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Literacy Through The Arts: A Phenomenological Inquiry into What it is Like to Experience Literacy within a Theatrical Space

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Literacy Through The Arts: A Phenomenological Inquiry into What it is Like to
Experience Literacy within a Theatrical Space

By

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Literacy, according to Lindquist and Seitz (2009), “is one of those words, like love, that people use commonly and confidently, as if its meaning were transparent and stable” (p. 8). Literacy in classrooms, however, is inherently complex and the experiences that surround it, especially from the student’s perspective, are often lost. This thesis examines how literacy came to be defined within a specialized arts immersion junior high school in Western Canada and how the unique approach to curriculum was better able to encourage student agency, authorship, and identity within literacy's definition.

This research is inspired by the work of the New London Group, which spoke to expanding the scope of literacy pedagogy through a proposed framework of multiliteracies embracing multimodality and contextual responsiveness to the learning environment. (New London Group, 1994). In response to this it was seen that students needed to have spaces in which they can play the role of code breakers, text users and text analysts. Artistic inquiry is a means to create such a space which in addition to teaching applied roles, also allow students to strengthen their social and cultural wellbeing (Wells & Sandretto, 2017).

Over the course of a semester eight students created a theatrical space in which they communicated their experiences of literacy with data being collected through interviewing, journaling, monologue writing, and performance. Through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis students, who were recruited using homogeneous sampling, had their data coded in a way that created a double hermeneutic around literacy as the researcher and

students engaged in dialogue and performance as a means of making meaning. This phenomenological process allowed for the development of a flexible open-ended inquiry.

The study's findings showed that students within this unique learning environment connected their literacy experiences directly into the fine and performing arts. Students experienced literacy both in a traditional sense and a performative sense, citing that their work within school productions was a way of building upon their literacy skills. For these students, literacy was not a single experience but an interconnected web of experiences that enriched their learning and increased their overall engagement.

Keywords: Literacy, Drama, Education, Curriculum

Preface: (Traditional Thesis: Requiring Ethics Approval)

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Harrison Campbell. The data and information reported in Chapters 2-4 were covered by Ethics Certificate REB18-0834, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) for the project Literacy in the Green Room: A Phenomenological Inquiry into what it is Like to Experience Literacy within a Theatrical Space given on June 26th, 2018.

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I also want to thank the staff and students who worked with me over the course of this study. The teachers and staff involved in this work very graciously opened up their school and classrooms to this research and the students who became involved participated fully and enthusiastically in a rigorous research process. This study would not have been possible without such dedicated support and your experiences and insights have helped to contribute to a greater understanding of both literacy and the importance of arts immersion within educational settings.

It is also important to acknowledge Dr. Catherine Burwell and Dr. Kimberley Lenters who examined this work, for their time spent reviewing this thesis. I am very appreciative of your willingness to become involved in this project and to help me grow as a young scholar.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful mother Jeanne Campbell who over the course of my undergraduate and graduate degrees has edited countless papers, had countless discussions, and has kept me both sane and supported as I worked to improve my teaching and research practices. The accomplishment of completing this program is not only mine it is ours.

Contents

Abstract	II
Preface: (Traditional Thesis: Requiring Ethics Approval).....	IV
Acknowledgments.....	V
Dedication	VI
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	- 1 -
Our Story Begins.....	- 1 -
What Are We Doing?.....	- 3 -
Research Question	- 3 -
Purpose Statement.....	- 3 -
My Working Definition of Literacy.....	- 3 -
Rationale for the Study	- 6 -
Description of the Methods.....	- 6 -
Expected Outcomes	- 7 -
Setting the Stage: What Are Arts Immersion Techniques?	- 8 -
Why Is Student Experience Important?	- 9 -
A Limited Scope of Literacy For Students	- 11 -
The Way in Which Literacy is Undertaken Pedagogically	- 12 -
The Needs This Study Addresses.....	- 12 -
Developing The Scope of Literacy For Students	- 13 -
Pedagogically Developing Literacy Practices in an Interdisciplinary Way	- 14 -
Creating Authentic Arts Immersion Techniques within Schools.....	- 15 -
The Benefits This Study Provides.....	- 17 -
Benefits to Specific Stakeholder Groups	- 18 -
Addressing Limitations	- 19 -
Who Am I?.....	- 20 -
Summary	- 23 -
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	- 25 -
Introduction.....	- 25 -
Defining What Academics Mean By Literacy	- 25 -
Framing The Seminal Work In This Area of Study.....	- 27 -

Literacy and Drama: An Embodied, Situated, and Social Experience.....	- 29 -
Instructional Approaches and Academic Discourse Around Literacy	- 36 -
Academic Discourse on Literacy	- 36 -
Instructional Approaches Towards Literacy in Classrooms:	- 41 -
Creating Authentic Arts Immersion Techniques within Schools.....	- 44 -
Theoretical Framework.....	- 50 -
Summary	- 53 -
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN	- 55 -
Introduction.....	- 55 -
Methodology	- 56 -
Phenomenological Lens	- 56 -
Existential Phenomenology Paradigm:	- 58 -
Setting	- 61 -
The Students Involved	- 62 -
Selection of Students.....	- 62 -
Description of Participants (Please Note: All Names Are Pseudonyms).....	- 63 -
Data Collection Process	- 64 -
One-on-One Semi Structured Interviews	- 64 -
Journals	- 65 -
Monologues and Performance	- 68 -
Analysis and Interpretation	- 70 -
Trustworthiness and Consistency	- 74 -
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	- 77 -
Introduction.....	- 77 -
Findings	- 77 -
Interviews:.....	- 77 -
Student One—Selina.....	- 79 -
Student Two—Petra.....	- 84 -
Student Three---Claire	- 91 -
Student Four- Erud.....	- 95 -
Student Five- Emilia	- 98 -

Student Six- Samuel.....	- 103 -
Student Seven- Dwayne.....	- 106 -
Student Eight- Raven.....	- 111 -
Experiences of Literacy Within a Theatrical Space.....	- 124 -
Literacy As Freedom.....	- 124 -
Literacy As Unveiling.....	- 129 -
Literacy As Ambition.....	- 134 -
Literacy as Connection.....	- 139 -
Literacy as Understanding.....	- 145 -
Literacy as Hope.....	- 151 -
Literacy as Speech.....	- 155 -
Literacy as Trust.....	- 160 -
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	- 165 -
Introduction.....	- 165 -
Discussion.....	- 167 -
A Note On Agency, Authorship and Identity.....	- 178 -
Recommendations for Future Research.....	- 180 -
Conclusions.....	- 185 -
REFERENCES.....	- 192 -

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Our Story Begins

I have always been enamoured with stories ever since I was young. Stories provide a wonderful medium, for both teaching and research, providing opportunities to explore phenomena and ideas that would not be explored in the same way otherwise. Over the course of this thesis I hope to be able to share another story with you, a story about a word that “is one of those words, like love, that people use commonly and confidently, as if its meaning were transparent and stable” (Lindquist & Seitz, 2009, p. 8). This word is *literacy* and it is an inherently complex educational phenomenon that is currently having its story being told through policies and action plans such as the *Literacy and Numeracy Progression Charts* (Alberta Education, 2013). Such policies break down the wider narrative of experience in favour of objectives, age groups, and categories. Currently, the authors of the story would have you believe that literacy is our protagonists’ ultimate goal, a sword in the stone to be acquired, rather than an ongoing experience of learning.

