, he had experienced systemic racism and the oppression of being a minority, which was comforting to those of us from Sipekne'katik who took the class. The memories I have of this class were that these were the first discussions I had in an academic setting about institutional racism, although that was not the language we used in our classroom; at the time, it just seemed like a safe academic space for us to share our experiences and frustrations about continually coming up against this unwelcoming and unmovable force (what we refer to in this paper as a "*brick wall*"). This was the first experience I had of a class being personally validating, while also opening my eyes to the magic that can be created when Indigenous students share their experiences in a respecting space.

What do Indians like on their toast? Have you ever done one of those math worksheets where you have to solve a bunch of math equations and every answer matches with a letter, so at the end of the worksheet once you've answered all the questions, you get the answer to a joke or a riddle? One afternoon in my 10th grade math class, my teacher handed out one of these worksheets; the headline question we were solving for read, "What

do Indians like on their toast?" Annoyed, but admittedly curious as to what the answer could possibly be, I said nothing and completed my worksheet. Upon solving the final math problem and having the answer **"Squaw-berry jam"** wrenching at my insides, I approached my math teacher to express my shy but grounded concern over the racist content of the worksheet she had handed out and instructed everyone to complete. To my literal horror, she told me that it was "just a joke," that I was taking it too seriously, upsetting myself over nothing, and should to return to my seat.

For what felt like months afterwards, I was made fun of for "not being able to take a joke" and heard this racist incursion directed at me countless times. Was I a squaw? When you hear something enough times, it starts to sink itself into you. Just like Mariam Ansar (2017) in Rachael's telling, I too embodied my teachers' dismissal immediately. What makes experiences like this so terrifying is that the students who are continually receiving discriminatory ideologies are not likely to question what they are receiving because the discrimination is framed as "just a joke". Unfortunately for me, I internalized that it was acceptable for my ancestry, specifically the strong and resilient women of my ancestry, to be the butt of academic jokes, and that this was not offensive, but funny. As a member of that dismissible group, my voice did not stand a chance of being valued in that world. This is the voice I speak with still today.

I would like to take a moment here to speak with you about what I feel is a clear example of what a multiplicity of meanings animating intimate moments is like for me in this situation. I do not wish to explicitly state that my 10th Grade math teacher created this racist and sexist worksheet because she is racist and sexist; I do not think she created it, and she probably didn't consider herself to be racist. I have often wondered how she feels about this encounter with me; if she feels she did the right thing by dismissing me and my concerns back to my desk. I wonder if this fleeting encounter still resonates with her, or if this was just another class for her, a fleeting *un*remembered encounter which blurs into all of the other forgotten classes she has taught. This is where I feel embodiment is easily transferred—in spaces we've forgotten about. She embodied the ideology behind the squaw-berry jam worksheet, and, given her potential influence as a teacher, I'm sure I'm not the only student of hers who learned to embody this discriminatory ideology.

Denial of (academic) existence: undergraduate lies. Let me now take you to the final semester of the four years I spent at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. At the time, I was an honours student majoring in Philosophy and minoring in Theology and Religious Studies. If there were any mentions of Indigenous content previous to this, I do not remember them. What I do remember, however, took place within my two final courses: Bioethics, and Feminist Philosophy. As my final assignment within the Feminist Philosophy course, I was surveying fellow philosophy students on what changes they would like to see within the Philosophy department. While I was handing out my short five-question survey in the Bioethics course I was enrolled in, a fellow student asked me what I would like to see change within the Philosophy department, one of the questions I was asking on my survey. The inclusion of female philosophers and Indigenous philosophies was my answer, to which the professor responded that there was no such thing as Indigenous philosophies, nor any female philosophers. While I could provide names of famous female philosophers to counter his claim, I am ashamed to admit that I was unaware of any Indigenous philosphers/philosophies at the time, which must have only reinforced

his claim amongst my fellow students. I won't even begin to discuss how many times he interrupted me and spoke over me while I was giving the preamble for my survey.

Fast forward again to the beginning of my graduate studies in the department of Education at the University of New Brunswick. While I now have the absolute joy of reading the incredible work of many Indigenous scholars', I continue to find myself facing and embodying institutional racism. The racism in this setting is not overtly noticeable; it's not like I have been called a "squaw" in this department. Rather, it is all the little things that accumulate and grind a person down. I had written a paper on the concept of neocolonialism last year for a course, and set up a meeting with the professor to go over my paper. The first problem I can remember him having with my paper was that I had misspelled "Wabanaki": he told me that I had spelled it "Abenaki" accidently. When I voiced to him that I had not misspelled but was referring to the Abenaki people, who are one of the five contributors within the Wabanaki Confederacy, he responded with "oh."

This may not seem like a big deal to anyone else besides me, and it has taken hours of thinking obsessively to be okay with that; it can matter to only me, but that means that it still matters. This is an example of a position of authority in a Eurocentric institution assuming that he knew what he was talking about when it came to Indigenous knowledges, and dismissing me when I had corrected him. So, once again, it was assumed that a privileged male who had good authority in the institution knew more about Indigenous history than an Indigenous woman. This was the final strike that engulfed my deeply rooted pain into the swirling ball of rage and humiliation it is today.

Embodied literacies and affective/affected work. So here I am today—feelings of anger and shame permeate my thoughts while I am still trying to figure out how to recreate the magic I experienced in elementary school despite those fleeting academic encounters that have taught me this is not where I belong. Experiences like those shared above have been accumulating within me for the 18 or so years I've been a participant in the world of institutional education and it has left me scarred and, at times, academically and internally paralyzed. I am swollen and bitter at the learned literacies I embody against myself unknowingly yet so deeply. I don't speak in class because I embody the dismissal my education and its delivery-boys have taught me. I am afraid that nobody will hear me, and if they do, they won't actually be listening—all they will hear is my anger and I will only perpetuate the stereotype of an angry Indian, another uneducated squaw. I am ashamed that this is who I have become. I never used to consider myself to be an angry person.

But anger is part of my healing journey; I am grieving the loss of the proud Mi'kmaq woman I could have been my entire life. I am grieving the cultural loss of the children taken from their families and communities and restrained/contained/maintained in residential schools and day schools, or placed with families other than their own. I grieve for the thousands of women, girls, and 2-spirited Peoples murdered, hundreds of whom remain missing. I am grieving for the Earth: for the land, air, and waterways we continue to molest through resource extraction. I grieve for all of our losses of life.

I am ultimately afraid that my colonized education is right—that my voice, my experiences are dismissible in this world and I just need to learn to accept that, to learn how to take the joke, how to be the joke. It is in having difficult, yet ongoing, conversations like this one and co-creating spaces for these conversations to be had, online and in person, that helps me to realize that sharing these experiences of embodiment allow others to

challenge the daily little things that go unnoticed and wreak havoc internally. The next time you hear someone make a discriminatory joke or remark, I'm hoping that you won't let it slide after taking part in this ongoing conversation.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) brilliantly places "shame as an insidious and infectious part of the cognitive imperialism that was aimed at convincing us that we were a weak and defeated people, and that there was no point in resisting or resurging" (p. 11). These memories I'm sharing with you are the beginning literacies of my own resistance and resurgence as an Indigenous woman. It is the accumulation of singular voices that slowly chip away at towering *brick walls*; I am hopeful that perhaps these memories I've shared with you will contribute, however minimally, to the recognition, and inevitable crumbling demise of these epistemically assimilative and internally damaging *brick walls.*

A Fleeting Changing Encounter with Isabelle Knockwood: Uncovering Lies of Omission as a Way to Embody Truths-Telling

Pam

I live and work on the unpurchased and unceded territory of the Wəlastəkwewiyik peoples. My settler family, on my father's side came to live in New Brunswick from Wexford, Ireland in the early 1800's and, on my mother's side from Banffshire, Scotland in the late 1800's. Our family has benefited greatly from the Peace and Friendship Treaties. In my life as an inhabitant of what is now called New Brunswick, and as a faculty member of the University of New Brunswick, and in the broader community, I strive to work in the present towards a time when First Nations rights are upheld with the same tenacity as the rights of settlers. In this part of our ongoing conversations, I speak to residential schooling narratives, affect, and epistemological shuddering as a way to crack open ourselves and omissive curriculum that tells only part of our Canadian-Turtle Island story, and in so doing keeps us from each other.

Katelyn's home of Sipekne'katik, is very close to the former location of the residential school at Shubenacadie. It was Isabelle Knockwood, from Katelyn's community, who introduced me to *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia*. Knockwood published this book in 1992, and was visiting the UNB Mi'kmaq-Wolustoqey Centre for a reading and signing in 1994 when I had the opportunity to meet her. As she signed her book with the words "Let the healing begin," I was struck by her generosity, knowledge, and matter-of-fact approach—that Indigenous and non–Indigenous peoples alike needed to be working together to discuss what really happened in these residential schools: brick buildings that closed off Indigenous children to themselves and their families—literal *brick walls* creating longstanding cultural divides between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. "There is a lot of healing that needs to take place" is what she said—unsettling my white guilt, and calling for me to act. What I took away from my fleeting encounter with Isabelle Knockwood was the need to learn more about and circulate other truths about Canada-Turtle Island, to make visible the injustices and harms of residential schooling policy, practices, and its intergenerational effects. I see truth-telling as a way to epistemic inclusion while dismantling bricked-up discourses. *Out of the Depths* is a deeply disturbing narration of the firsthand experiences of 27 adults who had been forced, as children, to leave their families and live at Shubenacadie Residential School (1930-1967), the only full-

time residential school in the Maritimes—a residential school that was home to 1000 children during its 37 years.

In his report to Indian Affairs on education for Indigenous children, the highly influential Egerton Ryerson, (1847) put it this way: "Their education must consist not merely of the training of the mind but of a weaning from the habits and feelings of their ancestors, and the acquirements of the language, arts and customs of civilized life" (Ryerson, as cited in Alexander, 2010, p. 133). Within her collection of autobiographical narratives Knockwood cracked open "the code of silence" (p. 11), making public what it meant for a national policy that called for young children to be "weaned" from their ancestors and "acquire" customs of what was clearly, for many, a life of abuse, one that created intergenerational trauma for generations to come. Within her re-constructed conversations, Knockwood details the everyday lives of children taken from their families to be raised by the so-called "brothers, sisters and fathers" of this Roman Catholic school/home. Quite literally stripped of their language and culture, —the children narrated by Knockwood articulate the shaming of Mi'kmaq bodies, hearts, and minds. The imposed taking on of English Catholic trappings in what was the home, school, and, all too often workplace of Mi'kmaq children, made palpable the domestic violence, harassment, abuse and neglect that took place within the school—which we must remember was the children's new home. More than educators, these nuns and priests were fathers and mothers.

Prior to 1876, attendance at residential schools was voluntary. However, an amendment to the Indian Act of 1876 required that Indigenous children attend residential and day schools administered by churches; a government of Canada policy enacted by priests and nuns. By 1900, within their newly designated homes and with their forcibly designated families, Indigenous children were dying in large numbers. In 1907, with the Federal investigations of Indigenous Industrial Schools in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, Dr. Peter Bryce, Chief Medical Officer for the Department of Indian Affairs of Canada found high rates of death from tuberculosis. His findings received publicity within the Canadian press, and dismissiveness from the Canadian government. Duncan Campbell Scott, Minister of Indian Affairs, in his response to Bryce's reports was unequivocal:

> Even were the Department prepared to take the schools over from the Churches, it is self-evident that the Churches would not be willing to give up their share of the joint control. These preliminary examinations by Dr. Lafferty and Dr. Bryce have already caused considerable irritation and brought protests from the Roman Catholic authorities who have the larger number of pupils under their charge. (First Nations Education Steering Committee & First Nations Schools Association, 2015, p.17)

If the Bryce report had been taken more seriously, perhaps the Shubenacadie School (1930-1967) might never have opened. Perhaps many other brick-walled schools might not have been built. Perhaps many Indigenous families, their cultures and languages may have been left intact. Instead, the government of Canada chose the literal *brick walls* of the residential schools as the homes for 150,000 children—leaving many families and communities bereft of children—and children bereft of their families, languages, and culture for generations to come. These literal and ideological *walls are now tumbling down as more and more*

residential narratives have been revealed through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015).

A brick wall *within: Epistemic shuddering.* In 1995, I placed *Out of the Depths* as an *optional* reading for the Cultural Constructions of Childhood course I taught, my pedagogical intent being to introduce the histories residential schools to expose the narrowness of colonial narratives by circulating other truths. These narrative truths detailed children and childhoods dislocated, damaged, and destroyed through removal from homes, families and land, from original and longstanding traditional literacies embedded and embodied in the lands where the Mi'kmaq peoples have lived for at least 12,000 years. This home within the child was eviscerated in a generation.

There were 24 people in the Cultural Constructions class. I offered the book as one of a number of options, rather than as a mandatory assignment. The class members who chose to read *Out of the Depths* were five First Nations people, already familiar with residential school narratives circulating in their families and communities—people carrying deeply embodied intergenerational effects and narratives. The settler participants in our class chose to read other materials; not familiar with residential schooling, perhaps, it appeared they thought this book was not for them. They embodied other literacies, other stories—official grand narratives that disappeared Indigenous people—made them historic. And so, we remained apart: Indigenous peoples carrying a fuller picture of Canada, and settlers re-inscribing grand narratives while remaining oblivious to, and apparently uninterested in, other people's truths.

I remember being stunned. My insides came crashing down, an effect of running into my own *brick wall*. My quickly crumbling interior construction created a massive epistemological shudder (MacNaughton, 2005), perhaps an epistemic earthquake as I encountered the affective manifestation of a pedagogy of choice. Sara Ahmed (2012) writes that the "research process is a process of estrangement which creates an orientation in which some things come into view that had been previously obscured" (p. 10). In this case, my pedagogic intentions revealed the deep cultural, linguistic, and racist chasm existing between the epistemologies of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people—the absent truths of Indigenous stories and experiences, and the half-truths of deeply embodied Eurocentric schooling.

Encountering my teaching settler treaty self: Truth-telling and Indigenous storying. Now 22 years later in my 27th year of teaching and learning at UNB post Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and currently within the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and movments such as Idle No More (see www.idlenomore.ca), most people coming into university classes in the Faculty of Education are very aware of residential schooling. Still, each year there are one or two people who don't know and are surprised, angered, shamed, outraged, and galvanized into action when they learn of what happened to innocent children, and to Canada, as a consequence of deliberate government policy to make Indigenous culture, language, and actual bodies disappear. In my childhood and too long into my adulthood, as I have written about elsewhere (Whitty, 2017), Indigenous people, languages and cultures were disappeared for me (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). I was/am one of many settlers who lived and learned what Daniel Francis referred to as the "image of the Indian, the "Imaginary Indian" (1992, p. 5), the one invented by Christopher Columbus upon his arrival to the Americas where he collectively named the

diverse First Peoples living here as one. My family who settled on traditional unceded Mi'kmaq land in northern New Brunswick, over 200 years ago, have incurred immense one-sided benefits as Treaty people (2007). And I am just beginning to learn what it means to be a Treaty person (Johnson, 2007) on these unceded Wolustoqey territory where I make my home.

Rachel Bryant (2017) in *The Homing Place: Indigenous and Settler Literacy Legacies of the Atlantic* powerfully explains how "colonized and Indigenous environments occupy the same given geographical coordinates even while existing in distinct epistemological worlds." In her work, she calls for settlers like herself, and many of us, to listen to stories that Indigenous peoples have been telling for centuries. She writes: "As a nation, we need fundamental change in all levels of Canadian society and culture because Indigenous peoples, histories and modes of thought have never been just another thing we could absorb or assimilate into our fort" (p. 185). In bringing this conversational thread to a close, I encourage each of us to continue to unsettle and transform y/our embodied storied selves. Animate y/our everyday lives and literacies: read, read, read; view, view, view; listen, listen, listen; talk, talk, talk, and bring the continuing power of Indigenous storying to y/our lives. Find stories by Richard Wagemese, Kathleen Vermette (2017), Julie Flett (2017), David Robertson, Leanne Betasamoke Simpson (2017)—to name just a few—and invite them into y/our everyday lives, teaching, research, citations, service, families and friends as one way to continue to unsettle y/ourselves. Welcoming these stories is one way to take up the calls to action articulated in the Truth and Reconciliation Report, to continuously crack open Knockwood's code of silence, and to listen to and learn many truths. And maybe you would like to try out *Raven Reads*—an idea enacted by Nicole McLaren making reading her way, and I possibly y/ours, to truth and reconciliation (https://ravenreads.org). You can listen to her just here on *Unreserved* hosted by Rosanna Deerchild - https://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/unreserved/segment/14948640

Addressing Issues of Cyberviolence in the Lives of Young Women and Girls Through Verbatim Participatory Video Dramas

Matt

In 2014, Status of Women Canada (SWC) initiated a nationwide proposal-based funding program entitled Cyber and Sexual Violence: Helping Communities Respond. The program invited regional stakeholders to submit applications for research projects that explore the prevalence of, and ways to address, cyberviolence in the lives of young women across Canada. In 2016, I was invited to be a part of the dissemination phase of one of these projects in New Brunswick. The knowledge-building phase of the research comprised a province-wide series of interviews and focus groups with young identifying women. I was to take the information gathered from the earlier phase of the research and work with a different group of young women. These new participants were invited to produce a participatory video drama, that draws on a verbatim cinema approach, based on themes in the earlier research. Our intention was to mobilize the voices of young women from earlier phases of the research for other youth and to use an arts-based approach to accent youth agency and address institutionalized paternalism. As identified in earlier phases of the study, young women found that paternalistic approaches informed and limited responses to cyberviolence in schools and communities. Although these two goals guide our work,

our team of young New Brunswick filmmakers have run up against discursive *brick walls* that place limitations around the project.

For this provocation, I draw attention to how paternalistic discourses have influenced the way audiences understand our work. I question whether our approach, chosen to embolden youth agency, has helped us move beyond paternalistic institutional discourses. I ask whether our approach has encouraged audiences to engage with young women's voices, or whether paternalistic discourses continue to cause audiences to overlook young people's political expressions. Below I outline the participatory video drama and verbatim cinema methods the young women and I adopt for the dissemination phase of the research. To provide more richness and depth to this discussion, I also include a short behind-the-scenes documentary that accents some of the young women filmmakers' perspectives on the project and their goals. Then I elaborate on some discursive tensions we have been experiencing when presenting the work. I conclude with a few questions to provoke reflection. I do this so we might encourage a more meaningful engagement with the participatory visual works in the project, and the young women's voices it helps express. I begin, however, by providing more context and elaboration about the New Brunswick iteration of the cyberviolence project.

In 2014 the Muriel McQueen Centre for Family Violence Research, the New Brunswick Social Workers Association, and the New Brunswick Office of the Child and Youth Advocate proposed a project that fit within the mandate of the national SWC program titled "Project to Prevent and Eliminate Cyberviolence against Young Women and Girls in New Brunswick."As described in one report (Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre, 2017a), their work seeks to contribute to knowledge and policy change at government, policy, educational, and institutional levels. Through interviews, surveys, and focus groups across the province, the research team worked with young identifying women between the ages of 16 and 19. Interviews with the young women focused on institutional responses to cyberviolence and the lived experiences of cyberviolence in New Brunswick. Emerging themes in the research included gendered experiences of cyberviolence, the complicit role of social media platforms that encourage anonymous publication, and the implications of permanency in relation to social media (Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre, 2017b).

The participants also raised an important criticism that troubled the research partners: most approaches to dealing with cyberviolence adopted by schools, service-providers, public institutions, the media, lawmakers, and researchers are limiting, alienating, and marginalizing for young women. Some participants suggested that a generational power dynamic means that adults, professionals, and law enforcement agencies always seem to have ownership over the narrative of, and initiatives intended to address, cyberviolence (Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre, 2017b). When cyberviolence is addressed in their schools or in the media, some saw the topic located in talk that is blaming, sexist, or discussed in a restrictive or punitive way for youth. These power dynamics became clear in comments made by one young woman when she discussed how schools deal with cases of sexual exploitation (e.g., when intimate partner photos or 'sexts' are shared or transmitted over social media). As she put it:

> When the school hears about nudes going around they freak out. But what you don't realize is the girl is probably freaking out enough about the fact that her nudes are going around without a lecture on how it's child porn (Participant Interview).

Her comment shows that young women are not only navigating sexual violence but also deal with victim-blaming discourses and institutional paternalism when schools try to address sexual exploitation. The comment also highlights how young women are often disregarded in efforts to shape knowledge and/or address issues of cyberviolence. The young woman's criticism illustrates Sara Ahmed's (2012) notions of institutional *brick walls*. Here, a *brick wall* limits young people's involvement in addressing an issue that impacts their lives. This wall is generational, gendered, and connected to dominant paternalistic discourse about youth and the need for their protection. Whereas the notion of a responsibility for adults to protect youth from harm might be something difficult to question, the initial work with young women in New Brunswick revealed how uncritical paternalistic approaches can limit discussions, be alienating, and can further marginalize young women who may already deal with serious issues.

For the New Brunswick research partners, the prevalence of paternalistic approaches to dealing with cyberviolence accented a problem in their project's design. The team questioned whether young women had been genuinely represented in their research efforts to explore and address cyberviolence at an institutional level. This stirred them to reflect on how their knowledge- building pursuits might be influenced by paternalism, or how their recommendations might also contribute to marginalizing power relations for youth and young women. Their reflections encouraged them to pursue more participatory ways to disseminate research findings to and with youth. The partners then recognized the need for young people to be involved, as key stakeholders and as meaning-makers, in the conversation about the research going forward.

In 2016, the research team invited me to be a part of the dissemination phase of the project. I proposed sharing research findings through participatory visual methods in a collaborative media project with a new group of young women from the province. We pursued a participatory narrative filmmaking distribution strategy that involves young women writing, directing, and producing a fictional film that represents, sometimes in a verbatim fashion, elements of the broader research data. The project draws inspiration from a combination of participatory video drama (Brickell, 2015; Milne, Mitchell, & de Lange, 2012; Mitchell, 2011; Shaw, 2016; Walsh, 2016) and verbatim theatre/cinema (Mienczakowski, 1995; Shah & Greer, 2017; Uzun, 2017). Participatory filmmaking methods involve grassroots groups or community members in knowledge-building and sharing activities through collaborative media projects. Whereas a good deal of participatory video projects find inspiration in documentary filmmaking methods, participatory video dramas as Waite and Conn (2011) explain, signifies participatory filmmaking that incorporates fictionalized narratives as part of the story-telling. The research team and I invited the new group of young women who to produce a narrative film that interprets, responds, and reflects on the voices of young women from the earlier components of the research. This extension of participatory video drama methods is inspired by notions of verbatim theatre/cinema. Verbatim approaches involve dramatized recreations of research texts (Abdullah & Khalaf, 2016). For Mitchell, de Lange, and Moletsane (2017), participatory visual methods and filmmaking can provide unique

possibilities for community-based meaning-making that can encourage more fair societal practices and decisions/policy-making at an institutional level. However, as the young filmmakers and I now understand, the same paternalistic institutional discourses identified by the young women in the earlier phases of the study impact how audiences respond to our verbatim participatory video narrative approach, as will be developed more below.

In January 2017, after some combined recruitment efforts with a teacher in a local secondary school, eight young identifying women volunteered to be a part of the participatory verbatim filmmaking project. Since that time, the group has been engaging and interacting with texts from the earlier parts of the research project. Through their encounters with each other, and with these texts, they are working towards a cinematic narrative that will act as an accessible vehicle to mobilize the research findings and engage with people who might not have opportunities to interact with traditional academic research. Through a verbatim approach, the group is adding another representational layer to the study (i.e. actors' portrayals, and narrative fictionalized representation of the research findings). They have used specific quotes from interviews of earlier phases of the research as lines of dialogue and narration in their larger fictional narrative. Once complete, the work will be accessible to other youth—in school contexts, teacher education, teacher professional development, academic conferences, regional film festivals, and film festivals designed for youth. The New Brunswick research partners also intend to integrate the film into a toolkit for educators and service providers (Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre, 2017b). Participation within the film group is on a volunteer basis, and participant numbers since January 2017 have varied based on school and life circumstances. In March 2018, with the help of the New Brunswick film community and the New Brunswick filmmakers' co-op, the young filmmakers completed the principal photography for their short film, *Social Proof*. Group meetings are ongoing and three of the filmmakers are editing the film.

In this short behind-the-scenes documentary below, the young filmmakers summarize how they have been engaging with research texts and making new meaning through their collaborations. As raised in the documentary, some young women saw their involvement as a way to "blow this research up."

Video Link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikOt2w1cshQ&feature=youtu.be

Over the last few months, the young filmmakers have had a few opportunities to share the documentary and their emerging work with community partners and the public. In debriefing sessions after these discussions, the young women have expressed that powerful paternalistic discourses are still influencing how adults, educators, and service providers are responding to discussions about cyberviolence, youth, and their work. For example, after presenting the project at a public meeting with adults who work in crime prevention, education, and other initiatives to address cyberviolence, one of the young filmmakers expressed how the audience might have only engaged with their voices in hallow, inconsequential, and almost patronizing ways. She explained how the audience only engaged with her, and the other filmmakers, at a superficial and congratulatory level. Within minutes of their presentation, which focused on the need for supporting youth agency in addressing cyberviolence, discussions in the room reverted to ideas influenced by paternalistic discourses. Our most pressing concern with these responses to the project is they leave discursive *brick walls* of institutionalized paternalism intact. I am interested

in addressing these discourses in the moment, when they surface around the dissemination film project.

Recently, three of the young filmmakers and I presented the project to a group of academics at the University of New Brunswick in a Work in Progress speaker series in the Faculty of Education. As a response to the experience the young women have had when presenting this work, and in an effort to find solutions, we fashioned a panel presentation and facilitated a brainstorming session. We tried to engage the audience in discussions about the problematic and dismissive elements of paternalistic discourses. We also brainstormed several ideas about how we might resist, challenge, and subvert these discourses when they come up. We considered how the film that the young filmmakers produce, and texts around that film, might also contribute to disrupting those discourses. The conversations were productive, and, most likely because we addressed the paternalistic discourses head-on, responses from the audiences differed from before.

Within this project, we will continue to negotiate how we frame discussions about the film project. We will also continue to think about how we might encourage audiences to reflect on the themes and political messages the filmmakers present in the film. I intend to keep the following questions at the forefront of my thinking when collaborating with the filmmakers and the research partners: How might we, as researchers and collaborators involved in the project, find some productive ways to resist or disrupt paternalistic discourses when they circulate around these projects? What inadvertent ways might we be inviting, inducing, or validating paternalistic discourses? And, how can we renegotiate our approaches so that paternalistic discourses aren't enlivened?

In Closing—For Now

In coming together and sharing our conversational space with you, we hope to have provided mutual inspiration, support, and stories that resonate with ethical responsibilities you may be encountering as a learner and an educator. Given the increasing recognition to act on the epistemic divide between Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and those embedded and embodied with/in cognitive imperialism—as Rachael, Katelyn and Pam have expressed—alongside the constant need to subvert paternalistic discourses in our everyday conversations—as Matt's work has shown—we would like to close the paper with questions from Daniel Heath Justice, a Colorado-born Canadian citizen of the Cherokee Nation. In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2017), Justice speaks to the "the many kinds of stories Indigenous peoples tell, and the stories told about them, stories that can "strengthen, wound or utterly erase our sense of humanity and connections" (p. xvii). He suggests four questions to be considered as processes to guide Indigenous peoples to speak to, understand, and share their diversities. These questions can also point to ethical ways of being for all humans as we engage with each other in processes of teaching, learning and research. Justice suggests:

> How do we learn to be human?
> How do we behave as good relatives?
> How do become good ancestors?
> How do we learn to live together? (2017, p. 28)

To continue the conversation, off the page, you may also wish to listen to an interview with Daniel Heath Justice and Rosanna Deerchild on CBC's *Unreserved*. Thank you for your attentiveness.http://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/how-indigenous-authors-are-claiming-space-in-the-canlit-scene-1.4573996/our-literatures-matter-because-we-do-says-indigenous-author-daniel-heath-justice-1.4577944

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Embodied Cognition: Laying the Foundation for Early Language and Literacy Learning

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Abstract

For children, hands are the critical conduit for learning the world and constructing mental models of its size and shape. Such embodied cognition (EC) is mediated through language in the social environment. In this paper we review the literature and develop the conceptual underpinnings for a framework for play-based pedagogy that integrates sensorimotor, cognitive, and linguistic systems that lay the foundations for early literacy experiences expected in the kindergarten and Grade 1 year. We provide suggestions for incorporating games and tasks in a play-based program that will promote EC.

Keywords

embodied cognition; play-based pedagogy; early literacy

Introduction

Mounting research evidence suggests today's youngsters arrive at school insufficiently prepared for the early and more formal demands of their first educational experiences. The *Early Development Instrument* (EDI) is a pan-Canadian initiative that measures children's ability to meet age-appropriate developmental expectations in five general domains: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge (Janus & Offord, 2007; Janus & Reid-Westoby, 2016; Offord & Janus, 2000). Data indicate 27% of Canada's five-year-olds are vulnerable on at least one of the five domains assessed. The detrimental, distal impact of these indicators on children's early literacy development, especially written literacy, at the end of Grade 2 is only beginning to be understood—largely through research evolving from the neurosciences (Dinehart & Manfra, 2013; James & Atwood, 2009).

Achievement data in early literacy learning (Alberta Education, 2014; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, 2007) indicate two concerning trends: overall, general slippage in early literacy development outcomes and, secondly, a persistent and growing achievement gap over time in the shift to academic literacy development among linguistically vulnerable populations of children including those raised in poverty or of language minority background. Emergent research findings suggest the etiological underpinnings to these trends may be found in children's control over fine motor skills and their influence on language learning as these are the major drivers of literacy development over time (Suggate & Stoeger, 2014).

The catalyst for our interest in this topic relates to an early literacy action research project completed during 2012-2016 with gifted learners in Grade 2 (Roessingh & Bence, 2017). Our findings pointed to the need for upstream interventions, as early as the kindergarten year, to bolster neuromotor control and to reset the trajectory for the exigencies of early literacy production including drawing, printing, and spelling.

The goal of this article is to advance a conceptual framework that will inform the design of purposeful play-based pedagogy in kindergarten and to provide suggestions for how the model might be implemented in the context of a play-based program. We draw on the three research domains of sensorimotor, cognitive, and linguistic development. These domains interact within the over-arching dimension of embodied cognition as they are facilitating the foundational mind-body-brain connections made possible by creating the neurocircuitry or neuro-pathways that underpin literacy.

We begin by providing further background information on early childhood and literacy development to set the context for the reader, and we define the construct of play. We elaborate on the role of embodied cognition and its crucial role in later literacy learning. We then review the relevant research from the three domains identified above working toward our conceptual framework for play-based pedagogy. We provide suggestions for activities and tasks that might be embedded in an early childhood kindergarten program that will promote the foundational concepts and skills for early literacy to come in the immediate years ahead.

Inside the "Black Box": Why Are Our Young Children Unprepared for Literacy Learning?

Speculation as to the root causes of children's lack of readiness for kindergarten across socio-economic status backgrounds are varied and multi-faceted. Increased exposure to digital devices and screen time (Ravichandran, France de Bravo, & Beauport, 2018); the complexity and changing nature of the family structure; the stresses of home and workplace demands; the changing demographic landscape across North America reflecting rapidly increasing linguistic and cultural diversity; diminished opportunities for exploratory physical play with clay, blocks, puzzles, crayons, scissors and paper, (Long, Bergeron, Leicht Doyle, & Gordon, 2006; Westervelt, 2015); and, crucially, insufficient outdoor play may all have detrimental consequences for children's linguistic, social, and physical development (Williams et al., 2008).

Indeed, many scholars of play research report the paucity of *any* kind of play in the kindergarten setting. Wilson, a neurologist recognized for his seminal works in explaining the phylogenic origins and evolutionary development of the hand (1998) and its connection to young children's perceptual, motor, and cognitive growth, foresaw and forewarned the negative consequences of the physically and sensory impoverished environments in which many children are raised (1999). Wilson cautioned against the increasing preoccupation with technology and digital devices among young children, noting this would diminish time allocated to physical activity and exploration. He emphasized the crucial need for children to learn the world through their hands, as the hands are the primary channel through which the brain tunes itself to the world in which we live, work, and play. Children cannot bypass or shortcut this step in abstracting concept information relevant to early literacy learning by gazing passively at visually mediated simulations on a screen. Time

for the work of childhood is a necessity in Wilson's view, not a luxury, and it cannot be rushed.

Nevertheless, there appears to be pressure to introduce a more academic curriculum at ever earlier stages of children's involvement with the school system where kindergarten is "the new Grade 1" (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). A growing body of research, however, indicates that an early overemphasis on decontextualized literacy readiness skills, such as phonics instruction, provides no longitudinal advantage in literacy achievement (Suggate, Shaughency, & Reese, 2013). Children whose entry into formal schooling is delayed, such as those in Finland (Walker, 2015) who are afforded learning opportunities in the interim through an array of playful engagements with language, materials and physical exploration in real-world contexts, readily close the literacy gap, scoring among the top-ranking countries globally on measures of literacy and numeracy.

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in children's written literacy development, perhaps as a consequence of slipping achievement in early literacy outcomes (e.g. Alberta Education, 2014), as reflected in the reintroduction of both manuscript and cursive hand by some jurisdictions. In our own work with gifted young learners (Roessingh & Bence, 2017), we observed a concerning gap among many Grade 2 students between their exceptional measured vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension outcomes, and their ability to mobilize lexical resources in the service of making and conveying meaning through print mode. We attribute this gap to difficulties in the domain of physical/neuromotor readiness visible in the distinct belaboured look of their printing efforts (*Figure 1*). Note, for example, the inconsistency in shape and size of letter formation, and the difficulty maintaining space and alignment of print.

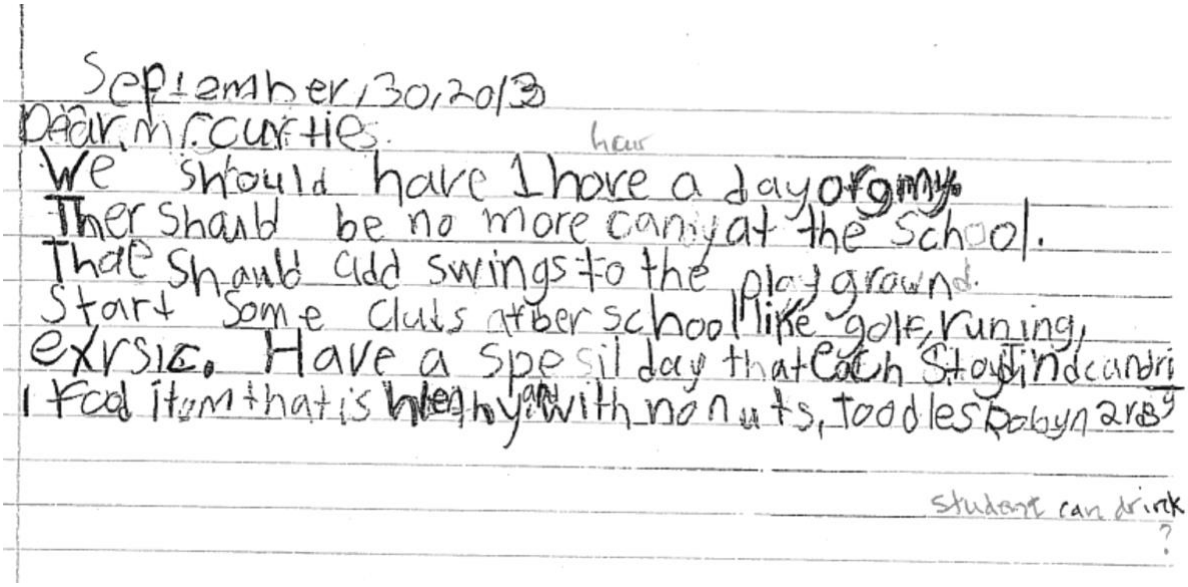
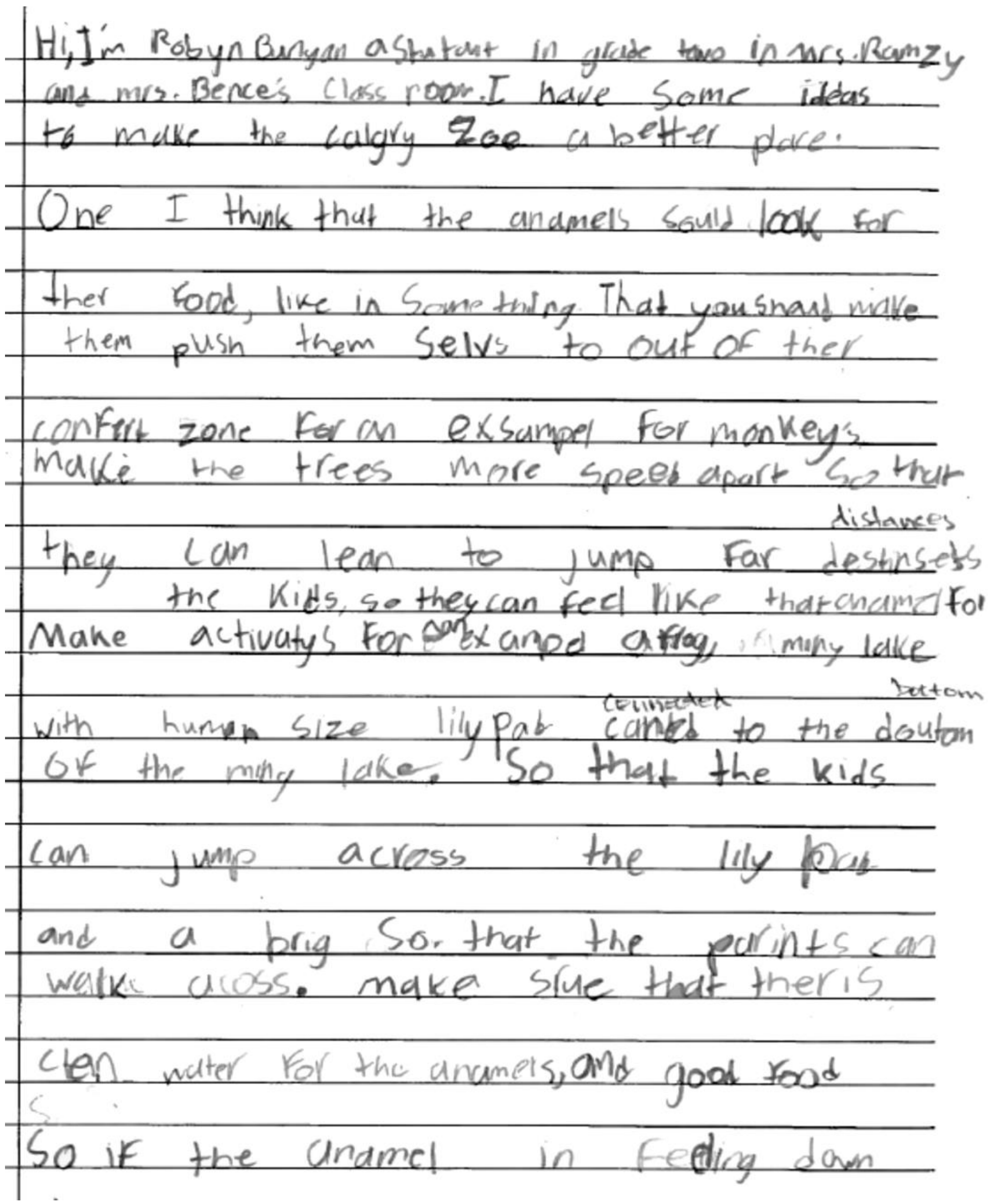


Figure 1. Belaboured Printing

While explicit, instructed support produced tangible impact on both the quality and quantity of most students' writing in Grade 2, in our view this intervention was insufficient to remediate the neuromotor demands of early literacy learning, and consequently the

overall achievement outcomes for written literacy remained well below what we anticipated for gifted young learners. *Figure 2* illustrates improvement in the student's printing efforts after participating in the *Handwriting Without Tears* (Olsen, 2003) program. The student's printing is immediately and readily legible, due to improved consistency in shape, size, and spacing. As noted previously, we identify the need for upstream interventions beginning in kindergarten to address this concern.



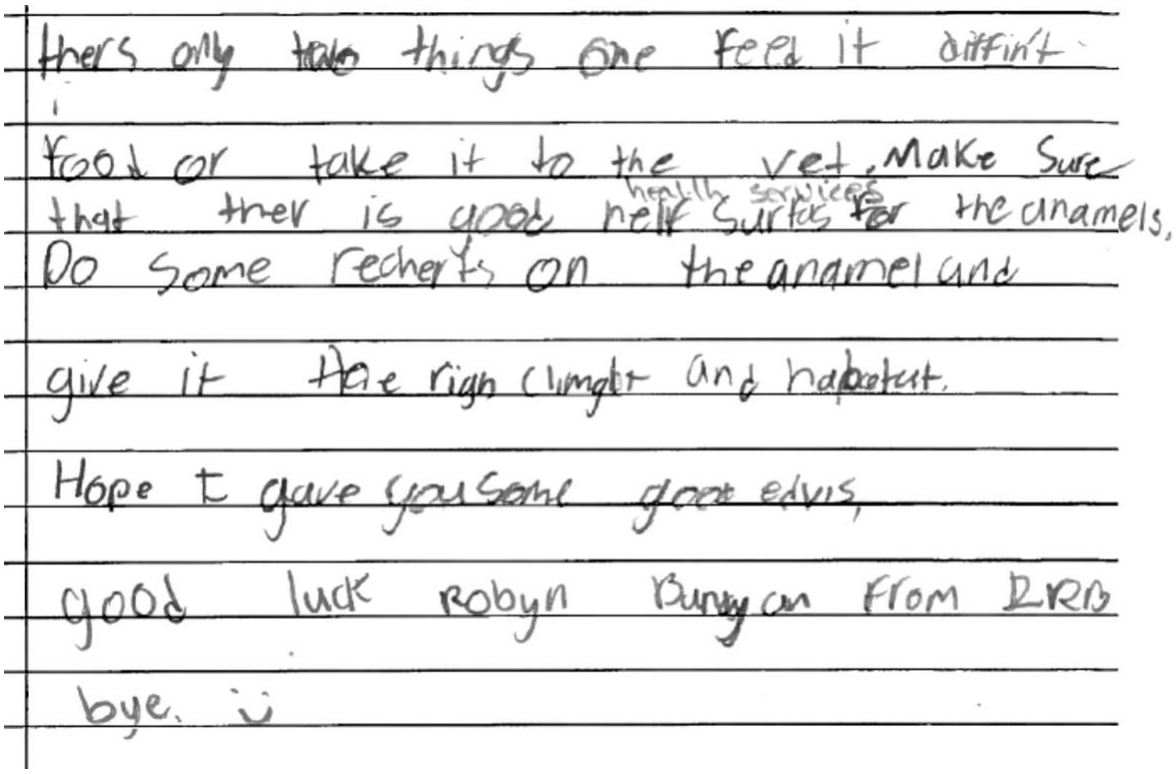


Figure 2.