The particular story that I am telling took place within a charter school, located in a large urban area, which specialized in arts immersion teaching techniques. What this means is that the setting of this narrative can be thought of as a pedagogical laboratory presenting the Program of Studies through fully integrated arts immersion strategies and a uniquely crafted timetable. Such uniqueness in school design provided an opportunity to explore and illustrate potentially radically different literacy phenomena while using the arts, tools that these students were familiar with, to better integrate student voice into the discussions of literacy. By extension, the presence

of students' voices would also help to increase student agency, authorship, and identity within a rich data set exploring literacy from a more personalized and experiential perspective. At the same time, such work also builds the sharing, and working with the elements of literacy achievement that McEwan-Adkins (2012) spoke to as being so central to success.

This story was written in order to explore how literacy lives within students' individual life worlds, how the school environment itself shapes an understanding of literacy, and what such experiences can tell both students and teachers about the process of becoming literate. For example, it was important to observe how the school's arts immersion approaches impacted the way in which students understood and engaged with literacy. What students' understood literacy to be, where they saw it within their learning in school, and the significance they placed upon it would all serve to impact how they wrote their own stories and perspectives of literacy and what it meant to them in a broader context. It was important to see if literacy learning from the students' perspective shared the same paradigm shift compared to an educators' perspective towards constructivism (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2000, p. 36). This student voice would be nurtured through a multistage research process of interviews, journaling, character creation, and performance which would not only help to explore literacy within various media (text, visual, embodied etc.) but also use theatre to invite student participation into a learning inquiry and process of discovery (Wells & Sandretto, 2017). Student voice is not an active component in many educational policies but rather a passive one. However, better understanding student voices through a phenomenological approach is significant due to the fact that it shows how students' practices of interaction with one another, identification of literacy, and embodiment of literacy

experiences can serve to aid reflection upon educational policy and pedagogical approaches (Macro, 2015).

What Are We Doing?

Research Question

What is it like to experience literacy within a theatrical space?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to create a theatrical space (dramatic production) in which students communicated their experiences surrounding literacy in order to better develop their own agency, authorship, and identity as learners.

My Working Definition of Literacy

My personal understanding of and experience with literacy also helped to inform the direction, rationale, and methods used in this study. It is important to note that this working definition also evolved, similar to the students definitions, from the study's beginning to the study's ending. At the onset of the work, I did view literacy as contextually responsive, which is what inspired me to read the New London Group (1996). However, I also saw it as inherently skills based. For me, having worked teaching English literacy, it had become centered around skills based assessments in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This is observable in works that I cite here such as Daniels & Zemelman (2014) who speak to the skills that build successful readers. As I began to explore literacy from the perspective of students, however, I also began to challenge my own assumptions about this phenomenon in order to better understand literacy as the communication and construction of meaning. The nuance which I feel that this work adds to,

such a definition, is that the meaning being constructed here is driven primarily by the students and not the teacher, myself, who within this context acts as a facilitator. The purpose of my work was to increase student agency, authorship, and identity as the students that participated in my study constructed what literacy meant for them at a personal level and to communicate how such definitions and practices can enrich how literacy can be understood more broadly. In essence, literacy can be everything and can also be nothing. It can be everything in the sense that each individual constructs unique meanings and understandings using literacy skills but it can also be nothing if these skills alone remain the focus of our educational discourse. Lindquist and Seitz (2009) spoke about the impacts of historical and cultural precedents in defining literacy and placed a strong emphasis upon the individual in the meaning making process. What this means is that the very way in which a learner engages with literacy skills is already influenced by who they are as individuals and by how they exist in the world. Socio economic status, class, and culture are all factors which Lindquist and Seitz (2009) discuss as potential influencers upon understanding and engaging with literacy. Therefore, if we only focus upon skill development within our educational discourse we would not be actively considering the impacts of the learners themselves upon our pedagogical practices. Literacy skills absolutely have a role to play in the meaning making process, however, so too do the learners themselves and the broader social aspects that shape their experiences. In my study, I intended to show how meaning is constructed within a literacy space, in this case a theatrical one, which promoted literacy through measureable skills such as; reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Meaning, however, remains central to my own working definition in so long as the students themselves drive such a meaning.

This shift in my conceptualization of literacy resembles the shift seen in literature about literacy. For instance, when Brian Street (2006) speaks about the differences between Autonomous and Ideological models of literacy (p. 37): according to Street, an Autonomous model of literacy had to do with how the act of becoming literate, gaining skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, would autonomously (hence the name) lead to increased “social and cognitive practices” (p. 37). Conversely, Ideological models of literacy speak to literacy as a “social practice” meaning that the way in which an individual uses and understands literacy skills is impacted by “knowledge, identity, and being” (p. 37) . What this means is that literacy does not exist within a natural state but is in fact contextually dependant.

Literacy skills, are therefore extremely important but they do not exist in a vacuum separate from the individual. This makes it vitally necessary, for us as educators, to understand our students’ experiences in order to understand the social practices that they bring into the classroom while learning skill development or application.

Brian Street (2013) developed a table of the “16 Most Relevant Articles on Literacy” (p. 55) which begins with a 1975 article and ends with a 2011 article. The shift in the tone of the articles mirrors the conceptual shift outlined, that I myself went through, above. From 1975-1989, the articles mainly focus upon reading and writing within various levels of schooling. 1989 sees the first mention of literacy being used for social action and as that concept expands, by 2006 there is mention of multiliteracies, 2008 sees the onset of digital literacies, and 2011 sees choice, motivation, and engagement on the part of the students being discussed. These sixteen articles are just a small sampling of the plethora of literacy research done over that same time

period, however, they do help to illustrate changes in thinking similar to the shifts that this research both argues for and creates in the ways data was collected and analyzed.

Rationale for the Study

Drawing upon the work of the New London Group (1994), which spoke to expanding the scope of literacy pedagogy through contextual responsiveness to the learning environment, this study demonstrates how process drama (Pascoe, 2002) creates a learning environment that allows students to become “code breakers, text users and text analysts while developing their social and cultural well-being” (Wells & Sandretto, 2016, p. 185). The resulting dramatic inquiry created a theatrical space which allowed students to recognize their own agency, authorship, and identity within literacy's definition and demonstrate that their (students’) practices of interaction, identification, and embodiment of literacy experiences can serve to refine teaching and learning practices (Macro, 2015).

Description of the Methods

This study's phenomenological approach, chosen for its focus upon individuals and the phenomenon, involved students being invited to take part in interviewing, journal writing, monologue writing, and performances. The resulting data included interview transcripts, various types of student journals, monologues, a performance night, and written post performance reflections. This arts based approach to research acknowledged that “the development of language (and literacy) is the result of social activities (experiences) that occur within an integrated system comprising language users” (Froese, 1997, p. 32). The data was interpreted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to create a double hermeneutic

around literacy as a means of making meaning. This meaning making process was made possible through thick and rich descriptions, practices of convergence and divergence, and the use of triangulation within the resulting discussion. The experiences of eight students spread across grades eight and nine have been included in this story of research. By reaching the “essence” of what each student considered a literacy experience, this study was able to achieve phenomenological reduction by creating “a direct and primal contact with the world as we experience it rather than as we conceptualize it” (Van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 452). Data collection began in early September 2018 and extended until mid December 2018 with myself being at the school site an average of three times a week. Research was built into the school timetable with times being arranged between the students, myself, and teaching staff on site. This incredible flexibility that the school provided also helped to minimize lost class time and had the research occurring during classes where the work undertaken for the study could help to meet learning outcomes (e.g., humanities).