Research in early literacy development is overwhelmingly focused on reading rather than writing, perhaps based on the assumption that they will unfold simultaneously, given they share analogous underlying processes and cognitive skills. Relevant research in the area of neuromotor development and the connection to literacy learning, particularly printing, is sparse. Further, a review of the literature on play-based learning is heavily focused on creative and imaginative/ pretend play, discovery and inquiry, and sociodramatic play as these have a consequence for social and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1933; Bodrova & Leong, 2015). The play-literacy interface (e.g. phonemic awareness, phonics connections) may be influenced by exposure through pretend play to telephone messages and lists, for example (Roskos & Christie, 2001, 2011). However, the crucial body-mind-brain connection required for learning to print, predicated on sensorimotor engagement and central to the construct of EC is largely overlooked in the extant literature. This is the niche we seek to occupy with our work.

Emergent Understandings from the Neurosciences: Embodied Cognition

Embodied cognition (EC) underscores the connection between sensorimotor engagement and young children's ability (and, indeed, older learners as well) to learn the world by internalizing haptic information from direct experience and manipulation of objects and materials to linguistic mapping, thus advancing their cognitive growth (Ionescu & Vasc, 2014; Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012).

EC draws on Piagetian notions of the centrality of active sensorimotor involvement in connection to cognitive development as it unfolds through an endless series of windows of opportunity, or sensitive periods, that open and close over time (Beilin & Fireman, 1999;

Ginsberg & Opper, 1969; Page, 1959). The second half of Grade 1 has been identified as the optimal window of opportunity for children to mobilize neuromotor, cognitive, and linguistic resources in the service of representing their thoughts through print mode (Roberts, Derkach-Ferguson, Siever, & Rose, 2014). This assumes, however, that children have been afforded the prerequisite opportunities, largely through play, making them "ready" for this shift to literacy. Concepts of shape, size, space, and pattern are important in making this shift (James & Atwood 2009; Rawlins, 2015). Many would argue that "play is the work" of childhood—the occupational predecessor of school (Lillard, 2013).

A related field of research endeavor, physical literacy, makes the important link between the child's awareness of body in space (proprioception) to movement and action with objects and tools, for example, and is predicated on an array of fine and gross motor skills which, in turn, have a distinct impact on the ability to identify and efficiently print letters. Rule and Stewart (2002) report that children who are given opportunities to play with real-life objects such as tweezers develop control over the fine motor skills (e.g. pincer grip) required for early print literacy development (Bergman, 2013; Greutman, 2010). Fine motor skills that aid small muscle movements such as pencil grip, pencil control, and independent finger movement have all been identified as precursors to writing skills (Keifer, 2015; Lamme, 1979). Moreover, a distal effect is observed between early control over fine motor processes and later academic success.

A growing body of research establishes the connection between fine motor skills and cognition (Piek, 2008; Wellsby & Pexman, 2014) as well as with language (Borghi, Flumini, Cimatti, Marocco, & Scorolli, 2011). In an elegantly designed study, Suggate and Stoeger (2014) investigated the links between vocabulary items with strong body object interaction (BOI), vocabulary items for general knowledge on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, and four tasks measuring fine motor (FM) dexterity and handedness among five-year-old children. BOI items are words for which action or tactile involvement leads directly to meaning making, such as the word "belt." They report correlations between FM and knowledge of vocabulary items with BOI as well as with general vocabulary knowledge.

A related domain of research, embodied communication, makes the link between using gestures from an early stage in infancy to their efforts to communicate; infants gesture to make meaning before the capacity to do so solely through language is fully realized. The early use of gestures is a harbinger of later vocabulary production. Further, the use of gestures not only promotes cognition (Dewar, 2017), it aids retrieval and memory of vocabulary over time (Cook, Yip, & Goldin-Meadow, 2010; Demire & Goldin-Meadow, 2016). These researchers underscore the idea that while gestures and embodied communication in early life support language development, play increasingly relies on language skills as do almost all endeavors in life. EC remains important throughout life whether in the performing arts; sports; crafts and hobbies such as knitting; daily life skills such as driving a car; or in the educational tasks of schooling where demonstrations, simulations and the like are an important step to automatizing skills and linguistic information concomitantly.

Helen Keller (1880 – 1968) left a rich legacy of insights related to how language, BOI, gesture, and sign language interacted to construct meaning in her mind, beginning with that moment at the water fountain where her teacher, Annie Sullivan, at last broke through the silence and darkness of her young pupil's life:

> As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten–-a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! (Keller, 1903).

Just as our first upright-walking hominid ancestors staked everything on the use of their hands millions of years ago—picking and grabbing; launching, throwing and catching; caressing and stroking; and using tools as a prosthesis for getting things done—Annie Sullivan intuitively understood this would be the only pathway to the brain for young Helen. The moment is poignantly recorded in an Academy Award winning performance and is a reminder of the inextricable body-mind-brain connection (Coe & Penn, 1962).

Defining the Construct of "Play"

Play is a broad construct that eludes any single definition and lacks both conceptual clarity and consensus among play theorists, the research community, classroom practitioners, and parents of young children (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkiff, & Gryfe, 2008; Gilbert, Harte, & Patrick, 2011; International Play Association, 2014; National Association for the Education of Young children, 2014; Roskos & Christie, 2011). The thread that appears to unite the various foci on play-based learning includes:

- pleasure or amusement, entertainment/fun;
- simple, sheer and pure joy for children;
- play is its own reward and is self-reinforcing.

Play activities may be child (or teacher) initiated and open-ended to promote inquiry (Pyle & Danniels, 2017) and discovery through pretend/creative/imaginative play; or structured/ organized/goal oriented/purposeful, and more reflective of "real world" situations through role plays and sociodrama. Play may be engaged in as a solitary activity or in groups of all configurations and sizes.

We position various types of play by way of a matrix organized along two continua illustrated in *Figure 3*. The vertical axis represents the shift from child to adult initiated or directed play; the horizontal axis represents play environments from less to increasingly more structured settings. We utilize this matrix in conceptualizing our framework for a play-based pedagogy for kindergarteners.

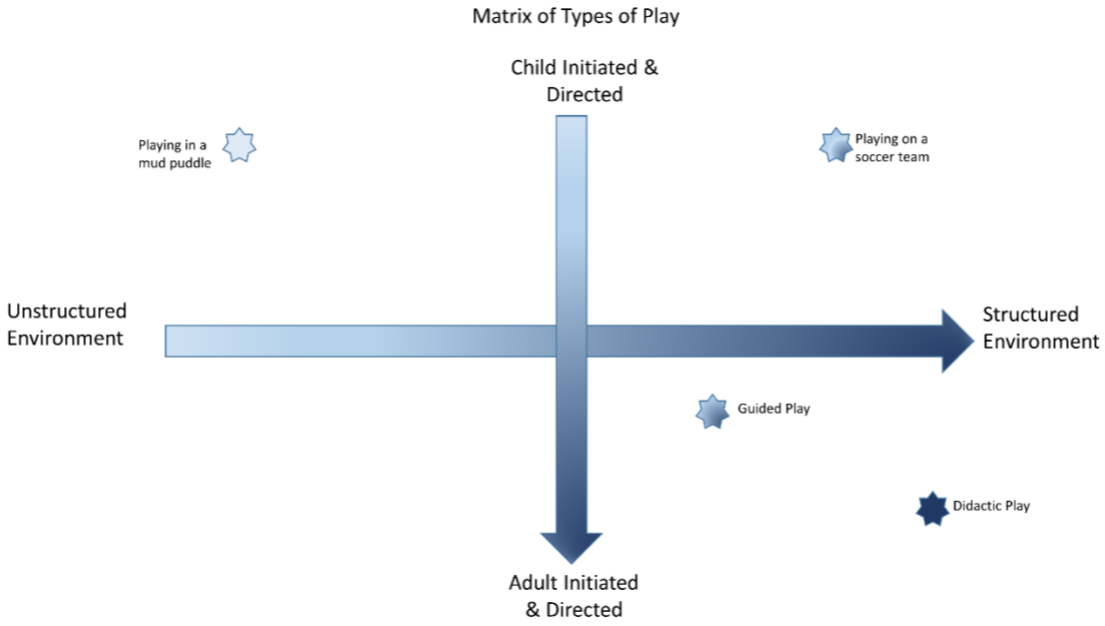


Figure 3. Matrix of play activities (Roessingh & Bence, 2017)

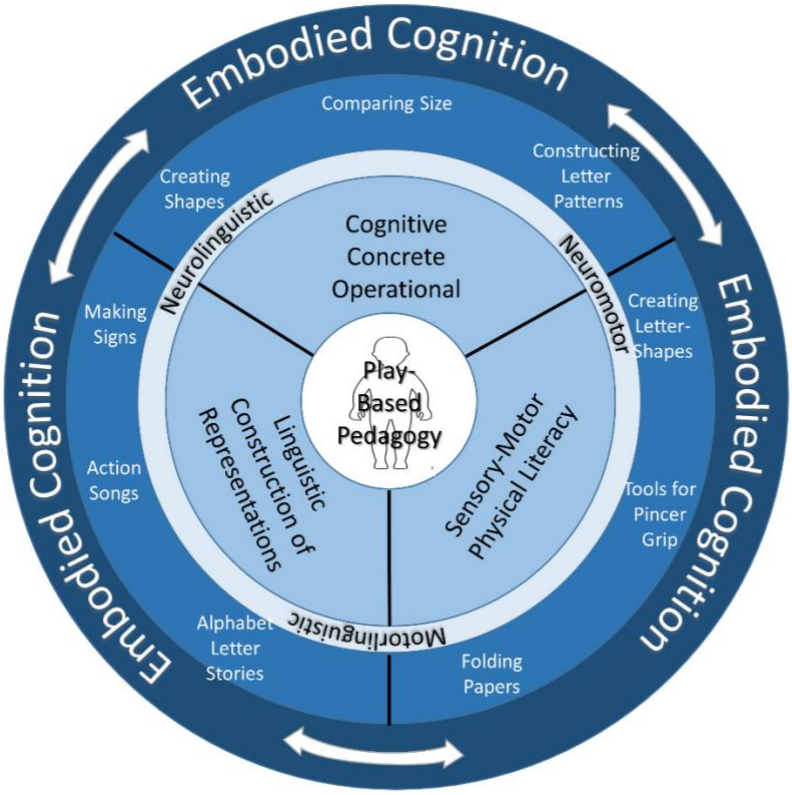


Figure 4. Conceptual Framework for Play-Based Pedagogy

We place the child at the center of our framework, interacting with our designed, purposeful play tasks and activities with real objects and materials in real time, thus making the crucial connections between cognition, sensorimotor and language development, and embodied cognition. The framework is sufficiently flexible to guide the design of a play-based program for diverse learner profiles depending on individual student needs and the degree of explicitness called for. Recall *Figure 3*, where we advised a position in the quadrant that is more structured and teacher initiated/directed. There are instances in our program design where teacher direction will be important, for example, in teaching children the correct way to develop a pincer grip (Greutman, 2010). Follow-up tasks and activities will be more open and flexible to child choice and child-directed play.

Gifted children, for example, are often characterized by an asynchronous pattern of development, with the cognitive and language domains well in advance of the neuromotor/physical domain. Thus, in the design of our play-based program, it will be crucial to attend to the distinct gap between language and conceptualizations about the real world, and the neuromotor requirements of engaging with and manipulating tools and equipment that are part and parcel of reinforcing the body-mind-brain nexus.

English language learners, or, children who speak a language other than English at home, are a growing demographic in school populations. While many of these children have distinct strengths in the neuromotor domain (Roessingh, 2017), as well as in phonemic awareness and phonics understandings, many of them need structured support in vocabulary development from an early age. And there are sure to be other children with various learning needs represented by way of the three domains or dimensions included in *Figure 3* above.

By placing the child at the center of the play-based framework, we encourage early childhood practitioners to glean insights into individual learning needs through an array of play-based "tasks" that might reveal these needs. Increasingly, it would seem that a balanced approach that promotes play founded on all three dimensions will be needed. In the section that follows we suggest activities, tasks, and the use of materials that will support such a program.

Implementing the Framework in the Context of a Play-Based Program

Inspired by Montessori's ideas about the prepared environment and the role of materials (Montessori, 1914), as much as possible we intend our materials to consist of simple, everyday household objects and materials (i.e. realia) that are inexpensive to purchase and put together for our young students (Rule & Stewart, 2002). Buttons and beads (loose parts), nuts and bolts (things that fit together), blocks, clay, pick up sticks/chopsticks, clothes pegs, string; paper, scissors, and glue sticks; pencils, crayons, markers and paper; tweezers, tongs and other utensils, and various containers comprise our materials tool kit.

We want to encourage children to imagine everyday objects readily available in most homes as objects for discovery, learning, creative, imaginative, and social play. This is the essence of the emerging maker culture (Dougherty, n.d.). Further, children might be involved firsthand in making materials. A current kids' craze is making and playing with slime, easily made with just a few ingredients that affords finger workouts as kids knead, stretch, role, and shape their slime or simply play with it as a relaxation activity by making it a stress ball.

Below is a series of suggestions for games and tasks from the three dimensions highlighted in the framework presented in *Figure 4*. While teachers and parents are likely to be familiar with these already, the key to including them here is the theoretical underpinnings to the broader construct of embodied cognition that may not be apparent and understood. We underscore this point in our concluding comments and thoughts.

1. **Shared storybook reading**. Books such as *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1971) promote "languaging" around directional words, and imagining and drawing objects in space. *Henry's Map* (Elliott, 2013) and *Lucy in the city: A story about developing spatial thinking skills* (Dillemuth, 2015) bridge to learning activities that promote spatial reasoning through finger tracing and drawing maps. A new release, *Carson Crosses Canada* (Bailey & Reich, 2017) also encourages skills related to mapping. These are important precursors to both literacy and numeracy concepts. In addition, children learn geography concepts through such storybooks.

2. **Loose parts play**. Sorting and categorizing small objects such as buttons and beads encourages fine motor development and the connection to mental concepts of shape, size, space, and patterns. These concepts are foundational for literacy learning (i.e. alphabet recognition, printing, and spelling). Children need an enormous amount of exposure, direct experiences, and time with an array of attribute pieces to internalize these concepts. A tray of "loose parts" (for each child) allows children to experiment and push the boundaries by creating more complex patterns, from early work on sorting and categorizing, which should be relatively easy for them.

3. **Playing with plasticine**. Kneading, molding, and manipulating plasticine gives little fingers a great workout! Children might challenge themselves to shape the ball of plasticine so that it floats in water. They delight in trying various shapes, with those "ahead of the curve" figuring out that weight and shape both play a role in whether the object will float. At age five, an important concept relates to conservation of mass and object permanency.

4. **Arts and crafts projects**. Paper folding (origami), stringing, beading, cutting, and finger painting promote fine motor skills, develop physical literacy, and reinforce the neural pathways needed for later printing and written communication.

5. **Music, songs, and nursery rhymes**. These activities expose children to the structure, pattern, and movement that underlies literacy concepts. These activities promote phonemic awareness in a naturally engaging way, with the additional benefit of introducing cultural capital for a growing demographic of young learners who are unlikely to be exposed to this information at home. Adding finger plays, gestures, and dance to these activities enhances sensorimotor (large and fine) skills, proprioception and the link to cognition.

6. **Cooperative play**. Sociodramatic play centers such as post office, grocery store, or restaurants, introduce and allow for the practice of the "scripts" for daily life, and the opportunity to role-play them. Realia for the post office can include paper, envelops, writing tools, and stamps. Tasks can involve recognizing addresses and directions, and sorting by letters or numbers.

7. **Outdoor physical and exploratory play**. Ball handling (throwing/ catching/ kicking), exploring playground equipment (hanging, climbing), and playing simple team games promote physical literacy. Paired with the use of equipment such as rackets, bats, and sticks, these games promote physical literacy, and, in particular, body awareness in space. Games and friendly competition further foster the development of social skills through the give and take of team play.

Our thoughts for planning guided play and its place in the kindergarten program represents only a portion of how children will spend their time. The overall program will benefit from a certain amount of free play (child-initiated and unstructured), imaginative and creative play, and the judicious use of technology.

Conclusion

On the face of it, parents and teachers have always understood the importance of play and afforded opportunities through play for the physical, cognitive and linguistic, social and emotional growth of children. Marzollo and Lloyd's (1972) book, *Learning Through Play*, is as relevant today as it was 45 years ago. It is as if we are rediscovering what we have long known about ourselves: humankind is by nature a tinkerer, an explorer, an adventurer, a creator, a thinker, a maker, and a do-it-your-self-er driven by an insatiable innate sense of curiosity, wonder, physical and mental challenge, and the need to know. The contemporary maker movement is a return to creating, rather than consuming, across a wide range of domains in a social, participatory environment that values physical exploration and effort.

Sixty years ago, city kids in Alberta played endlessly outdoors in mixed groups whether in loosely, spontaneously organized teams or individually on the neighborhood playground on the ubiquitous slides, swings, monkey bars, and teeter-totters. In late fall, the boards for an ice rink would appear through volunteer community effort and winter months drifted into spring through hour upon hour of outdoor play on the ice. Some communities even had night lights and intermittent music playing over a loudspeaker to encourage free-skating into the evening. Family time in the evenings often involved playing card games, board games, reading and constructing with blocks, and playing with simple implements such as pick-up sticks. Farm kids could spend countless hours taking things apart and putting them back together, "fixing" things, refurbishing an old car, in short, satisfying the human need for physical interaction with the material world in a quest to know, to be creative, and to be productive.

Handcrafts such as knitting, and simple hobbies such as keeping a penny or rock collection soaked up many hours while promoting fine motor skills, and learning about the objects in the collections. A *Dinky Toy* collection allowed for hours of imaginative play, and tasks such as sorting the tiny vehicles into trucks, cars, emergency transport, farm, and construction equipment. All of this was part of the intuitive rhythm of family life and

childhood no one really questioned. It is as if time is turning back upon itself with the re-emergence of interest in making jewelry, clothing, furniture, wine, food of all kinds, perfumes, bath products, and knowledge sharing through the affordances of social media.

The value and importance of physical exploratory play, sensorimotor engagement and processing, and early language, literacy and numeracy development and their connection to embodied cognition is only beginning to emerge as a focus of research endeavor. Underpinning embodied cognition is the importance of fine motor development as this affords the hands (and the child the sense of agency) direct contact and the ability to handle and manipulate objects and tools that thus build the neurocircuitry to lay the body-mind-brain pathways and connections for both early (and later) language, literacy, and numeracy learning (Dinehart & Manfra, 2013). The evolving research is being undertaken across a broad range of disciplines, mostly outside of the domain of education and is often not readily accessible to the classroom practitioner. Educational researchers must take and make what they can in transforming and applying the findings to classroom practices that teachers can adopt and adapt in building balanced play-based programs that will enhance children's early readiness in kindergarten for the upcoming demands of more formal literacy learning (Marcon, 2012).

It will be important, too, to make the connection to parents to inform them of their role in promoting the types of early childhood experiences we have outlined throughout this article. Shared storybook reading, for example, needs to begin in the earliest months of life; activities that help a toddler to gain control over finger movement begin in the first year of life. Waiting to intervene and reset the developmental trajectory upon entry into kindergarten at age five means losing precious, opportune moments to invite children to the "just right" play they need. As community engaged scholars, we also need to connect to the media. Recent newspaper articles on the benefits of play allude to the social, psychological, and creative aspects of play, and the importance of fresh air and interaction with other children on the playground (Fortney, 2017; Nieman, 2017). The importance of EC and the key role of developing fine motor skills is too frequently overlooked.

Various data indicate that our children are not as prepared as they need to be for their formal encounters with literacy learning that may have far-reaching consequences in their longitudinal academic outcomes that can be avoided with timely, appropriate interventions. In our view, it is the failure to understand the underpinnings of the importance of play that is the culprit.

Our pitch is simply for an informed understanding of the value of purposeful, guided play that positions our youngest learners to be better prepared for the literacy tasks that depend on cognitive, linguistic, and neuromotor development. The framework we advance is intended to be flexible in encouraging early childhood teachers to be more intentional in planning for play in the increasingly diverse contexts of the contemporary classroom.

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Open-Ended Apps in Kindergarten: Identity Exploration Through Digital Role-Play

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Abstract

This 2-year research study followed 14 kindergarten classrooms in Ontario as they used open-ended tablet applications to support literacy learning. Through multimodal slideshows the children explored identities such as reporter, teacher, and architect during self-initiated role-play. The slideshows they created demonstrated multimodal productions that were longer, more complex, and more varied than their literacy production with traditional literacy tools and practices. Rather than supplanting traditional kindergarten meaning-making practices such as role-play, children folded digital affordances into their play in ways that expanded the range of identities they explored and the tools and practices with which they explored them.