Expected Outcomes

By having students represent their experiences through speech, text, pictures, character creation and performance, it was possible both to collect a more detailed description of their voices and to provide them a constructive environment in which to explore their own understandings of their experiences. This understanding occurs both in the way of “epistemic literacy (literacy for exploration and discovery of a topic or interest) or for presentational literacy (literacy for the demonstration of knowledge)” (Froese, 1997, p. 40). This study also had implications for the importance of arts immersion pedagogical techniques and for the student’s relationships with both curriculum and educational policy. Seeing literacy on a more personal

level could help both teachers and students to better understand the nature of literacy as a concept while also seeing “different literacies and how they occur within various subject matter” (Pascoe, 2002, p. 64).

Setting the Stage: What Are Arts Immersion Techniques?

We live in an era where arts based schools and programming are coming under threat and the narrative about just what arts immersion education even can be defined as is muddled. There actually exists, however, quite a significant difference between: Arts Integration, Arts Infusion and Arts Immersion. For clarity, Arts Integration does establish curricular links while generating meaning through the arts, however, it only uses the arts to address one specific outcome rather than using the arts across subject areas and curriculum (e.g., using dramatization to answer a given prompt). Arts Infusion goes a little bit further in that it teaches subject matter from one specific subject area using one specific art form (e.g., using elements of dramatization to teach social studies) and in some cases is considered the natural evolution of Arts Integration (Erikson, 2013).

Arts Immersion envisions curricular design and approach differently. Rather than beginning with the subject area and adding the art form, it begins with the art form and adds the subject area. What this means is that the learning outcome might be, as it was in this study, to create a performance on the experience of literacy and so the curriculum leading to that outcome would then be taught based upon the needs of the performance. English language arts outcomes to write scripts and create characters, mathematics outcomes in how to measure and create sets, etc. In this way the subjects teach to the art form rather than the art form teaching to the subjects

(Erikson, 2013). Another method of envisioning this type of curricular shift is to look at “the use of process drama pedagogy in literacy learning (which) would locate drama as central to teaching and learning” (Wells & Sandretto, 2017, p. 193). Clarifying this understanding is of central significance to the future of fine and performing arts curricula and how they come to be taken up in the future. Such nuances also informed the need for student experiences and ways in which student experiences could be better communicated.

Why Is Student Experience Important?

There are challenges that exist when we try to understand student experiences of literacy with the antagonists of our story being the way in which literacy is commonly undertaken pedagogically and the limited scope through which students commonly identify literacy within certain subject areas. Officially, from a policy perspective, literacy has been defined as “the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living.” (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 1). However, the students in this study demonstrated that they defined the process quite differently in ways such as “something that lets you express who you are with no limitations” (Student One: Selina) and “I think it's like creative writing and a mix of writing and Language Arts...it's where you can express yourself within writing” (Student Six: Emilia). At first glance you may feel that such responses fall broadly within the policy's definition, however, students had trouble articulating the depth of their experiences and what literacy truly was for them prior to more in depth self reflections. A more in depth exploration also came to reveal complexities around the phenomenon that a definition could not account for in other cases.

One of the complexities was the limited scope that students had when identifying literacy. Discussing literacy, students would consistently mention subject areas related with humanities, meaning English Language Arts and Social Studies, and only rarely branch into Mathematics or Science, sometimes omitting them entirely from their reflections. Since it is clear that both Mathematics and Science construct and communicate meaning, there appeared to be a disconnect in the way in which meaning was understood in relation to language, as well as the role in which language plays in subjects such as Mathematics. This shows a very reader-based approach to literacy in the early stages of the study, focusing on both “reading and relationship to text” (Purves & Beach, 1972, p. 20). Once students had the opportunity to reflect differently (using methods outside of text) and could consider examples such as character work including developing “character beliefs, goals, and traits” (Culler, 2007, p. 175) they were better able to define literacy.

Students more commonly referenced languages that they were familiar with such as theatrical language. “Like other language forms, arts languages have their own conventions, codes, practices and meaning structures” (Pascoe, 2002, p. 64). Such structures and codes are learned through the process of engaging with the art form itself and learning to convey meaning within the context of that art style. Such practices can lead to students becoming more “literate” learners through the construction and communication of meaning. Not all schools apply such conceptualizations of language onto the arts though, with many keeping such definitions or considerations for more “core” subjects (English, Social, Science, and Math). Be that as it may, this particular learning environment was indeed serving to impact just how students articulated the nature of their own experiences through the arts (Erikson, 2013).

A Limited Scope of Literacy For Students

The further one looks at “literacy” within an educational context, the more definitions and mandates one will find. On the surface, literacy is about the construction and communication of meaning, as shown above, which naturally extends to being “a part of learning in every subject/discipline area” and “the responsibility of all subject area teachers” (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 1). The problem arises in how literacy gets communicated in an interdisciplinary sense, since teachers within different subject areas may be developing literacy practices without attaching the specific term literacy to them. Language is given primary focus in our current discourses of literacy and we see this within policy when language is discussed as “the rules of language, how to acquire information, evaluate it, and ethically use it, how to construct meaning from various kinds of text and, how to communicate effectively” (Alberta Education, 2017, Online). Language is not problematized or challenged in a cross curricular sense so it is often assumed to fall within written and spoken language which students attribute more naturally to language arts classes. Reading and writing, two terms students also often associate with literacy, are also only explicitly stated on English Language Arts assessment guides with literacy not becoming explicitly diversified within additional subjects even though it is present in these subject areas. These factors place limitations upon student experiences and can increase the difficulty they feel in expressing what literacy means to them, as well as understanding what is expected of them to become “literate”. Literacy after all is defined with increasing complexity the deeper into literature one goes, beginning with The New London Group (1996) terming literacy as “the multimodal, contextually responsive, and linguistically diverse process of constructing and communicating meaning” (p. 71). Other scholars would later add that literacy

also is about having “the ability to engage appropriately with varied texts through action, feelings and thinking related to a purposeful social activity” (Lenters & Whitford, 2018, p. 122).

The Way in Which Literacy is Undertaken Pedagogically

The challenge surrounding the perception of literacy, alluded to above, is further seen within common pedagogical practices within classrooms. The *Literacy and Numeracy Progression Charts* (Alberta Education, 2013) have already been mentioned as a tool that makes it appear as if once you reach a certain standard you have successfully demonstrated “literacy”. This does not take into account the living nature of language and how it changes over time or the experience of being surrounded by this constant change. Research within the area of literacy education states that “literacy will no longer be an end state; instead, it will become a continuous learning process for all of us” (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 121). As both teachers and students realize this fact we must also work together to help ensure that this process has “value beyond success in school” (Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka, 2001, p. 14). The way in which this study integrates performance into this meaning making process of value beyond school is helping to expand pedagogical processes while acknowledging the ongoing process of becoming literate.

The Needs This Study Addresses

Expanding the limited scope of students’ current conceptualizations and working to improve pedagogical practices were seen as direct benefits of this type of research. Most importantly these needs and changes were being driven by the learners and presented in a way more akin to lifelong learning as opposed to an outcome or assessment model.

Developing The Scope of Literacy For Students

There is a noticeable approach to teaching and learning within the research site that saw teachers building collaborative and inquiry driven spaces in their classrooms. This approach is also noticeable within both of the larger urban school boards that surround the site meaning that literacy is no longer only within the realm of the language arts teacher. Collaborative inquiry spaces have interdisciplinary elements with foci on research and project based learning. Reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension all become a part of this learning environment, however, instances of literacy which occur in other subjects such as historical reflexivity are also present. Literacy may begin within language arts, as the program of study (POS) states, “Language is the basis of communication and the primary instrument of thought” (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1) but the communication and meaning making established here in both the study and at the research site more generally extend outwards across other subject areas as well. The way in which such connections can be identified and enhanced will be discussed within the following section, however, before that can happen there is one additional skill explicitly mentioned within the language arts POS that is critical: Metacognition “The study of language enables students to develop metacognition: it enables them to become more consciously aware of their own thinking and learning processes and to gain greater control of these processes” (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 2). It is this conscious awareness that enables students to become reflective on their own experiences and the metacognition around language and types of language will help students to establish literacy connections within subjects outside of language arts.

“As students learn to read, write, see, feel, touch, move, act, and interact they are developing both metacognition and styles of literacy as they discern and interpret social cues,

respond to questions and difficulties, and adapt to problems as they arise” (Shosh, 2005, p. 72). It is this experience of learning that students may not even come to associate with literacy due to the overabundance of ELA in existing policies and practices. Addressing this gap of association and understanding how students experience literacy outside of English Language Arts will help to round out not only how literacy comes to be officially defined but how that definition can more effectively be implemented within existing practices and policies.

Pedagogically Developing Literacy Practices in an Interdisciplinary Way

When going through literature around the concept of learning, be it in relation to literacy or not, definitions are evolving beyond what has been traditionally expressed; referring to learning as something that is no longer fixed but instead in a state of constant development (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012). If learning, therefore, is no longer traditional and no longer fixed, it is important to look at literacy in much the same way. New forms of text, communication, and technologies are all informing what literacy means in our society, just as learning is also becoming a more dynamic system (Fischer & Heikkinen, 2010).

Thus when educators and policy makers try to translate such a complex educational phenomenon into a system that is meant to teach and appeal to broad and diverse audiences it can become problematic. This is especially apparent if the end result is perceived to lack authenticity. Authenticity within this context is about “connecting meaning to tasks that occur within school to a context outside of school” (Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka, 2001, p. 15). It can become easier to move meaning beyond the classroom within interdisciplinary contexts in the sense that many different transferable skills, including literacy skills, on the part of the student

go into classrooms where the process involves more complex activities that are often done as part of a group and/or project. Students learn to communicate within social networks, to construct knowledge, to inquire, discuss, and to then apply their learning beyond the classroom. (Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001).

Transferability both between subject areas and to areas beyond school is not only a tremendous benefit of interdisciplinary thinking but also a major component of constructing meaning and thus being literate within our modern era. After all, literacy “is dependent upon a historical and cultural precedent” (Lindquist & Seitz, 2009, p. 73) and therefore the definition is fluid and contextually responsive. Therefore, within this study the gap in pedagogical conceptions is explored through the research site’s strong interdisciplinary structure and the students’ experiences of that as they construct and assign meaning to literacy for themselves.

Creating Authentic Arts Immersion Techniques within Schools

The very nature of the research site helps to address this gap due to its charter's focus on an arts immersion curricular approach. For clarity in how such curricular approaches could be of benefit to literacy development we need only to look at how the embodied language of drama is discussed by Pascoe (2002). The multiliteracies demonstrated within Pascoe's definition include:

“embodied literacy (bodies in space, movement of bodies in space, gesture, and facial expressions), spatial literacy (relationships between objects and space), and linguistic literacy (words and dramatic tension), with the performance of said dramatic work adding further depth and complexity to the language of the discipline through time (length of time

committed to an action) and energy (the level of intensity behind an action and what that means)” (p. 66).

Drama is the example art form highlighted here due to its incredible flexibility within immersion techniques and for the way in which it constructs and communicates meaning. For instance, for a performance to best communicate its intentions, themes, and so forth to an audience it must perceive a harmony between what is on stage (performers) and what is backstage (technical staff and considerations), with each factor contributing to the end product. In this way drama is both providing opportunities to attach “vocabulary, and concepts to scenarios and the children's embodied experiences” (Chizhik, 2009, p. 394) while also developing strong literacy skills, in that it works at “defining pronouns, clarifying ambiguous terms, choosing objects to symbolize, and introducing topics” (p. 392). Moreover, drama, as an art form, creates spaces that encourage exploration of topics at “a pace set by students and an opportunity to create meaning around something that more genuinely relates to students themselves” (Macro, 2015, p. 336). While also setting a sustainable pace, drama is, at the same time, providing opportunities to engage with literacy through a broader scope since “newer definitions of literacy talk about the social practices of literacy, including such things as the way we interact, identify, and embody a literacy experience” (p. 338). Authentic arts immersion works to make the art form “a vessel in which subject matter is enriched” and in so doing addresses a gap within our current approaches to literacy by expanding our understanding to be more encompassing of the phenomenon overall (Pascoe, 2002, P. 74).

The Benefits This Study Provides

This research is of relevance to the field of education because of how it uses the experiences of students as an opportunity to broaden pedagogical understandings of literacy. In so doing, the resulting dialogue between myself and the students was unique. This research adds to existing work by exploring what literacy means to students via interviews, journal writing, character creation, and then creating a production around those experiences. Connections between literacy, cross curricular learning, and various art forms can be made much more explicit within this type of setting. Bringing such connections to the forefront of students' awareness also helps to show them that "Being literate (is) an anachronism; becoming literate (is) the more precise term, since each of us will always be acquiring new literacies" (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 121).

The dramatization process generated words which would become the essence or core of what literacy was for each individual student personified by the characters they would create and perform. As the students communicated their experiences through various forms of language: text based, visually based, movement based and so on, over the course of the study, these essences became further refined and personalized. Each character embodied that student's particular essence at their core and the stories they told were focused on these central themes. Literacy is clearly important, as we can see by the heavy push in policy from government, and it is therefore vitally necessary to understand the process of experiencing literacy from the learners themselves. This, I argue, is the most direct way to also identify the support structures needed to insure that these literacy skills, fundamental to contributing to society, are properly transferred. Finally, on a more theoretical level, literacy also possesses its own significance as an area of

study in that it is a complex phenomenon and an integral element of the socialization process: “being an important element of culture, language (and literacy) is essential for forming interpersonal relationships, extending experience, reflecting on thought and action, and contributing to society” (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1).