Introduction

Mobile digital technologies have become "everyday objects" in the lives of many young children in Canada, both inside and outside of formal learning environments. There is a growing body of research into the various types and uses of digital technology (DT) for young children. Several recent studies describe how mobile DT, such as smartphones and tablets, are being used to support young children's literacy learning at home and school, and to create a school to home link (Blagogevic, Brumer, Chevalier, O'Clair, & Thomas, 2012; Neumann, 2016; Radesky, Schimacker, & Zuckerman, 2015; Wong, 2015). While some studies have examined the use of eBooks, games, digital drawing pens (Lee, Wu, & Chen, 2017), augmented reality toys (Yilmaz, 2016) and learn-to-read apps, studies that report on the use of open-ended iPad apps in school environments are emerging (e.g., Fleer, 2014; Herro, 2015). In fact, several studies (e.g., Falloon & Khoo, 2014; Harwood, 2017; Roswell & Harwood, 2015) illustrate the dynamism with which DT is being explored in early learning classrooms as a way to redefine literacy acquisition, expression, development, and consolidation.

However, in many early learning contexts such as pre-schools and kindergartens, DT may be largely absent due to the concern of early years educators that it may hinder young children's learning through play. There are many voices urging caution when using DT with young children, while simultaneously championing the potential of DT for children's learning. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) warns that, "The appeal of technology can lead to inappropriate uses in early childhood settings" (NAEYC, 2012, p. 4). However, it also asserts that, "When used appropriately, technology and media can enhance children's cognitive and social abilities" (NAEYC, 2012, p. 7). Paediatricians Radesky, Schumacher, and Zuckerman (2015) express the concern that time spent on digital mobile devices, such as tablets, can displace "human interactions and other enriching activities" (p. 3) in the lives of young children. They also note that interactive media "have great potential to promote learning through joint engagement between caregivers and children" (p. 4). Given these seemingly contradictory messages, it is not surprising that educators may be cautious about integrating DT into their programs for young children.

The curriculum for kindergarten in Ontario, *The Kindergarten Program* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) advocates a play-based approach to learning and teaching:

> Play is a vehicle for learning and rests at the core of innovation and creativity. It provides opportunities for learning in a context in which children are at their most receptive. Play and academic learning are not distinct categories for young children, and learning and doing are also inextricably linked for them. It has long been acknowledged that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 18)

Early years educators may fear that DT could inhibit children's ability to be innovative and creative, and that it may limit their learning through "doing." Indeed, some DT programs and apps for young children are more skill-based than creative in nature, and encourage sedentary, solitary practice. As a result, many early childhood professionals report uncertainty about how and when to use DT in their early years classrooms (Beschorner & Hutchison, 2013). Indeed, although there are hundreds of mobile applications claiming educational value, few reflect principles of constructivist learning necessary for young children (Goodwin & Highfield, 2012). Without a secure foundation of knowledge and experience with which to evaluate and integrate DT, early childhood educators may struggle to incorporate it into their programs.

Open-ended tablet apps, when offered to children in play-based programs, may provide the opportunity to overcome the drawbacks of some DT and capitalize on its rich learning potential. Tablet apps that offer multimodal communication tools such as photography, drawing, video, and audio recording can be used by young children to enhance their play and deepen their explorations. By giving children new tools to influence their learning environment and create play scenarios, open-ended apps can provide increased agency to explore new identities in multimodal ways.

This research study examined how kindergarten children enacted digital literacy identities as they documented their thinking and learning using open-ended tablet apps in play-based programs. Literacy in this study is defined broadly as meaning-making in multiple forms, including visual, oral, print, and digital. Literacy activities in these

classrooms are often social and collaborative in nature, and are integrated into play and other content areas such as math and science. The classrooms in the study are situated in two large urban school boards in Ontario. The children come from families that are culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse. Children enter the kindergarten program in the year that they turn four and stay for two years. The open-ended apps complement a play-based approach to learning and teaching. All children were able to explore and document their learning in ways that met their individual learning needs through the multimodal tools provided in the iPad apps and the resources and materials provided by the programs.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study utilizes four components of multiliteracies theory (New London Group 1996). We view students' multimodal creations as instances of situated practice as Rowsell, Kosnik, and Beck (2008) describe it, "situated practice activities locate teaching within student skill sets; textural practices; texts and lifeworlds" (p. 54). The open-ended tablet apps the children used in this study allowed them to represent their world and their work in a variety of modes that met their individual interests, experiences, and skill levels.

A second component, the notion of overt instruction (New London Group, 1996) as interpreted by Mills (2006), was evident in this study. Mills interprets overt instruction to include a carefully designed program intended to scaffold student learning (2006). In this study, the children worked with the tablet apps within the play-based, inquiry-focused kindergarten program in Ontario. This program is specifically designed to encourage and support active, child-centred learning and thus the program facilitated the successful use of the open-ended apps. As Prinsloo and Rowsell (Prinsloo, 2005; Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012) remind us, context matters. The iPads as "placed resources" (Prinsloo, 2005, p. 96) functioned as tools the children were able to use to expand and deepen their meaning-making in part due to the support offered by the play-based program.

We viewed the children's work through the lens of critical framing, a third component of multiliteracies theory (New London Group, 1996). Although most of the kindergarten students in the study were not yet reading print, they were critically reflecting on visual and auditory texts that they or their classmates created and archived, considering them from different perspectives. Furthermore, they were able to incorporate images and ideas from popular culture and talk back to them by interweaving them with their own stories. The fourth element, transformed practice, as described by Mills (2006) involves a level of creative change through making connections to their learning and culture. Students are seen as active producers, rather than passive consumers of knowledge (Rowsell & Harwood, 2015). Transformed practice was clearly seen in this study as the children developed their ability to create longer, more complex and varied multimodal slideshows over the two years of the study.

The use of iPads and open-ended apps expands the range of modes that young children have available to them as they make meaning. Rather than just drawing and writing with traditional tools, they have access to photography, video, audio, clip art, etc., which they can use in isolation or in combination (Rowsell, 2017). This multimodal approach to literacy helps to reveal children's interests, motivations, and different pathways to literacy (Kress, 1997). As Gee (2005) reminds us, new technology allows for thinking and making meaning differently, "learning in a new domain . . . requires the

learner to take on a new identity" (p. 34). Through open-ended mobile apps, young children can interweave the many physical and digital texts in their lives to represent what is meaningful to them (Burnett et al., 2014). Young children need time and space to engage with the multiplicity of literacy texts that they encounter. Role-play is a necessary part of this process (MacKey, 2011). Through role-play, children can experience the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that ground different identities, informed by the texts they have experienced. Open-ended mobile tablet apps can offer one way to engage in, document, and reflect on meaning-making role-play activities.

Methodology

This paper reports on the first two years (2015/2016-2016/2017) of a three-year study in which we are following 14 kindergarten classrooms in Ontario as they used open-ended tablet apps (30 Hands and Explain Everything) in their play-based programs. The tablet apps were used mostly during open-ended activity time when children had access to blocks, construction toys, art materials, and pretend play props, but also during outdoor play and more focussed literacy activities. Most classrooms had two educators (27 educators in year 1 in total, and 25 educators in year 2 in total). The educators, registered early childhood educators (RECEs) and Ontario certified teachers (OCTs) in full-day kindergarten core day classrooms and before and after school kindergarten classrooms, were all interviewed before the study began to determine their experiences with DT and their attitudes towards using DT with young children. At the end of year one they were interviewed again to see if their attitudes towards using DT with young children had changed, and to learn about what they perceived to be the challenges and benefits of using the tablet apps in their programs to support literacy learning.

At the beginning of year two they completed a questionnaire on similar topics and were interviewed again at the end of the second year. All educators attended a focus group each year. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and detailed notes were taken during the focus groups. Classrooms were observed biweekly using participant observation. Kindergarten students had individual accounts in the tablet apps where they could archive their slideshows. Samples of student digital slideshows were collected and analyzed. The research team viewed the archived slideshows and noted the costumes and/or artifacts the children used, the content of their drawings, and the language they used and categorized the digitally recorded play episodes according to the identity the children appeared to be enacting. When a team member was present for the slideshow creation, observations of the process were included in the analysis. The research team all held RECE qualifications or were RECEs in training. The principal investigator also held an OCT qualification.

Findings

Students as Experts

The embodied experience of using an iPad, an adult "expert" device, allowed children to take on 'expert' identities. Some of the most popular identities explored through play were photographer, reporter, film-maker, teacher, and scientist. Students used the photo, video, and audio tools within the apps to document their indoor and outdoor environment, artifacts they had created, actions they had prepared, and each other. When students first began photographing each other, some students complained that they hadn't

given their permission to have their images in a slideshow. They recognized their ownership of their own image and sought to retain control of it. As photographers, they learned to ask permission of their classmates and teachers before taking a photo. A popular activity was to take a photograph of themselves or a classmate and then embellish the photo by drawing over top, sometimes completely covering the original image as seen below. These were occasions of great interest to the photographer and other students and often led to hilarious laughter. Sometimes, in the role of a journalist, the children added audio recorded commentary or interviewed the subject as part of their slideshow.

Figure 1. An Embellished Selfie

The students' photo explorations situated their literacy practices squarely in the "lifeworld" (Rowsell, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008) of their kindergarten classrooms. The multimodal apps gave them the power not only to choose the content of their photos (themselves and their peers) and independently take the photos, but also to alter them according to their interests. Typically, children in kindergarten are most often an adult photographer's subject matter. Young students are neither given cameras nor other devices to take photos nor tools to critically frame their photos (New London Group, 1996). As in Dockett and Perry's (2005) research with kindergarten children, the students could photograph their school world from their own perspectives, and could reflect on the photos and comment on their meaning. In Dockett and Perry's research (2005), the children commented orally on the photos. In the case of this study, the children could immediately see the photos on their iPads, reflect and comment on them, and then alter them in ways that were personally relevant. The agency afforded by this open-ended, multimodal app positioned students as active producers of the digital content rather than passive subjects. While traditional role-play is a common practice for young children, role-play mediated through the open-ended tablet apps enhanced both the children's agency and their meaning-making opportunities within the play-based program.

Dylan's Story. In the following case study, we see a young child role-playing a number of identities using the multimodal affordances of the open-ended apps, including storyteller, artist, photographer, director, and teacher. In the first year of the study, Dylan, a four-year-old in the first year of the two-year kindergarten program, was reluctant to draw or write using traditional tools, and, according to his teacher, his oral storytelling skills

were very limited. However, using the 30 Hands app, he created a six-slide story with drawings of his family members and a photograph of the sky out the window. He then added audio recordings to accompany the drawings on each slide: "I love my mommy, I love my daddy, I love my sister, I love the sky, I love everybody." He then wrote the words "I love" with his finger on a final slide, asking a research team member for the spelling of the word "love." Below is the first slide of "mommy" and the last slide of the slideshow.

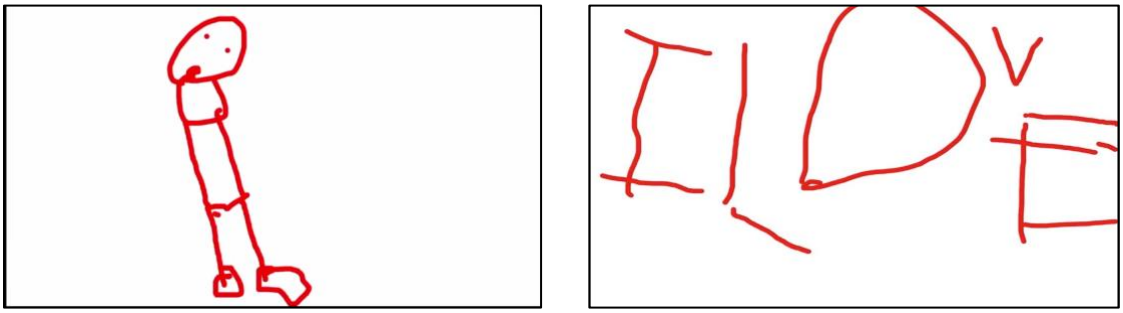

Figure 2. Dylan's Family Story

Dylan's teacher was incredulous. She did not know that he was capable of this level of literacy production. She reported that he had spent far more time drawing and then recording audio for this text than any other activity he had engaged in up to that point. It was also the most coherent and well-developed story he had expressed in any medium. Dylan also seemed incredulous. Although he typically did not readily engage with the other children in the class, he eagerly played his slideshow to several children in the class.

By year two of the project, Dylan had transformed from a reluctant student to an enthusiastic teacher. Dylan took on the role of director, asking the teacher to video record him while he demonstrated and described, in the role of a teacher, how two triangular prisms when combined turn into a cube. Below is a still from the video. He asks, "What happens when you put two triangular prisms together? You are right! [demonstrating for the camera] They turn into a cube!" Dylan appeared to feel very comfortable playing out his geometry knowledge, and engaging his teacher as his assistant.

Figure 3. Dylan as Geometry Teacher

Although Dylan was still not an enthusiastic writer with traditional tools by the end of his second year of kindergarten, the multimodal tools within the apps motivated him to powerfully communicate ideas as wide-ranging as his love for his family to his understanding of geometry. This learning was facilitated by the context, that is, the carefully designed play-based program that scaffolded his technology use (Mills, 2006; Prinsloo, 2005, Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012). He, like his peers, was given time, support, resources, and encouragement to explore his learning with "real" and virtual tools. The open-ended apps, offered within a play-based program, led to a transformation in Dylan's literacy practice (New London Group, 1996; Mills, 2006). His identity shifted from that of a reluctant reader and writer to an effective multimedia communicator.

The Power of Independence

The affordances of the iPad and open-ended apps allow young children to document their thinking and perspectives in ways that overcome the limitations of their age. At age four or five, most are not yet proficient in conventional reading and writing, and have not fully developed their fine motor control over tools. However, using the iPad apps, they can independently present information and communicate ideas in a quick, efficient, and more professional-looking manner than with traditional kindergarten tools such as paint or markers.

The 30 Hands app has background scenes that the children can use as a canvas on which to create their stories. A popular backdrop in this project was an outer space scene. Ella, who created the slide below, appeared to be excited by both the "real" looking backdrop, but also by her own creative additions. After choosing the space backdrop, she drew additional elements with her finger, changing colours often, and then audio recorded over the image. Below the image of her slide is a transcript of her audio recording.

Figure 4. Ella's Depiction of Space

> This is space. And then I created all the planets including Saturn. I put rainbows, I put dots. It totally looks like space. And I put the sun, I put everything! It looks so wonderful, you should actually see it! It looks so wonderful, you should see it! You should see it! (Transcript of Ella's Depiction of Space)

The pre-made outer space scene provided Ella with a foundation or scaffold (Mills, 2006) and perhaps inspiration for her dynamic and descriptive slideshow, but the open-ended nature of the app and the multi-modal tools within it enabled her to independently craft a complex identity. She clearly views herself as a creator ("I created all the planets") and someone knowledgeable about space, naming a specific planet, Saturn, and the sun. She also positions herself as competent and powerful, as she describes her accomplishment ("I put everything") and takes pride in what she has done ("It looks so wonderful"). She is also clearly taking on the role of a promoter. She speaks directly and enthusiastically to a future, unseen audience, inviting them three times to view her slideshow ("You should actually see it…You should see it! You should see it!") Through creating a digital drawing, audio recording a detailed description, and inviting a future audience to enjoy her creation, she is utilizing the multimodal tools in the app to independently perform a complex identity (Wohlwend, 2009).

Archival Reflection

Within the apps, the children could save their slideshows in their own digital folders. In this way, they could carry their archived work with them around the classroom. Like an artist or draftsperson, they could easily show their portfolio of work to others, opening up opportunities for reflection and collaboration with peers, educators, and family members. Many children regularly looked at their own and others' digital slideshows and were inspired to discuss them, embellish them, or add new slideshows on the same theme. This archival affordance scaffolded reflection and encouraged children to continue to explore their interests over time. In the following case study, Jasper, aged five, is motivated to explore his interest in the pop culture figure Pikachu and critically reframe it (New London Group, 1996) incorporating his own interests and creative skills.

*Jasper and Pikachu.*Jasper is quite enthusiastic about Pokemon, specifically a character within the series named Pikachu. His archived slideshows contain many scenes depicting Pikachu expressing a variety of emotions in different settings. The drawings usually incorporate a built-in background, space being a popular choice for Jasper. At the time of the following observation, many children in North America were consumed by a mobile game called *Pokemon Go (Niantic, 2016),* where Pokemon seemed to appear on a mobile device in the real world and children had the chance to "catch" them. The game often has updates where new characters or features are added to the game, including the addition of a Santa hat on top of Pikachu.

One day, Jasper gave a research team member a curated tour of his slideshow archive. As he shuffled through the slideshow images, they had the following exchange:

> **Jasper**: Some of these pictures aren't mine. This one is mine! (Selecting a picture of a space background with yellow circles drawn over it). This is what it looks like when you blast off. I know because I saw the Rangers do it.
> **Research team member**: Are the Rangers Pokemon?
> **Jasper**: They're the bad guys that try to catch all the Pokemon (opening a blank slide and filling the screen with light blue). I'm going to draw another Pikachu (beginning to add yellow on top of the blue). I'm going to make a winter scene.

Research Team member: Have you seen the Santa hat Pikachu they released in the *Pokemon Go* game?
Jasper: No! I didn't know that! (Drawing a Santa hat on the head of the Pikachu he created). Did it look like this?
Research team member: It looked exactly like that!
Jasper: I'm going to make this one have an open mouth. He's going to be happy. See? I know how to make an open mouth" (finishing his drawing and saving his work). This is the best Pikachu I have ever drawn.

Figure 5. Jasper's Santa Pikachu

Jasper again showed the research assistant all the Pikachu slides he had made previously. As he was doing so, he explained different aspects of each drawing, saying "this one is angry," "this Pikachu is in space," and, "I tried this but I didn't like it." Jasper opened his recently created Santa Pikachu and said, "I really like this one. It's the only Pikachu in snow I've made." He then added to the slideshow by audio recording a dramatic re-enactment of the sound a Pikachu makes, "Pika, Pika, Pika. Pikachu!"

In the context of the play-based kindergarten, Jasper had the time and digital and social resources to explore and critically reframe (New London Group, 1996) his interest in a pop culture phenomenon, Pokemon. He was comfortable sharing his digital drawings and making connections to his out-of-school experiences ("I know because I saw the Rangers do it"). The research team member, like his kindergarten educators, encouraged him to discuss his interests ("Are the Rangers Pokemon?"), positioning him as an expert. Perhaps due to the encouragement he was receiving, he begins to draw on a blank slide and narrate his actions. Further entering into Jasper's world, the research team member offers some new information about Santa Pikachu. This information is enthusiastically received and inspires Jasper to create what he imagines Santa Pikachu would look like. Jasper then transitions from depicting Pikachu as he has seen it or imagines it to look, to planning what his own version will look like and what emotion it is going to portray ("I'm going to make this one have an open mouth. He's going to be happy"). He then evaluates his finished work, proudly describing his drawing skill ("See? I know how to make an open mouth") and announcing that he has exceeded his previous Pikachu achievements ("This is the best Pikachu I have ever drawn!") After this interactive exchange, Jasper again reviews his Pikachu slides with the research team member, but this time he is more detailed in his

reflections, referring to the emotions of the character, the backgrounds, and his earlier attempts.

Using the open-ended app gave Jasper the opportunity to engage in digital role-play and represent his interest in Pikachu in a way that motivated him to continue to explore his abilities and his knowledge about Pokemon. The open-ended nature of the app afforded Jasper a multimodal experience that captured not only his interest, but also enabled him to showcase his knowledge about this aspect of popular culture. The context, an open play period in which the educators encouraged and supported students to explore their interests, was another key factor in this interaction. Having an adult who was responsive and engaged contributed to Jasper's meaning-making around the character and story of Pikachu, and his experimentation with drawing and audio recording. He was motivated to incorporate new information and attempt new forms of representation. The research team member, an RECE in training, was enacting the role advocated in the Ontario kindergarten curriculum, "As the children express their thinking, educators think about questions they can ask that will further provoke children's thinking and continue to stimulate their curiosity and wonder" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 21).

As in the previous examples with Dylan and Ella, we can see how proud Jasper is of his accomplishments and how excited he is to share his creations. In all three cases, the affordances of the open-ended apps intersected with the scaffolding provided by the context, including large periods of play time, physical resources such as blocks, and the social and pedagogical support of student-led inquiry, to enable instances of identity exploration and enthusiastic meaning-making.

In-Depth Exploration

While enacting roles such as teacher, scientist, performer, journalist, or architect with the iPad apps, many children exhibited motivation to represent their understandings with greater length, complexity, and variety of modes than they exhibited with traditional literacy tools and practices. Below are two slideshows created by Aisha. She has documented her exploration of the identities of architect and builder in four interrelated modes: with physical objects, with photography, with text, and with audio recording. Aisha began by building a small block structure on a counter using a few blocks of one type. She photographed it and labelled it using the text feature within the app, "DES is a letal cassol" [This is a little castle]. She then audio recorded what she had written on the slide. It is interesting to note that she used phonetic spelling, and pronounced the words exactly as she had written them.

At a later date, Aisha returned to castle building, this time creating a much more elaborate structure using tree cuts, wooden spools, and stones. The structure is far more castle-like with outer and inner rings representing walls and towers in the centre. On this much more elaborate, layered structure she wrote, "des is the casol its reli big" [This is the castle. It's really big.] She also audio recorded this message on the slide.