Benefits to Specific Stakeholder Groups

To help further break down the significance of this research it is also important to look to the following stakeholders and stakeholder groups:

- Teachers and Students: In particular, this research will be of benefit to the students making them equal partners in learning and offering legitimacy to their perspectives by creating a space in which they can be heard. This work also supports providing the opportunity for knowledge mobilization around the nature of literacy and providing students increased agency and ownership of their own education. As I began this journey of research I also hoped that teachers would be able to see how process drama (and other arts immersion techniques) could potentially be applied to complex educational questions and be used to explore topics of relevance to their own pedagogy and teaching practices.
- Superintendents/Educational Authorities: School boards are required to implement policy on wide reaching audiences and often host professional development on exactly how to enact policy. The data collected within this study can be a part of that development by creating opportunities for more reflective teacher practice in relation to the topic of literacy, as well as helping to show examples from classrooms about student experiences and diverse pedagogical practices that could be used to enrich other learning environments as well.

- Alberta Education Policymakers: Student perspectives on literacy within classrooms can create a dialogue around the effectiveness of current approaches and mandates. If such a dialogue is able to occur, it presents the opportunity to bring more consistency and reliability to policy for all involved in the educational process.

Addressing Limitations

As with other phenomenological work, certain critiques arise such as the fact that the approach is dependent as much on the way in which my mind, as the researcher, deals with the data, as the way in which the data itself is collected. Some potential limitations that I am well aware of after researching procedure in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) include:

- Philosophical assumptions which are abstract and can sometimes be difficult to identify.
- When selecting participants it is important to ensure that they share an experience with a phenomenon.
- The bracketing of the researcher's assumptions is often challenging

In order to address these limitations I did the following: member checking of data helped to verify interpretations of themes and/or patterns, philosophical assumptions were both considered and addressed using practices such as researcher memos which helped to keep me (and the students who also reflect throughout the process) grounded in a space of reflection and reflexivity, participants were selected based upon common factors (e.g., age, and grade level) and experience levels with every student having the option to participate, and the research was done in a context outside of my direct past experiences or work environments. Additionally, by

focusing the research upon student experiences within such a unique environment, my past teaching and classroom experience was less likely to be a factor or bias.

Who Am I?

As a researcher, teacher, and student, I have assumed many different roles over a short period of time. I was an undergraduate at the University of Alberta where I earned my degree in secondary education majoring in social studies with a minor in dramatic arts. Following that, my career began as a junior high Language Arts teacher who was also tasked with teaching drama, religion, leadership, graphic design, technology studies, health, physical education, and sports performance. Literacy and communication looked quite different across this range of grade levels and courses and that helped demonstrate to me that literacy experiences could be extremely diverse, not only between individual learners but between individual subjects as well. I worked to better understand the role of literacy within each of the subject areas I was responsible for and began developing questions about the implications of student's experiences on curriculum and the discussions we have around it.

Following my first year of teaching I moved to a new school, this time as a literacy proficiency teacher (LPT) which at the time was a unique pilot project. I had originally developed interest in such a posting as a means of further exploring my own curiosities around literacy and curriculum. My primary duties were to assist elementary students in developing their literacy skills and to run a smaller language arts class in grade nine for students that could benefit from more one on one instructional time. The interventions in primary occurred in grades one, two, three, five, and six and were arranged in conjunction with each grade level's teaching team.

The grade nine language arts class functioned as a pull out model of sorts but followed the same curriculum as the other classes with differences being more in how content was delivered and the nature of projects assigned. The program also ran alongside classes such as English language proficiency—which I also taught and helped design content for—that was tailored more specifically to English language learners (ELLs) and meant to assist them in meeting the language and literacy benchmarks assigned to them in things such as their learner support plans (LSPs). Being more fully immersed within teaching literacy specifically did present opportunities to have discussions with students around this subject matter.

However, it was in this environment that I first noticed that the default answer to the question of “what is literacy?” was almost always “reading” or “writing”. This was in spite of the fact that Alberta Education policy documents state that “Literacy should be a natural part of learning in every subject/discipline area” and “Literacy is the responsibility of all subject area teachers” (Alberta Education, 2017, Online). It was clear to me that there was a disconnect occurring since most students and teachers seemed to speak of literacy only in terms of language arts or as being the primary responsibility of the language arts teacher and that is when the need for my research became apparent. Informally, I began reaching out to colleagues and others in my professional networks inciting discussions around what literacy in classrooms looked like and how it could be taught in a way that enriched how students came to view and engage with it. Students were, however, absent from such discussions and their perspectives had yet to be fully explored.

As I moved on from that school to briefly teach high school social studies I began to make reflections about literacy a part of my own teaching practice. I taught history as a means of being “historically literate” and would explain to students that by connecting to the past they would be able to make inferences about the present and better understand their place as citizens. I also made use of projects which were very collaborative and called upon students to demonstrate understanding using various modes and interconnections to learning in other subject areas. One of my favorite examples had to do with creating an entire nation from scratch, beginning with discussions around the type of government to put in place before moving on to other considerations such as economic factors and social structures. There was a lot of simulation and role play in this project as students’ nations talked to one another, created a mock United Nations, and responded to various national or international events inspired by the news of the day. It was while teaching these types of lessons that I witnessed how the drama curriculum could enrich many varied learning outcomes within other subject matter and became curious about how to connect such enrichment to better understanding the student experience of literacy. I knew that such research had already been done in elementary settings, to a certain extent, but I identified a need to explore it within the secondary learning space and by using drama as a means to explore a phenomena as opposed to a tool to teach an outcome, which had more commonly been done.

Being intentional about explicitly identifying and discussing literacy seemed to enrich both the students’ experience, as well as my own, and so I applied to enter into graduate studies in education specializing in curriculum and learning to explore the nature of the experiences I witnessed in my various classrooms more fully. This specialization was ideal due to how it

approached curriculum from a critical angle and examined learning as a way to better understand pedagogical relationships as they are influenced by schooling, teaching, experiences and research. The context through which the curriculum is engaged with was also given a strong weight, meaning that this specialization area was open to interpretive perspectives resulting from research and had faculty members who taught about and used interpretive methodologies.

Outside of my particular thesis work I also conducted research on inquiry based learning (IBL) at the post secondary level helping to design undergraduate courses that would become a part of an embedded certificate program in inquiry based research techniques. I have also been involved in drama and theatre for over fourteen years, working primarily backstage in roles such as: stage management, lighting, sound design, and special effects operations.

Summary

This study is intended to address a disconnect between the way in which literacy is defined and the way in which literacy is experienced by the individual student learner. A more comprehensive view of not only both of these factors but also how they interact with one another will help develop both the learners' perceptions of what it means to be literate as well as the process of becoming literate itself (Glennon, Hinton, Callahan, & Fischer, 2013). This study will also help to show how concerns about scope and pedagogy can be alleviated through building “explicit connections between literacy and various subject matter, teaching and assessing various skills and student experiences on a continuum of literacy, building increased value and meaning around literacy skills, and by exploring ways to incorporate arts

immersion techniques into the overall process of constructing meaning around literacy with students” (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71).

By encouraging a learning environment that includes factors such as these educators will better be able to encourage and develop their students’ understanding of the complex educational phenomenon of literacy by having a more contextually responsive learning environment (New London Group, 1994).

As seen above it is important to consider how existing gaps can be addressed by shifting our perspective around the phenomenon of literacy. English language arts can remain an important foundation on the process of becoming literate as long as it does not dictate the entire conversation. Arts immersion techniques, such as drama, can be used to further expand the scope of literacy to include embodiment and experience within this educational phenomenon. This will not only assist in the development of the skills seen within successful readers (Daniels & Zemelman, 2014) but will also help students to further develop their own identities as learners (Holland, 1975 & Bleich, 1978). As you read I invite you to consider what literacy means for you, how you might personify it through a character and what story you would have to tell in relation to it.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Literacy, “has come to mean many things; it is not just being able to read and write” (Barton, 2015, p. 40), however, over the past thirty years it has often only been discussed within an elementary school perspective as seen in an analysis of “play-literacy research” (Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010, p. 56). The early days of formal literacy instruction in the classroom set a precedent around the process of becoming “literate” as the “ability to read and write”, however, more modern scholars have challenged this precedent of literacy as not allowing for ‘thinking’ and ‘meaning’ (Greene, 1995, p. 63). This literature review is designed to examine literacy within our recent context by examining it in relation to educational theories and policies, existing research on literacy as it is undertaken pedagogically, and literacy as it is impacted by research around how to create authentic arts immersion learning techniques within schools. Specifically, this is because the research question guiding this inquiry explores how arts-based environments create spaces that explore and develop student agency, authorship and identity in relation to their literacy experiences and learning.

Defining What Academics Mean By Literacy

Literacy is defined by The New London Group (1996) as the “multimodal, contextually responsive, and linguistically diverse process of constructing and communicating meaning” (p. 71). What this means is that literacy can take various forms (text, visual, embodied) depending upon the particular place in which it is occurring and that the various forms of literacy each have their own ways of communicating that serve to generate meaning. Other academics such as

Burwell & Lenters (2015) add clarity to such a definition by expanding practical pedagogical tools such as *linguistic landscapes*, which “create learning environments, or opportunities for reflection, designed to foster the complex process of becoming literate” (p. 208). Traditionally, when they were first defined, linguistic landscapes referred to language that was “public” and therefore informed the way in which an observer would come to understand “a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Landry & Bourhuis, 1997, p. 25) However, if we look at the classroom as a kind of public space, and use said space to influence our teaching practices, we can apply this same idea. Literacy is after all a process that is embodied and experienced differently depending on personal, environmental, and educational contextual factors but has primarily been explored from the perspective of teachers (Lacina & Silva, 2011). Most prior research that has explored this phenomenon has done so from an “assessment or outcome-based perspective and has used the arts in order to improve teaching” (Wells & Sandretto, 2016, p. 191). However, more recent research has begun not only to include both primary and secondary education but has also come to discuss the “experience of literacy” (Burwell & Lenters, 2015, p. 202). A more fluid approach, centered upon student experience, would also help to better recognize students as equal partners in their own learning, at all levels, and better encourage the development of their agency, authorship, and identity as learners (Galgut, Border, & Fenwick, 2017). At the same time exploring literacy in this way expands the opportunities to engage with ‘multimodality’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), and ‘visual literacy’ (Arizpe and Styles, & Ebrary, 2003) as spoken of within The New London Group’s (1996) seminal work. Such “new” literacies lend themselves well to a theatrical space since “play brings a freedom to explore and innovate, creating ‘safe’ ways of developing skills such as those required to navigate in the complex, demanding, modern information landscape” (Walsh, 2015, p. 90). This would make the

linguistic landscape of this hypothetical classroom in question centered on the conventions of a traditional drama classroom, since that is the language being used, which may include the opportunity for reflection, peer feedback, or playwriting.

Framing The Seminal Work In This Area of Study

Moving into the literature, it was in the early 20th century that literacy was defined in relation to “completion of school grade levels or basic reading and writing skills” (Barton, 2015, p. 45). Today, being “literate means being able to use ‘multimodal’ texts” (Cole, & Pullen, 2010, p. 28) meaning that what counts as being literate in the classroom may no longer be enough in the world outside of school. No longer is a person considered “literate” if they are only able to read or write it is the “application of such knowledge to a specific context and purpose that literacy emerges” (p. 8). Functional literacy, that is the reading and writing of text prior to application, remains a key element of the overall literacy process, however, it is no longer an all encompassing term. Literacy is more about the ability to “engage appropriately with varied texts through action, feelings and thinking related to a purposeful social activity” (Lenters & Whitford, 2018, p. 122). This conceptual shift around the nature of literacy began when The New London Group (NLG), who were all themselves literacy specialists, met to create a literacy pedagogy working group in 1996.

The New London Group (NLG), and their resulting 1996 seminal text, were created in response to “a growing multiplicity of communication techniques around cultural and linguistic diversities” (p.65). NLG sought to devise a pedagogy that engaged learners with language that existed in relation to power as well as “provided a foundation for critical engagement on the part

of learners with their own social realities” (p.65). Traditional literacy pedagogy was described by scholars from the NLG as being overly formalized, monolingual, and monocultural so the group wanted to expand the scope of literacy pedagogy to be more “culturally and linguistically diverse” (p. 66). Literacy specialists within the NLG was also concerned with the increasing variety of textual forms as multimedia technologies became ever more prominent and “representational forms increased well beyond the written word” (p.67). One problem, however, was as this process was occurring literacy pedagogy became trapped between “responsively evolving and a back to basics approach” (p. 68). Leu & Kinzer (2012) spoke to why literacy being trapped in this way was so detrimental when they described our current uses of literacy undergoing an “epoch of change” (p. 76) because of the increased complexity and sophistication of digital technologies and media. NLG’s seminal work was meant to be the starting place for dialogue that would help to frame future research into the teaching and learning of literacy.

NLG (1996) also used their work to try and move beyond “mere literacy”, (p.65) because it reflected a pure linguistic approach that ignored other forms of representation. Such literacy practices were very rules and standards-driven which, for NLG, detracted from the overall learning experience and intention of literacy learning. By contrast, the “multiliteracies” theory they proposed embraced multimodality and is more contextually responsive to the learning environment (p.67). This responsiveness was seen when literacy pedagogy could create a “dynamic representational interconnection between text and how the reader presents or applies an understanding of that text” (p. 72). For NLG, this application of understanding is what would eventually lead to “effective language, expression, and meaning making” (p. 69). Further influences on the way we construct meaning come from what we inherit from society as well as

the mode in which we seek to present that meaning. These different modes of meaning were described by NLG as “linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial” (p. 70). The end result of this work was to show that learners engage with literacy through situated practice (making meaning in response to their own experiences), overt instruction (developing meta-languages for different contexts or disciplines), critical framing (where accounting for the social context), and transformative practice (when the meaning created influences future experiences) (p. 70).

Based upon this seminal work in order to understand how literacy is experienced within a theatrical space it is essential to understand the meaning making process that lies at the heart of becoming literate. As well as, how language, discourse, and styles in meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic engagement and reflections impact meaning making. As you read on please consider how NLG viewed the human mind as “embodied, situated, and social” (p.72) and how this has influenced an important shift in the conceptualization of literacy over time.

Literacy and Drama: An Embodied, Situated, and Social Experience

The educational landscape, within the context of this review, includes educational policies from a province in Western Canada, educational theories surrounding literacy, and theories on the use of dramatization in classrooms. These inclusions are to identify any possible influences to literacy practices or experiences on the part of existing policies and research. Examples of the types of policies included are programs of study, and literacy growth charts. Examples of the theories covered here, in addition to dramatization, include text-based, performance-based, reader based, sociocultural based, and media literacy-based.