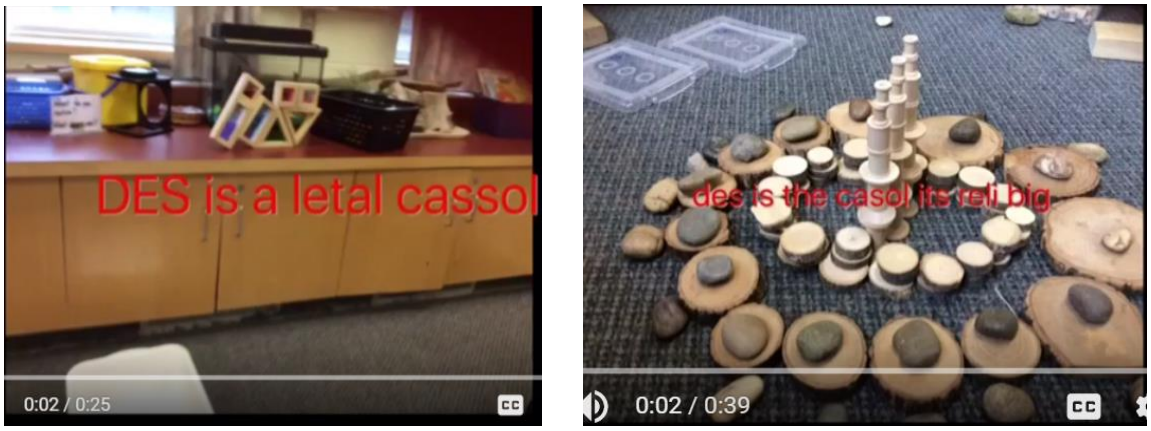

Figure 6. Aisha's Earlier and Later Castle Creations

As with the example of Jasper and his drawings of Pikachu, being able to reflect back on an earlier slideshow inspired Aisha to return to an earlier subject of interest and explore it more deeply. Aisha is clearly referencing her earlier work and comparing it to her new work. She has used the same form of documentation (photo, superimposed text, audio recording of the text) on both slides. She has also used the same type of labelling language (This is...) and comparative language (little and really big).

In terms of the increased complexity of her work, Aisha moved from using a few items of one type of material in a simple stacked structure, to a greater number and variety of materials in a more complex structure. In the second structure, there are three types of rings: an outer ring of stones, an inner ring of stones placed on top of larger wood cuts, and an innermost ring of small stacked wood cuts. These three concentric rings surround a series of towers made of stacked wooden spools of decreasing size. Clearly, this second structure would have taken a great deal more planning, time, and careful execution. Aisha notes this significant achievement in her typed and audiotaped description. She does not simply describe the two structures as little and big, but as little and really big.

The open-ended play periods in this class and the availability of a range of building materials set the scene for the development of Aisha's exploration of building. Typically block structures made in a kindergarten class would need to be put away at the end of the activity period, but because Aisha could document the first structure on an iPad and reflect back on the slideshow at a later date, she could transform her practice by building on her earlier exploration and developing a more complex manifestation of her thinking.

Discussion

The four components of multiliteracies theory are useful tools for examining how DT, when incorporated into a play-based kindergarten program, can enrich and enhance literacy learning and teaching. Situated practice (New London Group, 1996) was evident in that the open-ended apps supported and encouraged children to interweave the many texts in their lives (i.e., movies, TV, videogames, books, signs, school curriculum, everyday encounters, etc.) (Rowsell, et al., 2008). Through role-play that incorporates open-ended tablet apps, they could explore the personal meaning of these texts as they worked to craft their growing understanding of the world and of themselves through critical framing (New London Group, 1996). As a result, the children's work with the apps in this

study did not supplant the powerful meaning-making practices inherent in role-play, nor did the apps reduce the creativity and problem-solving possibilities of play. Instead, they added an array of multimodal tools that encouraged deeper explorations.

The multimodal affordances of the open-ended apps (photography, video, drawing, text, audio recordings, alone and in combination) allowed young children to represent and communicate their understandings in ways that were motivating and met the needs and interests of students at a wide range of language and literacy skill levels. They were role-playing with "real" technology, not toys, and producing "real" texts which approximate adult digital products. Over time, evidence of transformed practice (Mills, 2006) could be seen in their digital slideshows which showed a marked increase in length, complexity, and variety of modes of representation. The children actively incorporated the affordances of the open-ended apps into more traditional aspects of their play such as building structures, pretend play, drawing, and storytelling. Lastly, the play-based kindergarten program in which the children were given the time, space, resources, and encouragement to play out and document their ideas constituted overt instruction, as defined by Mills (2006).

There were several factors that facilitated the app-mediated identity exploration through role-play that occurred in this study. The first was the open-ended nature of the apps themselves. The apps had virtually no content other than a few backdrops, but they had many child-friendly tools for exploring, creating, and documenting meaning. The mobile nature of the iPads allowed and encouraged the children to take these thinking and documentation tools to locations that were rich with meaning for them, whether that be the classroom floor, the block centre, the pretend play corner, or out on the playground. While the children eagerly integrated the iPads and apps into their play, the fact that iPads are a "grown-up" device and not a toy appeared to add to their allure.

Unlike apps that are designed for teaching or practicing specific skills or curriculum content, these open-ended apps allowed the children to respond to and interpret the social and physical context around them in ways that were meaningful to them (Prinsloo, 2005; Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012). Unlike digital games which can disrupt the intrinsic meaning, motivation, and autonomy inherent in play by imposing rules, goals, and rewards (Nolan & McBride, 2014), the open-ended apps kept the children firmly in the driver's seat.

Although there is now a considerable body of research attesting to the benefits of DT for early years learning and teaching, including studies of multimodal literacy learning with iPad apps (e.g., Falloon & Khoo, 2014; Harwood, 2017; Roswell & Harwood, 2015), many early years professionals are hesitant to include DT into their programs. They may be right to be cautious. Not all DT is designed to encourage and support the type of intrinsically motivated and context specific multimodal meaning-making that play affords. Educators need to carefully choose and evaluate different forms of DT to ensure that they meet their learning and teaching goals. However, typically there is little pre-service or in-service guidance for early years educators to support them in this endeavor.

Furthermore, beyond choosing appropriate technology, educators face the difficult tasks of learning and teaching the technical aspects of the devices and apps, facilitating the integration of the technology into their programs, adapting or creating new teaching strategies, and learning to "see" DT mediated learning which can look different than traditional learning products and processes. We have written about these issues elsewhere in more detail (e.g., McGlynn-Stewart, Maguire, Mogyorodi, Brathwaite, & Hobman., in press; McGlynn-Stewart, et al., 2017a; McGlynn-Stewart, et al., 2017b). In this study, the

educators had the support of research team members who visited biweekly to observe and participate over two academic years, giving technical and pedagogical support when requested.

This study suggests that open-ended tablet applications can provide children with additional tools to actively explore, create, document, and reflect on their learning in many modes**,** when implemented within a play-based program, and when educators are given appropriate professional learning support. Rather than supplanting non-digital meaning-making practices such as role-play, children can fold digital affordances into their play in ways that expand the range of identities they explore and the tools and practices with which to explore them.

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Educators' Explorations with Gender Performativities and Orientations: A Participatory Action Research Project in West Nile Sub-Region, Uganda

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Abstract

This paper discusses findings from a feminist participatory action research study conducted in the West Nile region of Northern Uganda with a group of 35 educators who attended a one-week intensive professional development course focused on promoting gender equality in schools. Through a theoretical and methodological framework of multiliteracies and multimodality, gender constructs were "exposed" (Butler, 1988) and "disoriented" (Ahmed, 2006), opening new spaces for the promotion of gender equality, as well as pedagogical approaches to literacy that the participants could integrate into their own teaching practice to facilitate transformative learning in their own school contexts.

Keywords

gender and education; Uganda; professional development; multimodality; multiliteracies; performativity; gender orientation

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 5, *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*, is testament to global recognition of the need to prioritize efforts that will challenge and change practices, behaviours, and structures (many long-held and culturally embedded) that have served to oppress and discriminate against girls and women. Education is understood as one of the (perhaps *the*) most powerful ways through which to promote and cultivate gender equality , and gender-focused initiatives are now pervasive in the education sectors of countries worldwide. In Uganda, gender—as a focus theme—has been mainstreamed throughout national planning documents, such as Uganda Vision 2040 (Government of Uganda, 2007), and educational policies and documents such as the National Strategy for Girls' Education (NSGE) (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), 2013).

However, policies and documents in and of themselves do not disrupt normative gender(ed) structures and behaviours, or activate transformative social processes necessary to bring about gender equality. Disorienting gender within deeply patriarchal societies, such as Uganda, will entail no less than a radical deconstruction of the way things are and have been: gender equality can only truly be achieved if gender is exposed as a social construct that is "performed" (Butler, 1988) along "lines" (Ahmed, 2006) that have been forged and afforded particular forms of power (or oppression) and privilege (or subjugation) by history and culture and that can be "disorientated" in order to be re-orientated (Ahmed, 2006). Educators in such contexts, as frontline proponents of gender equality, have a dauntingly complex task. They must themselves begin to understand orientations of gender before they can effectively work towards challenging the inequalities associated with those orientations. And because their own identities have been shaped by

sociocultural and historical constructs around gender, educators require opportunities that will enable them to *conscientize* (Freire, 1970) their own gendered identities by "expos[ing] the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender cores or identities" (Butler, 1988, p. 530).

This feminist participatory action research study, conducted with educators in the West Nile sub-region of rural Uganda during a one-week professional development course (held in October 2014) concerned with the topic of gender-responsiveness in the school environment, sought to open up a new space for understandings of gender through multimodal literacies that "disoriented" the normative approaches (e.g., formal, power-differentiated discussion forums) to discourse engagement. During this course, the participants engaged in multimodal activities—writing, drawing, drama, and discussions—through which they explored and reflected upon the depth, breadth, and nature of gender inequalities that existed not only in schools, but in society at large. This paper will focus on the participants' experiences of performing and disorienting gender and insights gained into gender constructs that perpetuate gender inequality.

Structure of the Paper

In the following sections I describe the Ugandan context within which this study took place, and the theoretical perspectives of performativity (Butler, 1986), orientation (Ahmed, 2006), and a multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and multimodal understanding of text and literacy pedagogy. I then discuss the reasons for choosing a multimodal methodology that emphasized embodiment to explore constructions and assumptions around gender and the ways in which these negatively impact girls' educational experiences and opportunities.

In discussing findings from the research, I explore the ways in which the participants understood concepts of gender, gender equality and gender inequality, as well as the ways in which gender constructs orientate the participants themselves during these discussions. Their embodiment of the gender orientations and behaviours under consideration offered opportunities for innovative approaches to pedagogical practices that challenged the dominant, normative practices. Opportunities for embodiment of unfamiliar orientations through drama facilitated the creation of multimodal 'text' that sedimentized new learning and experiences through praxis (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). I conclude with some observations and recommendations about the enormous potential for embodiment as a means by which text can be created, read, and used for transformative learning.

Research summary

Background

Gender inequalities exist in countries and cultures throughout the world, but they differ in manifestation in accordance with the context. In Uganda, diverse and wide-ranging gender discrimination is acknowledged as being enormously detrimental to girls' educational and life opportunities, and thus over the past two decades the promotion of girls' education and gender equality has received a great deal of attention at the policy level, as well as through various national and international initiatives.

At a national level, Uganda has made significant gains in girls' access to and enrolment in education, having achieved near to full gender parity at both the primary and secondary school levels (Kwesiga, 2003; Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports,

(MOES), 2013; UNESCO, 2017)[1]. Nevertheless, gender inequality remains highly problematic in Uganda (Blackden, 2004; Bantebya, Muhanguzi, & Watson, 2014; Uganda MoGLSD, 2007; Uganda MOES, 2015; UNDP, 2015), and there are marked regional and socioeconomic disparities (Lawson, 2003; Ugandan Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2017). The West Nile sub-region of Uganda has the highest gender gap in enrolment in the country, with only six girls in school for every ten boys (Uganda BOS, 2015). Reasons contributing to girls' lack of attendance in the West Nile sub-region, and common throughout Uganda, include: the need to assume an unfair burden of domestic duties (MOES, 2015; Jones, 2008, 2011; Stoebenau et al., 2015); costs related to schooling, such as uniforms and school supplies (Jones, 2008, 2011; Stoebenau et al., 2015); distance to school and associated risks (e.g., sexual assault, harassment) (Geiger, 2002; Jones, 2008, 2011; Uganda MOES, 2015); and boys' education prioritized over girls' within families (Jones, 2008, 2011; Stoebenau et al., 2015), as well as girls' own perceptions of their abilities (Stoebenau et al., 2015).

Systemic gender discrimination that limits girls' educational opportunities is openly acknowledged:

> The school system remains a dominant source of gender bias and stereotyping. Education processes are instilled with persistent and inbuilt gender differences. Females and males are subjected to deferential socialization in classrooms and are rewarded for different things. Girls tend to be directed at learning and reinforcing femininity thereby learning to be submissive and passive instead of being independent and thoughtful. As a result the schools are largely unable to provide a gender responsive environment for effective teaching and learning to take place. (Uganda MOES, 2015, p. 16)

Didactic pedagogical approaches that center around closed questions, memorization, exam-based teaching, and obedience in the classroom have a particularly negative impact on girls who are expected to be "submissive" and defer to males (Kakuru, 2006; Mirembe and Davies, 2001; Mlama, P. et al., 2005). Teachers' attitudes that girls are not as intelligent or capable as boys are not uncommon (Geiger, 2002; Jones, 2008; Mirembe and Davies, 2001). And, books and other learning materials often reinforce gender stereotypes (Mlama et al., 2005; Jones, 2015). In addition, girls are also often expected to take on extra duties at school (e.g., serving tea to the teachers, washing dishes, cleaning the compound), which are not expected of boys, reinforcing girls' sense of servitude (Jones, 2008). Furthermore, sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation in the school context by male students and male teachers, and during the commute to school by boys and men in the surrounding areas, are common (Mirembe and Davies, 2001; Mlama et al., 2005; UgandaMOES, 2015; Jones, 2008, 2011). In the West Nile region of Uganda, girls' attendance and retention in school are particularly problematic (Faughnan, 2016; UBOS, 2012; Stoebenau et al., 2015).

Increasingly, it is becoming understood that gender equality in education *must*

[1] It must be noted, however, that although net and gross enrolment rates for both females and males is relatively high at the primary school level, primary completion rates for females are low, as is secondary school attendance.

ensure that girls can claim and exercise their rights to freedoms, opportunities, power, aspirations, and control over their own bodies and lives. The goal of the NSGE and other related policies and initiatives is to create gender-responsive schools and learning environments that liberate children from gender-related oppression and limitations. But, in order to be prepared to create authentic learning spaces of gender equality and empowerment, educators themselves need to engage with lived experiences of gender equality/inequality as embodied knowledge and sensation at deeply personal levels to reflect upon and deconstruct their own normative gender assumptions. They must be supported in a journey that may facilitate a renewed, even transformative, understanding of their own gendered identities.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspectives I draw upon to understand the complexities and possibilities of gender constructs include Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity, "disorientation" within Sara Ahmed's (2006) theory of "queer orientation," and Rowsell & Pahl's (2007) conception of understanding of text as "sedimentized," multimodal expressions of embodied knowledge, and a multiliteracies conceptualization of literacy as meaningful engagement with text (New London Group, 1996).

Gender Performativity

Gender is a social construct that is at the same time both deeply personal and highly public. Gender(ed) constructs frame the very ways in which we know ourselves and the world, as well as the way in which the world knows and interacts with us. Everyday behaviours (such as gestures, speech, and conduct), as well as pervasive roles and responsibilities (such as domestic duties and financial control), are gendered: "Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly" (Butler, 1988, p. 531). These continuously repeated performative acts of gender create patterns and narratives that shape understandings and self-concepts that essentialize what it means to be female or male so that gendered behaviours and dispositions appear to reflect a substantive and inherent aspect of the individual. Butler (1988), however, argues that "*stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 519) are not signifiers of "stable identities," but rather represent "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, *including the actors themselves*, come to believe and come to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler, 1988, p. 520; emphasis added).

Gender Orientations

Ahmed (2006) argues that understanding gender constructs and the ways in which they shape our lives is determined by the way in which we are "oriented" in space and to objects. The spaces we inhabit in our daily lives—our homes, our places of work, and our communities—are familiar and predictable to us. These familiar spaces become the background upon which our bodies and the objects with which they interact are foregrounded. The ways in which our bodies are able/unable to occupy space, and the objects (material as well as immaterial) with which we interact and towards which we are oriented to/around/away from, as well as the distal relations between our bodies and those objects, serve to facilitate or constrain our freedoms and opportunities.

Objects are what we "do things with" and what allow us to do things; they can be material or immaterial (e.g., personal goals, hopes, opportunities). They are located (or placed) upon/within the background in ways that have particular orientations (time, distance, angles) to us. Objects that are nearest to us are given our greatest attention to, and often what is nearest to us has been placed there. What is placed near to children is what society intends them to reach towards, to follow the hereditary "straight" line which reproduces normative societal structures:

> we…inherit the proximity of certain objects, as that which is available to us, as given within the family home. These objects are not only material: they may be values, capital, aspirations, projects, and styles. Insofar as we inherit that which is near enough to be available at home, we also inherit orientations, that is, we inherit the nearness of certain objects more than others, which means we inherit ways of inhabiting and extending into space. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 557)

In the context of a girl's experience, objects that are placed in close proximity to her will influence the nature of, and frequency of her interactions with it, and she will extend herself in space towards what those objects represent. The placement of an object leads the body towards it in a particular line. For girls in the rural Ugandan context, for example, brooms, washing basins, and cooking pots are frequently at hand, and girls learn to orientate themselves towards cleaning and cooking, caring for others, and focusing their attention on the home, in accordance with the normative and hereditary gender line of society.

Individuals also orientate themselves toward or around immaterial objects such as beliefs, self-confidence, values, and personal goals depending on the proximity, accessibility, and availability of those objects to the individual. In rural Uganda it is often, perhaps generally, expected that girls are meant to prioritize becoming wives and mothers over education – at the post-secondary, secondary, or even primary level. Such strong, prevalent cultural expectations (immaterial objects) work together with material objects (such as brooms, basins, cooking pots) to orientate girls towards marriage, motherhood, and domestic duties. This strong orientation towards domestic responsibilities serves to orientate girls away from other immaterial objects such as personal goals, aspirations, and careers) because the lack of orientation has prevented critical connection and familiarity with these objects. Thus, girls begin to understand what is within reach for them through these orientations: "The normative can be considered an effect of repeating bodily actions over time, which produces what I have called the bodily horizon, a space for action, which puts some objects and not others in reach" (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 561-2).

The ease with which a body can move through space determines what is within reach of/for that body. Ease and normativity converge in alignment where the straight or normative body aligns with vertical line and conforms to the normative space. Children's bodies and attention are directed towards particular "lines," or lineages, or life paths that have histories and are etched—often deeply—within within the social architecture to promote the continuation of the line. The lines have been created, or have evolved to frame and hold society together with a particular orientation of what is normative/straight. Objects that have relational significance to particular orientations are also integrated into those lines that with history seem not to have been created, but to have always existed.

Thus, the lines come to represent an orientation of normativity where relationships between bodies and between bodies and objects appear stable, aligned, and balanced. As such, these lines offer both an illusion of inevitability (that one inherits certain lines to follow), and of choice (that there is a range of lines to choose from), and yet these lines are not hereditary nor are they easily resisted. These lines offer certain benefits that can only be enjoyed if the line is followed; and, there is pressure to conform to these lines to ensure that the hereditary societal structures are perpetuated. However, horizons are constructed, over time, to establish normative orientations. The horizontal axis is what determines the orientation of the vertical (body) within space.

Unsurprisingly, the spaces, objects, orientations, performativities, and lines that intersect, viewed from a normative, paradigmatic perspective that has a vested interest in aligning individuals to prescriptive social norms (e.g., to perpetuate patriarchal power and privilege), resist disorientation (e.g., erode patriarchal power and privilege and support women's empowerment) to maintain and enhance the status quo. Thus, individuals/bodies that deviate from or challenge the normative alignment of the horizontal and vertical will encounter difficulty extending into space and will find many objects out of reach.

Ahmed (2006) posits that it is necessary to intentionally disorientate the familiar in order to expose the coherence and calcification of normativity as a *constructed state* that has been reified through performativity, lines, and objects, and not an originary state. Exposing and disavowing gender-normative beliefs (for self and others) and associated practices/performances can be radically disorientating. In contexts such as rural Northwest Uganda, where girls and women's orientations and alignments are very much constrained by patriarchal norms that subjugate women to subservient positionalities where personal dreams and freedoms are deemed out of reach (by themselves as well as others), there is little scope for a young girl to challenge these entrenched societal orientations without repercussions or even grave risk, if there is no support for her to do so.

Thus, it is incumbent upon adults, especially teachers who represent learning, knowledge, and possibilities, to support children in questioning normative values, beliefs, behaviours, and structures. Only through disorientation does one become aware of one's orientation (Ahmed, 2006). It is necessary to expose the normative orientations that have created, perpetuated, and entrenched gender inequalities in order to begin to figure out a way to actually bring about gender equality. Gendered identities can be de/re-constructed by creating new lines that do not follow, or reproduce, existing lines or paths. In order to grapple with orientations, however, we need to begin to with ourselves, "the here of the body and the where of its dwelling" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 545).

Text and Literacy as Embodied Social Practice

Understandings of literacy have expanded over recent decades with the acknowledgement that meaning is communicated through a wide range of literacies, or multiliteracies associated with a "plurality of texts" (New London Group, 1996, p. 61), which are representative of diverse cultures and contexts:

> Apedagogy of multiliteracies . . . focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects . . . Multiliteracies also creates a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are

> dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes. (New London Group, 1996, p. 64)

With this expanded understanding of semiotic representation comes an expanded notion of "text."