Beginning with the perspective of regional Programs' of Study (POS) literacy is defined as “the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living” (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 1). This definition moves literacy outside the realm of the language arts teacher and instead makes language contextually applicable and fundamental across learning areas. English Language Arts (ELA) often still acts as a starting place for literacy. This can be seen at the very beginning of the ELA POS document where it says “language is the basis of communication and the primary instrument of thought” (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1) and that the goal of the subject matter is to foster “the development of skills such as metacognition in relation to linguistic meaning making processes” (p. 2). With that being said while ELA certainly provides the tools to understand a literacy experience it is not the entire literacy experience in and of itself.

Within this Canadian context, “English Language Arts” (ELA) is taught in order to “enable the understanding and appreciation of language” within various forms in order to teach students how to “use language confidently, competently, and contextually as needed both for personal and educational needs” (p. 1). In order to meet such a lofty mandates many ELA teachers call upon different styles of literacy theories depending upon the lesson under study as well as their own teaching style. Examples of these theories include: “text based, reader based, socio cultural, and/or media based” (Beach & Swiss, 2011, p. 5). The earliest text based literacy theories date back to New Criticism (1929) which focused on the interpretation of textual meaning in order to bracket out subjectivity and experience. Beach (1993) called any subjectivities in the meaning making process fallacy and along with Blau (2003) looked at literacy, and text, from a scientific and quantifiable angle. It is still possible to see New Critical

theory at work in classrooms when ELA teachers discuss “character type, perspective, setting, story arc, and thematic development” (Beach & Swiss, 2011, p. 6). This theory is also present in school practices such as re-reading, to further develop a student's interpretation, as well as activities that call upon reader responses to texts (Applebee, 1993).

Performative theories are another way to approach the teaching of literacy but differ from New Criticism in several distinct ways. Perhaps most distinct is that rather than bracketing out subjective experience this way of teaching calls upon speech-act theory (Austin, 1975) and explores how “text can come to live in the world and impact lived experiences” (Beach & Swiss, 2011, p. 3). We can see performative theories at play when students are focused on ways in which text could speak (phrasing when reading aloud) and/or examining how social conventions could serve to “impact character beliefs, goals, and traits” (Culler, 2007, p. 175).

Reader-based theories, as opposed to text-based theories, place more importance on “the reader in conjunction with text as opposed to just text independently” (Purves & Beach, 1972, p. 20). Understanding the reader and how they arrive at their interpretations is intended to account for factors such as “age, gender, and ideology” more effectively (Marshall, 2000, p. 390). As a result it is possible to see how the reader constructs their identity as a reader Holland (1975) & Bleich (1978) and to gauge the ability of students to understand how a character's identity can drive them through text (Zunshine, 2006). It was also reader-based theories, in conjunction with performative theories, that saw the first formal integration of the fine and performing arts as a way of “developing emphatic engagement with text” (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998, p. 112) setting a precedent within literacy theory moving forward.

Socio-cultural theories, as compared to the theories mentioned previously, are context specific and focus entirely upon the social and cultural influences that shape text creation (Misson & Morgan, 2006). In particular, these theories are used in teaching when students are engaging with texts outside of their own social and cultural contexts. This is in an effort to be cognisant of how “socio-cultural identity can impact the meaning making process” (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith 1995, p. 118). The most prominently discussed socio-cultural theory, lately, is postcolonial literary which seeks to remove Eurocentric and imperialist bias from texts describing social and cultural norms of non-imperialist cultures (Spivak, 1988). The suspension of marginalized cultures through Eurocentric attitudes is argued by scholars to impact literacy in the sense that it marginalizes certain reader’s identities impacting how they construct meaning Johnston (2003) & Grobman (2006). While this is a very far reaching sub-theory within socio-cultural literacy it is also possible to address such topic on a micro rather than macro level within the classroom.

New Media Literacy theory focuses upon the prevalence of online texts as well as readers taking on roles of co-constructors in regards to media texts (Hayles, 2008). The New London Group (1996) spoke to the importance of technology's impact over twenty years ago and felt that it would play a central role in “literacy to come” (p.72). While digital literacies remain an area rife for additional research there are studies such as Burwell and Miller's (2016) that speak to how digital vlogs (video blogs) bring together elements of storytelling techniques and communication of meaning reaching wide audiences.

While there is a frequency of use surrounding each of these theories, both within ELA and beyond, there is also a rising trend of literature and policy arguing for “multiliteracies”, this argument also calls for an understanding of literacy that is both discipline specific and interdisciplinary depending upon the particular context of a given situation. Within the Western Canadian context, in particular, this trend can be seen in online ministerial materials which say that “literacy should be a natural part of learning in every subject/discipline area” and “Literacy is the responsibility of all subject area teachers” (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 1). From a learner’s perspective, however, this can sometimes be confusing since the term literacy itself is not always explicitly attached to tasks outside of reading and writing. In order to improve the clarity around the transferability of literacy skills, therefore, it becomes important to discuss understanding literacy in terms of “the rules of language, how to acquire information, evaluate it, ethically use it, how to construct meaning from various kinds of text and, how to communicate effectively” (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1). While such definitions do help to establish literacy in an interdisciplinary sense the actual experience of engaging with literacy in various subject matter is not discussed from student’s perspectives within these types of policies currently.

McMaster (1998) describes the use of drama as a teaching tool to increase “student’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivation around engagement with text, expanding the scope of literacy teaching and research to include student experience” (p. 576). However, she goes on to say that within our North American context, dramatization has been equated strictly to “doing a play” (p. 574) meaning that the use of it as a teaching tool has been met with resistance from educators. The idea of “doing a play” was seen by teachers that McMaster spoke to as “elaborate, tedious, and time-consuming” (p. 574). In spite of this resistance, McMaster argues that drama is

essential in the development of students' "language growth, self-confidence, self-concept, self-actualization, empathy, and cooperation" (p. 581). In addition to these considerations what else can dramatization be argued to offer literacy development on a smaller classroom scale? Well, Shosh (2005) wrote about how drama encompasses various literacy learning outcomes including: "decoding, vocabulary, syntactic discourse, and continuous reflection" (p. 70). Beyond these factors, which help to develop emergent literacies, drama also builds an important social context by fostering a "strong community of learners" (Leonora, 2016, p. 311) and encourages increased "variety surrounding communication techniques" (McMaster, 1998, p. 575). "Think alouds" stand out as one such example and allow for the development of oral language skills as students "define, articulate, express, and verbalize their thoughts in first rehearsal and then performance" (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013, p. 173). At the same time, participation in drama allows children the opportunity to develop listening skills both on a surface level, such as "listening for cues, and on a evaluative level, when offering feedback about other performances, as they work collaboratively to construct meaning" (Barton & Baguley, 2014, p. 96).