As multiliteracies acknowledges the various forms and engagement with literacy, multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress & Jewitt, 2003) is a framework that acknowledges the importance of the elements involved in creating meaning (or "text") within these different kinds of literacies. Multimodality assumes as a fundamental tenet that literacy is not limited to meaning conveyed through prescribed forms of written or spoken language, but through a wide range of semiotic representations that are produced by the meaning-maker through their choice and combination of semiotic modes, such as drama, drawing, dance, photography, and music (Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Kendrick, Jones, Mutonyi & Norton, 2006).

Kress & van Leuwen (2001) state, "the semiotic instances, or texts, in which we are interested include the everyday practices of "ordinary" humans as much as the articulations of discourses in more conventionally text-like objects" (p. 24). Rowsell & Pahl (2007) posit that these texts are representations of the meaning-maker's *habitus* (Bordieu, 1977, 1970), or, "ways of being, doing, and acting in the world across generations, time, and space" (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007, p. 391). As such, the texts become material "sedimentation" (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007) of identity, and insightful commentaries on the Discourse(s) (Gee, 1996, 1999) with which she is engaged.

The semiotic act of producing and interpreting a sign involves an interweaving of diverse modes (e.g., sound, movement) that are embedded within a context (e.g., a classroom) that create an embodied experience for both the sign-makers and the sign-interpreters, and create communicative forms in ways unique to the sign-maker. The text-making process involves the active integration of these components through "praxis" (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007), which offers opportunities for deep learning and "the expansion of identities . . . [that can] be accompanied by a transformation in the identities of the text maker"(Kress, as cited in Rowsell & Pahl, 2007, p. 393).

Alternative modalities of expression disrupt normative power structures that are founded upon, bounded, permeated, and perpetuated by formal and exclusionary literacy practices that prevent those not versed in those practices from having a voice. A multimodal and multiliteracies approach to literacy pedagogy opens possibilities for meaning-making and contributions to Discourse from those often excluded from discussions and decisions that impact their lives and their communities. In this study, participants drew upon their habitus, identities, and the gender discourse under consideration, and used a range of modes to sedimentize experiences, observations, and ideas into signs that were shared with and interpreted by others within the embodied context of the course. Importantly, the act of creating and interpreting meaning in a multiliteracies/multimodality approach to literacy also introduced new pedagogical approaches to literacy for the participants that they could incorporate into their own teaching.

Research Design and Methodology

Participants and Location

This research project involved 30 pre-primary and primary school educators in the West Nile sub-region of Northern Uganda. These educators were interested in promoting gender equality in their schools and voluntarily attended a one-week professional development course (October 2014) on the topic of gender-responsive pedagogy, that I designed and facilitated. The course was offered as part of an East African educational initiative funded by the Canadian government's Department for Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD) and operationalized by the Aga Khan Development Network. This program focused on areas in East Africa where education was particularly problematic in terms of attendance, retention, performance, and gender inequalities.

The participants in this course included male and female teachers and head teachers, as per the table below.

Table 1
Feminist, Participatory Action Research Framework.

Designation	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Head teachers	1	4	5
Pre-primary teachers	9	6	15
Primary Teachers	10	5	15

A feminist, participatory action research (FPAR) multimodal methodology was used in order to engage participants in the investigation of gender issues they had both witnessed and experienced themselves. The FPAR approach is a "[d]ecolonising research [process that] . . . helps envision other ways of theorizing the complexity of gender and educational experiences" (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010, p. 630). As a white, female, Canadian course facilitator and researcher, I fully and openly acknowledged and inhabited my etic positionality as well as my cultural and personal lens and biases. I discussed gender inequality as a global phenomenon in order to position Uganda within the larger context of the world. As one participant remarked in their reflective summary of the course, "There was good comparisons between issues within Uganda and issues which were outside Uganda which widen the scope of understanding of the participants".

I established my role as that of a facilitator, and made clear my intention for the participants and me to work together equally as *investigators* of gender-related issues. In alignment with fundamental tenets of participatory research., I also acknowledged that the participants were the experts with respect to the local contexts in which they lived and worked and so my role was primarily to listen and work with them to address the issues of gender inequality that they identified:

> The researcher's role as a privileged possessor of expert knowledge must be reconceptualized as that of a catalyst who works with local participants to understand and solve local problems. The researched become as important as the researcher in formulating the problem, discussing solutions, and interpreting findings." (Hall, 1975, as cited in Lather, 2004, p. 200)

A Ugandan educator who had completed her Masters of Arts degree in Education at the Aga Khan Institute for Educational Development-East Africa co-facilitated the course with me in her role of Professional Development Tutor. Her familiarity with diverse education contexts as well as gender-based constructs in Uganda helped me to gain deeper insight into some of the issues raised by the participants.

The FPAR approach also examines a question or problem—in this case gender inequalities—from a vantage point that seeks to uncover the various intersections of, for example, cultural practices, resources, policies, and institutions, in order to bring about change. FPAR often involves, as was the case in this project, "organizational building" (Maguire, 1996), where solidarity amongst the community needed to be cultivated in order to *open up* the research topic. During the week-long professional development course which is the focus of this study, a mixed-methods, multimodal approach was used for data collection. The participants completed pre- and post-course questionnaires, a reflective summary on the week's activities, and they engaged in a number of multimodal activities during the course, in which they contemplated their own embodiment of gender-based experiences and assumptions.

Multimodality as Methodology.

In this study I draw upon multimodality as a methodological framework. Multimodality, or, meaning-making through different modes (e.g., images, writing, and speech) and media (video, drawings, drama), offers a creative, investigative, context-responsive approach to explore the complexities of gender. Multimodal activities provide opportunities for expression and reflection that extend far beyond the traditional, hegemonic and often patriarchal discourses which are typically mediated by language (spoken and/or written), particular kinds of language (e.g., an official language that denotes an educated individual, or a dialect that is considered of higher value than other dialects), and language acts (such as public debate or official pronouncements).

Multimodality actively seeks to engage individuals in self-expression that intentionally subverts predictable and limiting structures of language and its modes of representation (writing and speech) to a diverse range of semiotic (meaning-making) modes (Kress & Jewitt, 2003). Modes are gestures, images, sounds and other such material representations that constitute "organized sets of semiotic resources for meaning-making" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246) and thus a form of text, whose meaning can be *read*, or co-created, by its audience. The texts, or artifacts, become semiotic points of engagement that stimulate perceptions and sensations in others (Pink, 2011; Roswell & Pahl, 2007).

Data collection included: pictures created by participants; video recordings of dramas; stories written by participants; observations of activities recorded by written notes taken by me; chart paper used to record ideas and main points of discussion; notes take by me during discussions; participants' reflective writing on the week's activities; and a

course evaluation completed by participants.

Analysis

There were three levels of data analysis, all of which used a triangulation design analysis approach (Cresswell, 2008). One level of analysis focused on data pertaining to gender issues in local educational contexts as identified by the participants. As data were produced, participants and I together reflected upon emergent themes, which I recorded and coded into categories relating to gender discrimination in the educational context (such as inferior status/home, inferior status/school, and inferior status/community). This analysis process was iterative (Grbich, 2013) and collaborative.

A second level of analysis focused on my interpretations of the engagement and experiences of the participants themselves as they immersed themselves in the production and interpretation of multimodal texts that disoriented normative gender constructs. After various sessions in the course, I would reflect upon my observations of various "texts" (semiotic representations ranging from behaviours, to artifacts, to spoken words) that had been produced and then present my thoughts and questions around these texts to the participants for their consideration. The analysis here—although initially conducted by me—was ultimately collaborative.

A third level of analysis included grouping quantitative findings from the pre- and post-course questionnaires according to predetermined codes based on close-ended questions, as well as sorting and coding emergent data from open-ended questions on these questionnaires, my observation notes, and the reflective writing pieces the participants composed at the conclusion of the course. This was also the stage of meta-analysis, involving extensive triangulation, as I worked with the various data sets to confirm assertions, expose any contradictions, and formulate new questions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from this study revealed that all the participants were well aware of the wide-ranging forms of gender injustices (physical, emotional, mental) suffered by girls (and by some of the participants themselves) in their schools and communities. The participants could identify material "objects" (e.g., learning and financial resources, household items) as well as immaterial "objects" (e.g., practices, behaviours, attitudes, opportunities) that were orientated towards/against girls in ways, as well as performances of gender that excluded, marginalized, oppressed, or even violated them. However, the participants did not identify the underlying gender constructs that framed the space of these orientations and performances. Thus, the multimodal activities described below discuss how the participants began to engage with gender constructs and gain deeper understanding of gender-related issues in their own lives as well as in their educational contexts.

Performativities and Orientations of Space and Voice

The first day of the course involved reviewing understandings of gender and consideration of what gender-responsive schools might look like. Overwhelmingly, the male participants dominated the discussions and responses to the questions, often overriding the female participants' attempts to make contributions. This had quickly become a space into which men extended themselves and exercised the gendered power that it afforded them. The men's bodies were vertically aligned with the horizon (the space

of public discourse), but the women's bodies were not. This was a useful place to begin the course as the performativities and orientations related to gender had naturally unfolded: "The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 545).

The following day I requested that all participants reflect upon why women were less likely to respond and voice their opinions than men in this kind of context. Each participant wrote an anonymous response and taped it on the wall. This was followed by a gallery walk where the responses were read. A number of responses asserted that women did not have the confidence to contribute their ideas in public and/or formal contexts: "Women are shy; women are fearful"; "women tends to be shy among men"; "The women are generally fearful. They think men can present better than them"; "Women still feel inferior in the presence of men so therefore fearing to take responsibility; low self-esteem in women to talk out what they think; awareness about gender equality missing among the women; fear of being just a woman among men." Some responses attributed to men greater ability and/or intelligence than women: "men are quick in decision taking"; "Women feel men can do better than them"; "[Women] believe that men are the leaders; Others think that men's are more intelligent than them"; "Women takes a lot of time while explaining"; "Men feel that sometimes what women does can not be understood." Others claimed that cultural norms positions men in a place of power over women, where women feel they must "respect" (often a euphemism for "obey") men and assume a deferential and subordinate role: "African culture of paying respect to men"; "The women generally give respect to men by allowing them to lecture"; "the women have respect for the men to make men stand and represent them"; "Others [women] feel ashamed to stand in front of men; the cultural belief that men are ahead of women . . . the cultural belief that men are over all of everything"; "The African tradition discourages women's voice"; and, some stated simply that women are not given opportunity" and that the men did not give them chance to present."

These honest, anonymous, acknowledgements of feelings and, reasons/excuses for the oppression of women's voices opened up the opportunity to explore the constructs underlying these performativities, objects, and orientations. Gendered orientations and performativities related to voice/voicelessness in public space had been exposed. Women's orientation towards/within the space were characterized by fear, shyness, deference to men, shame, and inadequacy, and these orientations were performed by "allowing [men] to represent them," and "tak[ing] a lot of time" to express their ideas. For the men, on the other hand, their orientation toward/within the space enabled them to "lecture" and assume leadership roles. This was performed by being "quick in decision taking," and "not giv[ing] [women a] chance to present." In the ensuing discussion, some of the women ventured to express their frustrations with men talking over them, cutting them off when they were speaking, or dominating discussions. Several of the men objected to these claims, but because the intersectionality of gender, voice, and power was now under consideration, the associated gender constructs that provided men with dominant positionality and greater power had become *conscientized* and acknowledged as a representation of gender inequality.

The participants acknowledged that these gendered performances and orientations were also existent in the school context, where the horizon aligned with male students (in terms of, for example, offering ideas, responding to questions, receiving support and

encouragement from teachers) and male teachers and administrators (who were given greater respect and whose ideas were received with more serious consideration). Girls, on the other hand, were often overlooked or not encouraged to contribute to class discussions/questions, expected to be submissive, and defer to boys and men, and not given equal respect as boys. Female teachers as well were expected to be subordinate to male teachers and administrators as per cultural expectations.

In order to redress this imbalance—both in this professional development situation and in the school context—the participants proposed various responses and approaches that could be taken to promote a supportive and inclusive environment to overcome feelings of intimidation and vulnerability. Participants' suggestions included: providing more time for girls/women to speak; awareness of the ratio of responses between girls/women and boys/men and making efforts to ensure these were equal and proportionate; drawing awareness and not tolerating boys/men interrupting, talking over girls/women. (Of course, these same approaches could be applied to girls/women who might dominate boys/men.) Such deliberate efforts to open up space and time for girls' and women's voices to be heard would serve to disorientate the normative educational context.

Disorienting the Performativity of Space and Voice

Although the women's voices had been "heard," the challenge of ensuring that their voices continued to be heard and extended in the shared space remained. The horizon of the space that had been established—that of public discourse—had the male body, but not the female, aligned at its vertical intersection. So, with the intention of unsettling the gendered power dimensions that had surfaced, I attempted to re-orientate the parameters and constitutional elements of that space, by shifting the familiar axes sufficiently so that gender performativities as enacted by the participants might be exposed.

In order to facilitate more equitable participation in the classroom setting, I initiated a *two women per one man* ratio (a ratio reflective of the gender female/male numbers in the group) of contributions to discussions and responses to questions. This was very challenging to implement at the beginning: many of the men were demonstrably annoyed with this approach, and became agitated and impatient when they were forced to wait to for women to make their contributions before they could respond. And, many of the women were initially timid and/or reticent to express their thoughts and offered responses in very quiet voices or whispers, kept their heads low, or asked a female peer to answer on their behalf. However, over the course of the week, the contributions of women who were initially reluctant to put forward their views increased significantly. In addition, the men, especially the headteachers, who were typically accustomed to assuming roles of leadership, authority, and representation of others, became more patient and supportive of their female colleagues. The body language also shifted: the men were more relaxed when waiting for women to respond, and the women began to respond in louder, more confident voices, making more eye contact with other participants—including the men—in the room.

The majority of the participants expressed appreciation for this intentional strategy for including all voices in discussions and activities. In his reflective summary, one man commented that one of the highlights of the course was, "Woman/woman/man answering questions planted some confidence, morale in the women to talk. It was interesting and encouraging." A woman similarly commented that one of the enjoyable things about the course was, "Answering questions and contributions woman/woman/man."Another

woman observed that "Woman/woman/man answering questions/contributions gives chance for women to know that they can also think like men; made women to feel that they are also powerful and good decision makers; made women to feel that they are equal to men". These comments reveal that although the normative orientation remained masculinist—in that power, ability, and opportunity was framed around men—women had an opportunity to experience male orientation in this context and thus trouble the assumptions that aligned men (and not women) to its horizon. Many participants said that, when they returned to their classrooms they would "Giv[e] equal opportunity for girls and boys in discussing questions in class," indicating their willingness to begin to disrupt gender orientations in their classrooms.

However, there are limitations to structural strategies and processes that are implemented in attempts to manage and distribute power and opportunities in a controlled environment, as they do not subvert the foundational social architecture of gender and associated power imbalances. In order to "expose the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender cores or identities" and disorient the normative, it is necessary "to elucidate both the act and strategy of disavowal which at once constitute and conceal gender as we live it" (Butler, 1988, p. 530). The written statement made by one participant—"The African tradition discourages women's voice"—with respect to women's reluctance to participate in discussions revealed an underlying driver of gender orientation which we explored as a group. We considered historical, cultural expectations of girls and women (the hereditary lines of gender) and how girls and women perform these expectations, how they position themselves within their society and relationships (how they orientate their bodies towards objects and how their bodies are orientated in relation to the horizon of normativity), and how these expectations, positionalities, and orientations impact the life paths, experiences, and opportunities of girls.

Drawing as a Semiotic Mode to Identify Gender Inequalities

To explore experiences of gender discrimination and stereotyping, the participants represented scenes where they had witnessed or experienced gender discrimination, particularly connected to educational environments and/or opportunities through drawings. They then taped their drawings to the wall and took time to view each of the images through a gallery walk. The images were raw and powerful, representing a range of gender-based abuses endured by girls within school and community contexts.

Figure 1. Male teacher beating female student

Figure 1 represents physical abuse that girls are commonly subjected to by male teachers. In this drawing the male teacher is oriented towards and embodies power (dominant gender) and authority (teacher). The stick is a material object of orientation with which he performs power and authority by beating the girl. The girl, on the other hand, performs powerlessness (dominated gender), and she is (as are her tears) oriented towards the ground as she is beaten.

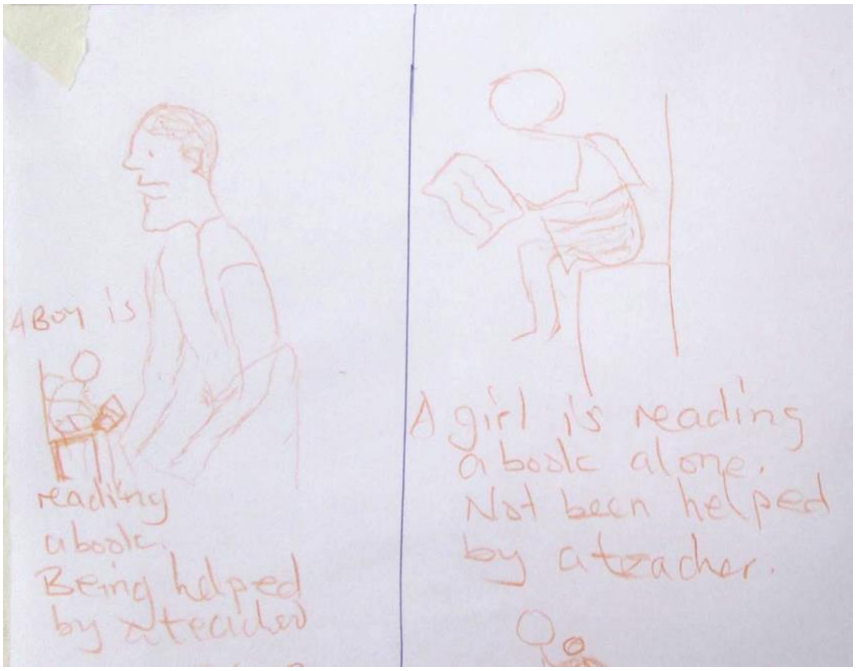

Figure 2. Contrast of attention given by teacher to boy and girl in classroom

Figure 2 contrasts the learning experiences of a boy and a girl in a classroom. On the left, the boy is receiving support and guidance from a teacher. The teacher is oriented towards the boy, who is, in turn, oriented towards the teacher who is nearby, in reach, of the boy. The boy performs the role of a student deserving of help, and the teacher performs the role of the one who is meant to provide help to deserving students. The right side of the drawing depicts a girl who receives no help or attention from the teacher. The girl is isolated, and the teacher is not within reach. The girl performs the role of someone who is not perceived as a student, but someone excluded, forgotten, and ignored.

Figure 3. Girl and boys seated in classroom

Figure 3 depicts a classroom context in which the boys are seated on benches at desks, while the girl must sit on the floor. In addition, the girl is caring for a young child, possibly the child of the teacher, as this is not an unusual practice. In this drawing, the material objects of orientation are powerfully present. The boys are afforded higher status in the classroom by being provided with benches to sit on, and a desk upon which they can do their work. The benches afford the boys literal height over the girl, who is orientated towards the ground, upon which she sits. The girl is also orientated towards the child, whom is prioritized over the girl's educational opportunity. The teacher is oriented towards the boys, but not the girl.

Figure 4 (below) shows a boy lifting the skirt of a girl, representing girls' sexual vulnerability, and the sexual harassment and abuse they suffer from boys as well as men in the community (including teachers). The boy's performance of violating a girl's body is demonstrative of his orientation towards power over others' bodies. The girl's experience of having her body violated reflects her orientation away from power, or her orientation towards powerlessness and subservience. Even the object of the skirt itself—that girls must wear, both as part of the uniform as well as for everyday attire (even working in the fields)—as something that can be "lifted" in order to expose the body, represents the vulnerability and potential for sexual abuse that girls and women face.

Figure 4. Boy sexually harassing girl

Following the gallery walk, discussion of the drawings revealed that all of the participants were familiar with each of the themes, and acknowledged that they were not uncommon in the school environment. In addition, many of the women alluded to their own personal experiences with the abuses depicted in the drawings.[2] The discussion these drawings triggered was profound, and the unequivocally gendered nature of the injustices depicted was acknowledged by every participant.

Disorienting Gender Through Drama

Building upon themes that had been raised through the various activities, the participants explored and embodied gender(ed) experiences through drama. The participants worked in groups of five, and created short pieces that centered around one of the themes that had been presented through the drawings and/or discussed in the course: a talented female student was not given time at home to do homework; a male teacher sexually abused a female student; a girl became pregnant and was forced to leave school, but wanted to return to school; a girl who had missed many days of school due to menstruation and tried to attend school during her menstrual cycle, but her uniform became stained by menstrual blood and she was humiliated by the boys and then ordered to leave school by her teacher; and, the drama upon which I have chosen as a focus for analysis—a girl had been denied a chance to begin school at the appropriate age, but when her mother finally convinced her father to allow the girl to attend school, she is "big" and is ridiculed by both the children in the class as well as the teacher.

Interestingly, in each skit, some participants chose to assume different genderroles for themselves . There was much laughter and teasing in the preparatory/rehearsal stages where women and men exchanged garments and created props to assume gender roles and disrupt their own gendered identities. This process led to some interesting insights into the ways in which they intuitively understood the performativities and orientations towards

[2] It would be helpful to further explore female teachers' own experiences of gender discrimination, but there was not sufficient time, nor appropriate conditions, in this study.

objects associated with gender constructs. The dramas themselves explored some dark aspects of gender discrimination and revealed some disturbing realities.

The drama I will consider for analysis focused on a girl (played by a man) whose father (played by a woman) had not permitted her to begin school. The mother and daughter begged the father to allow the girl to attend school, but his response was to beat his daughter and force her to perform onerous domestic labour. In this drama, the material objects of orientation for the father were the suit jacket and trousers (which had been borrowed from a male participant), the chair upon which he sat, the food he ate, the copious amounts of alcohol he consumed, and the money he kept to himself and then dispensed to the girl only so that she could purchase more alcohol for him. With these objects, and the opportunity to occupy space as a man, the woman who played the father vertically aligned her (the man's) body easily to the horizon of scenario. She/he sprawled over the chair in a posture of entitled belligerence, and regularly extended a foot or a hand to kick or hit the girl, and demonstrated contempt and utter lack of compassion and respect for his wife and daughter.

The father/husband extended his power and dominance into the space of the home, where there was little, if any, space for the women to claim power. The wife and daughter were orientated around/toward the ground: they sat at the man's feet and pleaded with him, or scurried away from the place of power (the chair, the home) in order to do his bidding (e.g., buying more alcohol). The man who played the daughter embodied the performativity of gender associated with being a girl. Material objects of orientation included a skirt, a cooking pot, and a broom. With seeming ease, the man inhabited the vertical line against the horizon of the familiar space that girls inhabit. His/her movements were cowering, skittish, and fearful. He/she was prepared to be beaten, or threatened, and jumped at any order that was issued by the father. He/she cried incessantly, and exuded an overall attitude of defeat and powerlessness.

At one point in the drama, a local school probation officer (typically a man, but played by a woman) came across the girl buying alcohol for her father in the local trading centre when she should have been in school. The probation officer visited the home and ordered the father to allow his daughter to attend school. The performativity of the probation officer embodied power, authority, and status as an educated male with paid public employment who was in a position to force others to comply with legal requirements. The objects of orientation for the probation officer included a uniform (suit jacket, trousers, and a cap, borrowed from male participants), as well as a motorbike (represented by a broom).

The power differential shifted at the family home when the father was confronted by a more powerful performance of masculinity in the probation officer. The girl was then permitted to go to school. However, because she was much older and much "bigger" than the other students in the class, she was ridiculed by both the students and the (female) teacher for not being able to read, write, or do basic math. The teacher sent her home. It was of interest that the female teacher seemed to lack compassion for the girl, and orientated herself away from the girl. What kind of gender performance was the teacher embodying here? Was it a way to exercise any power she might have as a teacher? Was it to disassociate herself with those who represented the embodied experiences of severe oppression?

These dramatic representations of the challenges that girls face seemed to enable many of the participants to more fully comprehend gender-based abuse and discrimination.

One male participant expressed a new appreciation for imbalance of work assigned to girls: "The role plays were so interesting. It made me to experience how the girls to work which I had never done". Another commented on how the dramatization helped participants form a more comprehensive understanding of/for the various stakeholders involved in promoting gender equality: "I learned about the roles of stakeholders in the education system especially when we dramatized some stories". What seemed to be the most compelling and interesting aspect of the dramatizations for the participants, however, was the opportunity to experience different gender positionalities and how that shifted their relationships in the world. Some participants commented on insights gained from the more superficial aspects of exploring different gender roles: "it is…useful to do gender activities, e.g., men doing women's work and women do men's work." Some expressed insights related to empowerment: "I enjoyed the drama on gender relations where men and women can do what they thought they could not do"; "In role play many who feel shy to discuss with others were able to speak." Others discussed the helpfulness of role play in gaining an appreciation and understanding of different perspectives: "in this training I gain more knowledge from this role play where by women are able to be like father and man to be like mother." Still others claimed that drama helped them to understand approaches that could be used to promote gender equality in the local context: "in role play it brings the clear picture of what we are supposed to do in promoting gender issues in our community."

Drama enabled the participants' identities and *habitus* to become entwined within the Discourse of gender in relation to education, as a form of text or "sedimentation" (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). During the process of creating the text, the participants disorientated their own experiences and understandings of gender which offered them insight into the power of alignment (empowerment) as well as shifts in alignment (experiencing the different roles of mother/father) within normative gender orientations. In the discussion following the dramas, men who had played female roles admitted to feeling helpless, disrespected, and abused. The women who had assumed male roles felt empowered by the authority they wielded just by virtue of being male, as well as the freedom they had to do certain things are culturally prohibitive to women, such as ride motorbikes. The woman who played the teacher who was seeking sexual favours from the female student discussed how her own personal knowledge of this kind of situation made it easy for her to act out the scenario and it also was informative as she was able to actually understand the kind of power male teachers wielded over vulnerable female students.

The participants believed that dramatizing gender-based challenges was an effective way in which to share, but also personally experience, the complexities of these challenges. As one participant remarked, "The role plays were fantastic and real. I wish the whole world watched the role plays. They would bring in some change." Another (anonymous) individual wrote in the reflective summary of the week's activities, "The role playings were so interesting. It made me to experience how the girls to work which I had not ever done." Another commented on the need for "role play to solve problems," and another observed that it was possible to "pass gender messages to others through stories and skits."

Discussion

This study sought both to disorient assumptions related to gender normativity in order to expose the elements, processes, and structures that cohere to create something that

appears to be natural or inherent/inherited. The act of disorienting was not intended to find ways to *right* the orientation, but rather to unsettle what was familiar in order to open up spaces of possibility for new orientations.

The *two-women-one-man* discussion strategy effectively disoriented the space of public discourse, where men experienced constraint, and women were able to extend their bodies into a space that was not typically available to them. Initially, the men felt ill at ease, agitated, frustrated, and annoyed, but over the course of the week, the orientation posed less discomfiture for them. The women, too, initially were uncomfortable with the expanse of space available to them, but they became accustomed to orienting themselves towards the power of voice that had become within reach.

The drawings captured objects, performances, and orientations of gender. Drawings clearly depicted the ways in which boys were oriented towards education—towards their teachers, their chairs and desks, the chalkboard; girls were often oriented away from education, and towards objects that would "straighten" their hereditary lines—such as the ground, a child, and clothing that rendered them vulnerable. Gender performativity was evidenced, for example, by male teachers beating female students, and boys sexually and verbally abusing girls. The drawings were instructive in providing artifacts of reference for the discussion of how gendered orientations are foundational to what becomes gender normative.

The dramatic enactments were especially powerful, as they enabled the embodiment of performativity and a full tilt of experienced disorientation. The visceral experience of many of the participants who assumed the roles of the opposite gender seemed to deeply impact them as well as the other participants. The words, gestures, postures, interactions, objects, and ways in which their bodies occupied space were imbued with the corporeal knowledge of what it means to be orientated towards/around/away from material and non-material objects, and how those orientations impact and even determine the lines/paths individuals follow. Interestingly, the women and men who assumed different gender roles did so with surprising ease, as if they intuitively knew what it felt like to be "aligned" with the horizons of gender-constructed space, especially when supported with material objects that reinforced attributes associated with that gender.

Many participants communicated—openly or anonymously in the questionnaires—that our explorations into cultural orientations of gender had initiated a paradigmatic shift for them in terms of their understanding of the challenges that girls face: "[I now] understand the problems faced by the girl child especially the big ones during: menstruation, school fees problems, negligent parents, girls that conceive during their school life," and, "[I understand] how gender can be promoted in schools, communities and other institutions." Disorienting gender through embodied, multimodal approaches to text creation and interpretation offered the participants not only new insights into girls' lives and experiences, but also increased understanding of normative gender-based issues, which motivated them to commit to more gender-responsive pedagogical approaches that acknowledged the need for deliberate practices of inclusion and encouragement of all pupils: "As a teacher I need to change methods of teaching in order to cater for the slow learners . . . I need to involve all the learners in my class that is girls and boys to participate equal in the activities given." Experiences of disorientation also appeared to cultivate deeper degrees of compassion and empathy that participants indicated would influence their practice: "[I will] teach with mercy trying to understand the learners deeper"; "I as a

teacher should not harass pupils but solve their problems amicably with their parents for their bright future." Some participants indicated that explorations into disorientations of gender was of continuing interest to them, as evidenced in this comment in the reflective piece, "After I will leave [this course] I will be observing my gender and make sure that I observe the gender roles."

However, there was also recognition that disorienting the status quo was risky and would likely be met with resistance. One male participant, who admitted to me that he had struggled with the challenges that the course had presented to his understanding of gender-normative assumptions, behaviours, and structures, wrote, in his final reflective piece, "I will try to do, implement . . . the necessary ideas in my school though I may get some tough times from the community as they may see what I will do as unusual." This comment bespeaks the reality that the deliberate disruption of societal gender norms is a herculean undertaking. Those tasked with bringing about gender equality from within are also being tasked with deconstructing and disorienting the societies to which they belong, and within which their own gendered identities have been created. Thus, working towards achieving gender equality within gender inequitable contexts will undoubtedly be a prolonged, iterative process of disruption and disorientation.

In addition to disorienting gender assumptions, the multimodal approach to participatory research immersed participants in literacy pedagogy that they found to be inspiring for their own teaching. In our final discussion at the conclusion of the course, the participants considered ways in which they would use multimodality in their own teaching practice to engage their pupils in drawing, discussions, drama and other modes of expression. Some reflected upon multimodal practices they would include in the classroom in their final reflective piece: "The knowledge I got from [this course] made me to learn a lot of things, It will made me take a lot of different things in the classroom: telling stories to the children . . . different kinds of playing . . . drawing pictures will be done; role playing I will introduce"; "The message I will take back to my class/school include…writing gender messages on the compound; organizing some skits about gender in school".

Conclusion

This study showed that embodied, multimodal approaches to text and literacy can be used to disorient normative gender assumptions in powerful ways. The interstices pried open by disorientation offer opportunities for non-normative experiences, perceptions, and insights that unsettle the taken-for-grantedness of assumptions and practices based on those assumptions. Policies and programming that promote gender equality in and through education often presume that educators intuitively know what gender equality is and how to facilitate it in the school. Educators, as all individuals, bring their own gendered identities to their work, and this shapes the ways in which they understand their students, their professional relationships, their communities of practice, and their pedagogy.

Teachers inhabit classrooms as individuals with lived experiences, yet unless they are provided with opportunities to deconstruct and disorient gender constructs, they cannot be expected to transform the very society that shaped their own gendered identities. Gender equality in education can only be realized once educators have the opportunity to explore and value their own, and others', embodied experiences of inequality. With this knowledge they can challenge and resist the normalization of inequality and oppression and begin to reshape habitus in their schools (and beyond) to actualize empowerment for girls.

This study found that, despite the participants' understanding that they were expected to be promoting and operationalizing "gender equality" in their classrooms, and their desire to do so, they did not feel that they possessed the knowledge or tools to do this. The structured discussion response format (*two-women-one-man*) and the multimodal activities (drawing and drama) supported the participants in the exposing of gender constructs, as well as disorienting those constructs. These processes and experiences enabled them to gain more clarity about the nature and prevalence and often un- or under-perceived gender injustices that hindered girls' educational opportunities.

Thus, if educators are expected to operationalize gender equality policies and initiatives in ways that they become *truth* and *reality* for children, educators must first, through professional development opportunities, come to know both how gender constructs frame orientations and performativities in ways that present, for example, injustices, opportunities, and power differentials as normative so that these can be deliberately disrupted and disoriented. In addition, educators need to be exposed to effective pedagogies of literacy/literacies that embrace, embody, and value diverse modes of communication so that all voices will have the opportunity to be heard through the semiotic representations they produce through modes of their choosing. Through acknowledging the layers of meaning within sedimentized text, and providing opportunities to uncover and examine these layers, the process of disruption and disorientation can begin to unsettle the normative and open fissures for new gender(ed) identities and relationships.

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Creating New Meanings and Understanding with Postcolonial Texts: Teaching **Purple Hibiscus** *in a Grade 10 Classroom*

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Abstract

This article invites readers to share the experiences of a teacher and his Grade 10 students as they read and discussed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Nigerian novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel was selected as part of a national action research study in which literacy researchers and teachers select postcolonial literature for the classroom and develop new pedagogical strategies for teaching the texts. The article suggests that contemporary international novels such as *Purple Hibiscus* have potential to raise complex questions of social justice in the classroom and to create new understandings of a changing world.

Introduction

The opening line of the Nigerian coming-of-age novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) spoken by the teenage protagonist, Kambili, offers an evocative reminder to readers of the power of symbolic objects to provide insight into the fictional lives of characters: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines" (2003, p. 3).

With these few words, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie introduces readers to three themes of the novel: the ongoing power of Catholicism in postcolonial Nigerian society, the father's abusive nature, and the children's resistance to his domination. These opening lines of the novel also point to the intertextual nature of contemporary African writing. The words are a pointed allusion to the famous novel *Things Fall Apart* by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. As Kurtz (2011) explains, *Purple Hibiscus*

> is noteworthy both for the way that it connects backwards in time to the literary generations that precede it and for the way that those very connections open up fresh perspectives and reveal a rich and complex panoply of intertextual possibilities that were not available in earlier generations, thus manifesting a new stage in the ongoing elaboration of Africa's literary imagination. (p. 26)

Purple Hibiscus opens up complex questions about the relationships among culture, religion, tradition, power, and social change. The novel follows Nigerian teenager Kambili Achike, the daughter of a highly respected, wealthy Catholic businessman. Kambili is painfully shy and craves the approval of her father, Eugene, who behind closed doors is extremely abusive to his family, causing his wife several miscarriages and punishing his children for the slightest infractions. Sent to spend time with her progressive aunt, Kambili falls in love with a young priest and learns to voice her own thoughts and opinions. At the

same time, her brother Jaja becomes more and more rebellious, threatening the superficial, familial perfection that their father craves. The novel ends with the death of Eugene, having been slowly poisoned by his wife, and the hope for a better future.

Purple Hibiscus has often been described as an African female *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist Kambili finds her own voice and identity. In addition, the novel can also be seen as an allegory of Nigeria's struggle against corrupt and oppressive rule. Audrey Peters (2012) suggests,

> *Purple Hibiscus* explores the issues of ethnic tensions and political unrest in Nigeria as parallels for coming of age and issues of identity definition. The story, although set in Nigeria, is common to adolescents from other times and places . . . The allegory between personal and national identity elevates this story from a typical narrative of adolescent angst into a thoughtful analysis of the formation of self; further, it does so in a way that dissipates some of the isolation that typically marks adolescence, allowing a reader to belong to a larger world. (p.27)

According to Peters (2012), the novel reaches across national borders, breaking down national insularity and showing western readers a less caricatured version of Africa, and encourages them to imagine the experiences of people elsewhere in the world.

Purple Hibiscus was selected for a Grade 10 English Language Arts classroom in a large, culturally-diverse, urban high school as part of a national research project to teach postcolonial literature with potential to raise issues of social justice with students. In this four-year study, funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), literacy researchers in six Canadian provinces met with teachers in monthly inquiry groups. The research aimed to investigate teachers' perspectives on the role these literary texts might play in the development of curricula and pedagogies that address issues of individual equity and structural inequalities.

In this paper, we offer our perspectives, as a researcher and an English language arts teacher, on ways that Adichie's text addresses the aims of the research; we discuss pedagogical strategies designed to teach the text and share some of the Grade 10 students' responses to reading *Purple Hibiscus*.

Ingrid: Overview of Our Research Study

Coming to the Study: Rationale and Aims

While Canadian multiculturalism has increased awareness of cultural diversity, it has been slow to effect structural societal changes in the country and students continue to read literature that privileges Eurocentric perspectives. In a majority of Canadian secondary schools, English language arts teachers still select and teach canonized British and American literary texts (Johnston & Mangat, 2012; Johnston, 2003; Mackey, 2009). Teachers often base their literary selections on their own reading histories, on the availability of texts in their schools, and on provincial curriculum mandates and guidelines (Baird, 2002).

Our current study built upon a previous SSHRC-funded study in which researchers at six universities across Canada developed monthly inquiry groups with interested teachers to offer support and reinforcement for making curricular changes through selecting and teaching Canadian literature by authors from a wide range of ethnic, racial,

and cultural backgrounds. Funding from this grant provided classroom copies of the selected new texts, thereby addressing the challenge of accessing new literary resources, and the inquiry groups created opportunities to share ideas for new titles and to develop curriculum resources for teaching the texts.

Many of the selected books paid critical attention to such historical and political factors as colonialism, indigeneity, immigration, multiculturalism, gender, religious and cultural policies. For example, secondary teachers in my inquiry group selected books by Indigenous Canadian authors, such as Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000) and Richard Wagamese's *Keeper'n Me (2006)* that encouraged their students to reflect on the legacies of residential schools in Canada; others selected graphic novels such as David Lester's *The Listener* (2011) looking back to the injustices of World War II, and *Skim* by Mariko and Jillian Tamaki (2008) which considers issues of gender identity, religion, and suicide. More detailed stories of teaching contemporary Canadian literature from the various national research sites, together with an annotated bibliography of the selected texts in this study, are included in our book *Challenging Stories: Canadian Literature for Social Justice in the Classroom* (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017).

Our present four-year study builds upon the recommendations of teachers involved in the previous action research study to broaden the selection of texts beyond Canada to include more international, postcolonial texts. Much of this literature aims to destabilize dominant discourses in the West, challenging inherent assumptions and critiquing the legacies of colonialism. In this study we have followed a similar pattern of inviting teachers to participate in inquiry groups, sharing ideas and resources for raising issues of social justice with our students.

We have recognized that teachers' understandings and approaches to promoting social justice in their teaching are equally as important as text selection and availability. A study by Bender-Slack (2010) in the United States explored secondary English language arts teachers' perspectives on teaching for social justice, and found that most had vague conceptions of social justice, believing it to be more about fairness than the need to address systemic inequalities. Our study recognizes the importance of involving teachers actively in the choice and discussion of texts and the development of pedagogical strategies that address the complexities of engaging students in questions of social justice.

Including more postcolonial texts into the classroom has encouraged us as researchers and teachers to look more broadly at texts written by international authors. In addition to Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus,* secondary teachers in my Edmonton group selected texts such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) and *Exit West* (2017), by Mohsin Hamid, two novels that play with genre and format to challenge our thinking about the current state of international terrorism and world tensions. Another teacher is exploring how the interaction of image and text in the graphic novel *Zahra's Paradise* by Amir, with illustrator Khalil (2011), offers powerful insight into human rights in Iran, and how the *March* series of books by authors John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, with illustrator Nate Powell (2013), creates a dramatic retelling of the civil rights movement in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Our research study was underpinned by postcolonial theories of reading practices that emphasize the hybrid nature of negotiating cultural identities and citizenship in a "third space" of literary engagement (Bhabha, 1994; Bradford, 2007), and address the role of

literary texts in interrogating the colonial past (Gandhi, 1998; Jogie, 2015). Wisam Abdul-Jabbar (2014) suggests that in selecting a postcolonial text for the classroom,

> a deciding factor is the extent to which a certain book can help the students to see the world from the perspective of the other. One of the most challenging aspects of teaching a postcolonial text is the teacher's burden to take his or her students over the barriers of language, culture and preconceived notions into a world of difference. (p. 5)

Deciding to teach more unfamiliar postcolonial texts may challenge teachers to move outside their comfort zones into a pedagogy of discomfort. Megan Boler (2014) explains that "a pedagogy of discomfort recognizes and problematizes the deeply embedded dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony" (p. 118). For teachers to make a commitment to growth and change requires experiencing the discomfort of new thinking and a willingness to engage in in-depth inquiry with students regarding systems of domination and the difficult work of reevaluating the relationship of one's privilege to others in the world. Including postcolonial texts in the classroom can empower teachers and students to reflect on their own cultural understanding and to see themselves within historical contexts and potentially to allow their worldviews to be altered.

Methodology

We conceptualized our inquiry groups with English language arts teachers as a form of action research, a "self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (Carr & Kemmis 1986, p. 162). Following ethics approval from each university and from participating school boards, researchers and teacher participants worked together, attempting to follow an action research model of understanding a research problem, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and reviewing. In our monthly inquiry groups, we worked through the curricular and pedagogical possibilities of teaching for social justice through reading and discussing scholarly articles related to teaching postcolonial literature, and shared ideas about texts that might be relevant for the study and appropriate for the age and level of students in our classrooms. Teachers selected and taught particular texts, engaged with students' responses to the issues of social justice raised by the literature, and reflected upon the transformative potential of addressing these issues with students in these classrooms.

Researchers at each of the six provincial sites developed their own case studies. In each year of the study we have gathered data in the following ways:

- Audio recordings and field notes of inquiry group discussions prior to teaching selected literary texts and post-teaching discussions and reflections.
- Field notes of observations in participant teachers' classrooms as they teach the selected texts.
- Student-generated materials in response to the selected texts
- Audio recordings of focus group discussions with volunteer students in these classes.

- Audio recordings of individual interviews with teacher participants about their reflections on the inquiry group activities, their philosophical and pedagogical understandings of teaching postcolonial literature for social justice, and their experiences of teaching the texts.

Following analysis of our data at each site, we have shared our findings at conferences, workshops, and in collaborative publications. At my particular inquiry group, ten teachers from high schools and junior high schools in my city and surrounding areas have attended our meetings and are enthusiastic about discussing possible postcolonial texts that are suitable for their particular grades of students.

In the following pages, Kevin, one of the teacher participants in the study, shares his experiences of teaching *Purple Hibiscus* in a Grade 10 classroom.

Kevin: Selecting the Novel, or There Must Be More Than Mockingbird

Selecting a novel for a whole-class community read is always a challenging task. While participation in the action research study had freed me from one of the most common constraints of what to teach (availability in the book room and limited funds to purchase new texts), I still worried about picking the "right" novel. For many of my colleagues, both at my school and across the province, no Grade 10 English class is complete without studying *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It seems to be almost a rite of passage—a sign that students are ready to leave behind the YA novels of their junior high experience and enter into a new world of literary experiences. Indeed, surveys conducted within my district both in 1996 and again in 2006 showed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* continued to reign as the most widely taught novel in Grade 10 (Mackey, 2012). Little had changed, I believed, since 2006. When I suggested to one of my English 10 classes that we were likely not going to be reading Harper Lee's novel, a student, visibly concerned, replied, "But we have to read that book! Aren't we supposed to read it in Grade 10?" I assured her that while it was an enjoyable and worthwhile book that she could (and should) borrow from the library if she wanted, there were other novels which would be equally worth reading. I asked many of my fellow teachers why they continued to use *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the classroom. Responses typically fell into two categories: "I love it," or, "I haven't found anything else that works." Certainly, I could identify with the former. I remember encountering and liking the novel when I was a high school student, and as a teacher I had taught it a couple times. However, the latter reason provided by my colleagues seemed to be self-perpetuating: since many teachers always chose *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they therefore never took an opportunity to see what else might work. My desire to break from tradition and try something new was crystallized in 2016 when Canadian Author Lawrence Hill published an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* calling for an update to the high school canon. Critiquing the novel's focus on white characters at the expense of black characters, as well as the novel's Alabama setting, which Hill saw as too removed from Canadian contexts, he wrote:

> the rote and ongoing use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the classroom points to our very Canadian-ness, and to our collective disinclination in Canada to examine racism and black history in our own backyard. How utterly convenient it is for Canadian children and adults from Dawson City to St. John's to read about racism

> in the Deep South of the United States in the Great Depression, and to avoid discussions about slavery, segregation, other forms of racial injustice as well as the civil-rights movement in Canada itself.

I loved the novel, but I wanted a change for myself and for my students. There had to be something more than *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2003 novel *Purple Hibiscus* appealed to me for a number of reasons. According to a study by the Cooperative Children's Books Center (2013), young readers are more likely to encounter children's books with animals or trucks as protagonists than they are to find books about black characters. Although this particular study focused on picture books, I knew that this lack of diversity is endemic to YA and adult genres too. Knowing from experience which books are commonly taught in the junior high English language arts classrooms of our feeder schools, I was skeptical that my students would have encountered many racially diverse characters in their reading history. I wanted my students—many of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants—to read books by and about people that looked like them, and to see themselves represented and reflected in literature. Following education scholar R.S. Bishop (1990), I believe that literature can be a mirror, as it "transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading then, becomes a means of self-affirmation" (p. ix). Given that the majority of literature studied in English classrooms continues to be drawn from a Eurocentric canon, many students may go through their entire formative education and never encounter characters that resemble them or their family. As Bishop notes,

> when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. (p. 29)

The repeated privileging of these certain forms and ways of thinking while marginalizing other views and approaches represents Kumashiro's (2002) definition of oppression. When these repetitive forms are encountered over and over again in curricular material, they begin to be taken for granted, as if they are a self-evident and natural truth.

At the same time, I felt that it was important for all students to encounter texts about characters from cultures and backgrounds different than their own. It was important that they consider not only the ways in which these characters' lives were similar to their own, but also that they understand and learn to appreciate the ways that others are different. Bishop (1990) furthers her metaphor of the mirror by asserting that literature may also act as a window, a means to offer students—particularly those from a dominant social group—a view of another world. These students, accustomed to seeing their own reality reflected back to them, may have developed an exaggerated sense of self-importance coupled with an ignorance of others. For these individuals, literature can offer an opportunity to witness possibilities of other ways of being. Since I teach at a large, diverse urban high school, I wanted my students to have the opportunity to explore and learn from other cultures, to see the world from new perspectives. In doing so, I hoped that the novel would serve as a foundation to explore broader issues of social justice. I wanted my students to ask the same questions that I had: why do we need to read about more diverse characters? Whose

interests are being served by typical text selections? How can increasing our understanding of others whose lives are different from our own help us to create change? Such a move echoes Bishop's final consideration of how literature may function: as a sliding glass door, a way to access a different kind of future (1990). While she does not naively suggest that merely reading about the experiences of others will somehow help oppressed people, she does suggest that developing an empathetic understanding of others is an important starting point.

In addition to opening up new ways of seeing the world, *Purple Hibiscus* also presents a compelling story that I believed would resonate with my students. Like Kambili, many Grade 10 students are beginning to find their own voice. They are becoming increasingly aware of the ways that their own beliefs align with or diverge from those of their parents and are learning to articulate these beliefs in new ways. I believed that the themes of growing up, discovering identity, and family relationships would allow students to personally connect to the novel. Given that my students come from a variety of religious backgrounds and are generally curious about other faith traditions, I thought that *Purple Hibiscus* would allow them to not only explore the intersections of Catholicism and traditional Igbo practices, but also to examine the consequences of religious extremism and hypocrisy. Finally, as I intended to use the novel with a regular Grade 10 English Language Arts (ELA) class as well as a pre-International Baccalaureate (IB) ELA 10 class, I wanted a novel that offered an engaging plot and complex characters that was also rich in symbolism and lyrical language.

Teaching the Novel

Having committed to teaching *Purple Hibiscus*, I was left with a couple of questions as I prepared my teaching plans. As the novel is set in Nigeria, I knew that there would be many cultural and historical references that students would not understand. Thus, I debated whether it would be better to pre-teach some background information first, so that students had a foundational understanding of the cultural context, or whether it would be better to begin reading the text and encourage students to explore these references themselves. On one hand, I did not want students to feel overwhelmed by references to places and events that were completely unfamiliar to them. On the other, I did not want to act as though I was an expert on Nigerian culture, when, in fact, I know very little. Moving into a literary and geographic territory with which I was much less familiar exemplified Boler's (2014) notion of pedagogy of discomfort. I would have to challenge my own beliefs and deeply held assumptions about the teacher-as-expert before I could encourage my students to challenge their understanding of their position and privilege in the world. Ultimately, I settled on presenting the novel without cultural context, but with strategies that I believed were important for comprehension. As students read, either on their own or as a class, they were asked to record questions that emerged about cultural and historical references. These questions would later form the basis of research presentations. The novel sparked many potential questions for inquiry, including:

- What impact did the British have on Nigerian society during and after Colonization?
- How did religion in Nigeria change with the arrival of Europeans?
- What status do traditional Nigerian languages have within present day Nigeria?

- What are women allowed or not allowed to do in Nigerian society?
- What kinds of hobbies (music and sports) are popular with young Nigerians?

Next, I wondered how I would use the novel to address issues of social justice. Although I recognized that such a term was difficult to define, given the range of possibilities that it might include, I considered the following as a working definition: social justice begins with the inclusion of a diverse range of voices and experiences, ones which have often been, or continue to be, marginalized in some way. It is about opening ourselves as readers to new ways of seeing the world, broadening our perceptions and understandings in such a way that creates a possibility for action (Lynch & Baker, 2005). It is asking ourselves difficult questions about who is making decisions and whose interests are being served (Young, 1990). Finally, social justice is about asking what we can do to begin making the world a better, more equitable place to be for all. In some ways, the mere inclusion of the book addressed inequalities of representation and the historical privileging of Eurocentric texts written by men Beyond that, though, I wanted students to develop a more nuanced understanding of a different society—in this case, Nigeria—as well as an empathetic understanding of Kambili and those in situations like hers. I wanted them to explore issues of power and privilege, and how they interact with identities such as race and gender.

At the same time, I was conscious of how mere empathy-building projects can be problematic. As educational scholar Sharon Todd points out, the notion of community that becomes the chief aim of empathy is built on an "illusion of 'social wholeness' which risks submerging the very differences that social justice education seems so adamant to respect into a collective totality where singularity no longer holds any moral or political meaning" (2004, p. 338). In other words, the one who empathizes assimilates the Other into their own way of thinking and being, very often ignoring differences that matter to the Other. The impossibility of truly understanding the Other can be seen in the well-intended, but ultimately harmful, sentiments of people who assert that they "don't see colour". Whereas these speakers imagine that they are putting themselves in the position of the Other and reassuring them that everyone is really all the same, they are also expressing how they would not want to feel different themselves, ignoring the realities that these others *are* different and that they likely feel many of the effects of such difference on a routine basis. Furthermore, Todd argues that people ought to have a "responsibility to others even when understanding their experiences is not possible" (2004, p. 338). Despite the classic advice of literary hero Atticus Finch, it is not always possible to "climb into [someone's] skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960, p. 36). Thus, I wanted my students to both recognize their similarities to Kambili while continuing to acknowledge the important differences as well.

In addition to developing some empathetic awareness, I wanted to push students further to consider their own responsibility in effecting positive change. Thus, I asked the class to consider as essential questions, "How is power divided in societies?"; "How do people with lots of power silence those with less power?"; and "How can those with less power respond?" With these three essential questions in mind, I chose to frame the novel through Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *TED Talk* "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). In this lecture, Adichie draws on the Nigerian concept of *nkali*, which roughly translates as "being greater than another," warning of the dangers of allowing only those with power to tell the stories of others, and in doing so, defining through totalizing narratives how others

are perceived. The result is an essentialized view of groups that are read as homogenous, incapable of acting outside of the preconceived stereotypes that have been established. Prior to viewing the *TED Talk*, students were asked to brainstorm what comes to mind when they consider Nigeria. Few students had any knowledge about the country at all. When I asked them instead to consider Africa as a whole, predictable answers included ideas related to poverty, famine, AIDS, and war, or notions of wild safaris and ancient Egypt. Very few students—even those with various African backgrounds—offered responses related to modern cities or vibrant cultures. The class was then asked to reflect on how it is that they came to possess such ideas about these other places. Most students suggested that images of Africa that they had seen on television or in movies tended to illustrate the same narrative, and that they had not, by and large, encountered any narratives—fictional or otherwise—that offered an alternative. After viewing Adichie's *TED Talk*, students began making a number of insightful observations about the ways in which stereotypical depictions of groups make it difficult to appreciate differences and value the potential of others. Many of them commented on the "unfairness" of such situations, and connected Adichie's ideas to issues ranging from Indigenous issues in Canada to Black Lives Matter in the United States.

In order to explore further the consequences of such stereotypical views of Africa, I asked students to read a short story called "Crocodile Tails," by Zimbabwean writer Chiedza Musengezi (1999). In this story, Gill, a young British teacher, travels to Zimbabwe to teach school and to "experience hardship" (Musengezi, p.134). As she develops a friendship with the narrator, a local teacher, both women reveal the naive misconceptions they hold about each other's culture. More specifically, Gill realizes that Western educational practices which she believes to be superior are out of place and ineffective in a different context. The story ends somewhat ambiguously when the narrator arrives in Britain to see her old friend and, expecting a "transformation for the better," suggests that the West is not as paradisiacal as she imagined (Musengezi, p.135). Students were quick to connect the story to Adichie's *TED Talk*, recognizing how each of the characters had a "Single Story" about the other's culture. Furthermore, they raised interesting questions about the implications of North Americans going to volunteer or work in African countries with the express intent of "saving" others by introducing them to Western ideas or practices. As many of the students were studying the impacts of globalization in their social studies course, they were able to make several links to social and economic issues of "voluntourism."

After examining the idea of the "Single Story" through Adichie's *TED Talk* alongside Musengezi's short story, students wrote personal responses in which they explored a "Single Story," told about one group—cultural, religious, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographical, socioeconomic, age, etc.—to which they belonged. Common themes in these reflections included feelings of frustration and anger at the assumptions people often made based on the labels they assigned, a desire to prove these stereotypes wrong, and recognition that responsibility to move beyond this way of thinking belongs to those who hold the views. Students also considered this issue in light of the essential questions, and posited that by making assumptions about them, other people with more power were, in a way, silencing them by refusing to engage with them as individuals. Some students noted that they felt powerless to change this, though many pointed to the work that we had already done as a way to perhaps help others understand the damage of

stereotypes. After sharing their writing with others, students engaged in a discussion in which some revealed their surprise about the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination many of their classmates faced. They also brainstormed ideas about how to begin the work of counteracting these stereotypes. While many students were encouraged by the work being done in the classroom and expressed a sense of empowerment, others remarked that the task of overcoming forms of oppression such as racism was pointless, because "there would always be racists" and "this is just one class". Nevertheless, throughout the class study of *Purple Hibiscus* (and beyond into the study of other texts), students continued to return to the ideas of Adichie's "Single Story."

With essential questions still in mind, the class began reading the novel. It became apparent to students quite quickly that Eugene is a character who possesses great power, based on his role as head of the family, his high status in the community, and his close connection to Catholicism, the privileged religion within the community. Organized into small groups, students tracked the circumstances that allotted some characters power while depriving it from others.Students identified dogmatic religious views, patriarchy, the military, corrupt governments, and the legacy of colonization as dominating forces. As I did not want students to reduce all relations in the novel to a binary of powerful/powerless, I also asked the groups to track ways that characters who seemed to have less power responded to or rebelled against those who had more. Students noticed that Kambili, as a young girl silenced by her father, is afraid to express herself and deprived of the agency to make her own decisions. At first, Kambili seems to deal with her father's dominance by remaining quiet, while her mother Beatrice responds by acting subservient, and her brother Jaja by openly defying his father. As the novel continues, students pointed to other characters' unique or changing response to oppressive power: Ade Coker, who uses his newspaper to publish scathing editorials on political corruption; Papa Nnukwu, who continues to honour the traditional Igbo ways, rather than convert to Catholicism and enjoy the economic benefits this would bring; Aunty Ifeoma who values education and speaks out against the subordination of women; Father Amadi, who recognizes that a syncretic religious system is likely to be more accessible to the people than a hardline, conservative Catholic ideology; Beatrice, who we learn has been secretly poisoning her husband for some time until his eventual death; and, finally, Kambili herself who ultimately acknowledges the complex relationship she has with her abusive father and learns to articulate her own independent identity. Students were then asked to choose one character to represent through a visual collage. In addition to focusing on character appearance, traits, and values, students were also asked to consider how the character had been silenced by those with more power as well as how they responded. In doing so, the class came to understand that their chosen character did not exist as just a passive victim, but as a person with agency to respond to injustice.

Within the novel, no character advocates more strongly for resistance to domination than Kambili's aunt, Ifeoma. With her vibrant lipstick and progressive viewpoints, Ifeoma proved to be a character that fascinated many students. Curious to see where the discussion might lead, I introduced the class to another short Adichie text, "We Should All Be Feminists," an essay in which Adichie outlines the negative effects of everyday sexism and argues the benefits to both men and women of embracing a feminist perspective. Many students were surprised to learn that they had already encountered an excerpt of this text in Beyoncé's song "Flawless" (2013). I asked students to compare the arguments posited by

Adichie in her essay to Beyoncé's feminist views as articulated through her music, videos, and interviews, to Ifeoma, Beatrice, and Kambili in the novel. Aside from the instant engagement that Beyoncé brings to any high school lesson, students were actively invested in exploring the nuances between these women's viewpoints and with other ideas of feminism the students already held. The comparison exercise provided a foundation for students to engage in a moderated class discussion. Students made many insightful comments about the extent to which feminism was still needed, problems with "white" feminism, the relationship between feminism and queer and trans people, and the roles and perspectives of men within feminist perspectives. Finally, students wrote personal responses, many of which skillfully tied together the novel, the essential questions, and the smaller, supporting texts.

The final project the class completed during the course of their study was a context research presentation. Using the questions formulated throughout their reading of *Purple Hibiscus*, students organized and refined their research queries. Specifically, students were directed to examine the role of some cultural or historical factor in relation to the events of the novel. One group chose to examine the use of Igbo words and phrases. After providing a general overview of the structure of the language, the group shared their observations that while translations for the words were never provided, one could nevertheless determine the general meaning of the lines from their context.Linking the language back to the essential questions about power, the group convincingly argued that Adichie used traditional Igbo as a way to reclaim power over the dominant, colonial language. These students recognized that characters like Eugene were products of a colonial system that privileged English over Igbo, and that the use of Igbo without translation represented a particular response to a power that had historically silenced native languages. Another group chose to examine allusions to Nigerian musicians such as Fela. Like the first group, these students provided interesting background information and song lyrics before examining the ways that Kambili's cousin Amaka uses these artists to assert a strong Nigerian identity. They, too, recognized these choices as a response to colonial cultural imports. Other topics included the Biafran war, Catholicism in Nigeria, the Igbo religion, and traditional food. Regardless of the topic chosen, student presentations revealed a curiosity and willingness to explore another culture in relation to a novel in which they were already invested.

Moments of Discomfort

Two issues raised throughout the study of *Purple Hibiscus* prompted moments of discomfort for some students, forcing them to reconsider deeply held beliefs. Some students (with European backgrounds) expressed frustration and annoyance that many of the problems in the novel were being continually linked back to colonialism. They remarked that they felt as though they were being attacked and were being asked to assume guilt for the colonial policies of the past. In response, I asked students to consider how the exploits of Europeans were typically described in their social studies courses. They acknowledged that representations were generally favourable, with examples including the discoveries of the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and the Age of Exploration. Some mentioned learning about the negative impacts of Europeans, such as residential school policies in Canada, though this often came as a surprise in later grades, long after students had already established a particular narrative in their mind. I suggested that given

that most students had a favorable view of Europeans, it might be difficult to hear evidence that contradicted this; it might feel as though one were being personally attacked. Students then completed a free write, in which they explored their reactions to counter-narratives that challenged traditional beliefs.

A second issue which prompted discomfort for some students was the discussion of Eugene's religious identity. Students clearly resented his outward righteousness that hypocritically masked his inner brutality. When I framed this as religious extremism, and suggested that this was not unique to Catholicism but sometimes extended to other religions as well, some students were reluctant to acknowledge that people within their own religious communities could behave like this. While I wanted to push students to consider the ways that people of various faiths can sometimes use religious ideology to justify horrific acts, I was also aware from watching students' facial expressions and body language that many in the room were very uncomfortable. I too was feeling uncomfortable, wading into territory that I knew might provoke an emotional response that I was not feeling ready to handle. A number of my students come from homes where religion is central to daily life and is not to be critiqued or challenged. I could sense that I had hit a nerve in asking my students to consider what might be problematic about the ways that their own religion has been co-opted and deployed. At the same time, perhaps it was only my own discomfort that led me to withdraw from the conversation. Whether out of concern that the discussion might become too heated, or anxiety that I might inadvertently mischaracterize a particular religion and profoundly insult my students, or fear that the topic could lead to a parental complaint, I chose to change the direction of the class and focus on a different topic. Such moments of discomfort serve as a reminder that while shared reading experiences can open up spaces to challenge student thinking and be powerful sites for learning, teachers must be aware that the crisis invoked by difficult knowledge might be too much to bear.

Student Responses to the Novel

After completing our class study of *Purple Hibiscus*, I was curious to gather feedback from students about how they enjoyed the novel, what they took from it, and how it affected their views of social justice issues. I asked students to fill out a survey, considering what themes they found interesting and what aspects of the novel they liked and did not like. Ingrid also organized a focus group with several students in the regular English 10 class. Students who participated in this discussion unanimously agreed that they found the novel interesting and worthwhile to read. Several students (again) commented that they had anticipated reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Grade 10 but they were pleased to have read a book related to contemporary life in a part of Africa and to think about the effects and legacies of colonization. Some specific remarks included:

- "I enjoyed how this novel wasn't typical like any other book we've read in school."
- "I liked it because I got to learn about different perspectives in Nigeria."
- "It made a strong comment on how religion can both be used in a positive manner, and as a means to oppress and control others."
- "I enjoyed how the characters developed in the story and learned to have a voice for themselves."

Even when asked about what they did not enjoy, most students responded with a negative reaction to a character, suggesting an emotional connection with the text.

Overall, the assignments and responses produced by students and their recorded comments about the novel illuminate the potential of a postcolonial text such as *Purple Hibiscus* to revisit and interrogate the colonial past in the context of the classroom. Students' responses to the novel suggest that the text is able to invoke ideas of social justice by challenging oppressive systems of discrimination and enabling students to engage with the legacies of colonizing practices and structures from a critical perspective.

Final Reflections

In addition to providing valuable funds to purchase new texts, the research study provided an invaluable space to discuss and reflect upon the successes and challenges of teaching literature for social justice. Monthly meetings of the inquiry group allowed for the sharing of new texts and resources and the discussion of pedagogical practices that might be helpful as teachers worked through the complexities of teaching a novel for the first time. Kevin's story of teaching *Purple Hibiscus* in a Grade 10 English language arts class offers insight into the potential for such contemporary postcolonial texts to challenge students' inherent assumptions and to critique the material and discursive legacies of colonialism. His decision not to teach Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a text that has gained canonical status in many North American secondary schools, in favour of this lesser-known African novel with fewer developed curriculum resources, did create some initial unease. As Boler (2014) suggests,

> A pedagogy of discomfort emphasizes the need for the educator and student to move out of their comfort zones . . . The 'comfort zones' we inhabit are inscribed cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice and more by virtue of dominant cultural values, which we internalize as naturally as the air we breathe. (p. 117)

Curricular changes do involve facing up to our investments and the discomfort of new thinking, but as Kevin's story illustrates, such changes can be the start of transformative shifts in how teachers and students experience the world.

Ethics

The study discussed in this article was reviewed and approved by the University of Alberta Ethics Board and by participating school boards in the Edmonton area.

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