Additional moments of literacy development in drama include: reading, writing, and/or memorizing scripts as well as "defining pronouns, clarifying ambiguous terms, choosing objects to symbolize, and introducing topics" (Chizhik, 2009, p. 392). At the same time that this process is happening drama is also providing opportunities to attach "vocabulary, and concepts to scenarios and the children's embodied experiences" (p. 394) creating a more holistic experience of literacy overall. So, much of drama can occur outside of formalized productions and theatrical spaces do not always need to be purpose built for performances. There have been studies that use the arts as enrichments in traditional learning environments and have still seen noticeable "gains

in fluency, comprehension, and oral reading confidence” (Peck & Virkler, 2006, p. 792). One such study in early primary grades even noted how drama led to the development of a skill called symbolic representation, which relies on the use of de-contextualized language (p.793). As a child's representational skills are honed in drama the study noted that they begin to better be able to “recognize, understand, and implement symbols within their play, a skill that can be applied for literacy” (p. 796). The alphabetic principle, wherein symbols (letters) represent sounds which have meaning, for example, become internalized and then are used to make sense of printed material through reading (p. 792). Drama is not only a boon to younger grades though but also to their secondary counterparts since the idea of being able to engage with multiple modalities is seen as “needed to succeed in modern society” (Mills, 2009, p. 111).

Considering the application for drama in developing secondary level literacy skills one needs only look to the development of metacognition during drama activities. This is evidenced in how students read and re-read, becoming “drama detectives” who attempt to find as many “clues” about their characters as possible within a text (McMaster, 1998, p. 582). Research has also proven that by engaging in drama practices students are developing their knowledge of syntactic structure (word order, phrasing, and punctuation) which in turn leads to smoother future reading and literacy experiences (p. 577). Moreover, as students learn to

“read, write, see, feel, touch, move, act, and interact they are developing styles of literacy as they discern and interpret social cues, respond to questions and difficulties, and adapt to problems as they arise becoming textual experts” (Shosh, 2005, p. 72).

The skills that develop over the process which Shosh (2005) describes include but are not limited to: “understanding plot and character details, being able to sequence events, understanding cause and effect, and vocabulary development” (p. 75).

Instructional Approaches and Academic Discourse Around Literacy

Now having gone through the origins of literacy theory, as well as the applicability of drama within literacy learning, it is important to understand how literacy has previously been researched and how it is often taught. Both of these considerations will provide context for the experiences of students discussed in later chapters and help to address the gap in student agency, authorship, and identity surrounding literacy. This section also provides an opportunity to explore what research says about “authentic” literacy experiences and shows how this study’s research site diversifies itself from other educational institutions.

Academic Discourse on Literacy

As educational research continues to advance, so too does our understanding of authentic learning experiences. Literature has followed this trend by moving our understanding of learning beyond fixed mindsets and towards a definition of something that is no longer fixed but instead in a state of constant development through scaffolding (Glennon, Hinton, Callahan, & Fischer, 2013). This same type of shift in definition has also begun to occur specifically in relation to literacy with newer definitions explaining that “literacy will no longer be an end state; instead, it will become a continuous learning process for all of us” (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 121). This change in the conceptualization of literacy, towards a more dynamic system, has been in response to “newer forms of text, communication, and technologies that all impact what literacy

means at a societal level” (New London Group 1996, p. 70). As such definitions and understandings of literacy are established questions can sometimes arise in regards to what “authenticity” within a learning environment actually looks like in a working classroom.

Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka (2001) came to define “authenticity” through “authentic intellectual work” involving “original application of knowledge and skills, rather than just routine use of facts and procedures” (p. 14). This “authenticity” was primarily achieved through inquiry into questions and problems which resulted in “a product or presentation that has meaning or value beyond success in school” (p. 14). Inquiry for Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka is skill based and group oriented so that students build “inter-personal communication skills, generate meaning through inferences and research, and learn how to apply such research in a community setting” (p. 17). These ideas for inquiry fit well into the kinds of skill development literacy research argues for especially around what constitutes strong reading skills.

Specifically, talented readers are able to:

“Visualize (mental pictures/sensory images), connect (own experience in relation to readings), question (to wonder about and investigate the text), infer (predict, interpret, and draw conclusions), evaluate (determine importance and make judgments), analyze (notice text structures, vocabulary, theme, point of view), recall (summarize information), and self-monitor (act on confusion, be a proactive problem solver)” (Daniels & Zemelman, 2014, p. 30)

These skills could also be argued to be transferable since they can lead to “higher levels of communication, engagement, and achievement across various subject areas” (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 125). There is, however, more to the picture of literacy than just strong reading skills and there are factors that exist beyond text that can influence literacy development. Lindquist & Seitz (2009) mention a fair number of influence considerations including: “mind, culture, class, work, and technology” (p. v). What they meant by this was that an individual's level of literacy, exposure to literacy, and even the types of literacies they are exposed to are all impacted by “environmental factors external to the classroom” (p. v). It would not, therefore, be authentic to expect a student who is lower socio-economic status (SES), without access to technology on a regular basis, to have the same technological literacy as a student with constant access to technology.

It was in response to calls for authenticity and acknowledgement of external influences that saw the work of Barton and Baguley (2014) come to fruition. Barton and Baguley were concerned that literacy education was to “one dimensional” (p. 93), however, after being inspired by the work of Davis (2008) which said that “the curriculum stalwarts of literacy and numeracy are no longer sufficient to equip students with the basics they need to operate in the innovation oriented, digitally wired twenty-first century” (p. 10) they set about creating new ways to conceptualize literacy education. Barton and Baguley (2014) acknowledged “subject specific knowledge and language” (p. 93) and explored the use of story in drama as a means of expanding the scope of literacy within their classrooms. They believed that drama created opportunities for the innovation mentioned by Davis (2008) as well as “offer(ing) an identity and sense of purpose” through group work which was also spoken of by (Baldwin, 2009, p. 44) as preparing

students to better face the twenty-first century. The arts developed literacy in this setting due to their multimodality (Barton, 2014) as well as the use of “dialogue, actions, and nonverbal communication” (Edwards, 2006, p. 205) to both construct and communicate meaning. As within ELA, stories are used in drama to build understanding in the reader or viewer so that they can take that understanding, form connections, and impact their own identity in some way.

It has also been found that the theatrical space drama created could provide an approach to literacy that was more “active, social, and experiential” (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71) centered within the types of inquiry and problem solving that Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka (2001) said lead to more authentic learning. The combination of studying story within a dramatic setting allowed, as other research has shown, for a more “open-ended dialogic search for meaning” (Edwards, 2006, p. 205) that better acknowledged multiple points of view as well as the needs of the learners. Unlike more traditional literacy settings the use of the fine and performing arts here allowed students to present knowledge publicly and use rehearsal to better develop their own understandings (Vaughan & Caldwell, 2014).

Lenters & Whitford (2018), Pascoe (2002), and Wells & Sandretto (2016) have all also conducted studies on the use of drama within a literacy space and collectivity have cited additional research that verifies that drama “engages the whole person – the intellect, the emotions, the imagination, and the body” (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71). Drama develops not only the individual learner themselves but also their surrounding network of peer support (Barton and Baguley, 2014, p. 97) and their ability to take risks and challenge their own assumptions. These enrichments and the opportunity to see literacy in

various disciplines culminates in what Pascoe (2002) refers to as being “multimodally literate” as well as being “arts-literate” (p. 72). In both cases a student's overall understanding of literacy changes to be both more “creative and ethical” (p. 75). Such work is also concerned with how students’ understandings or approaches to literacy changed over time as additional meaning was constructed. Drama does, after all, construct meaning over a number of phases beginning with “establishing a familiarity with the story and characters via reading and rereading, staging the story both with and without scripts, rehearsing and then finally performance” (p. 76).

Moving onto the work of Lindquist and Seitz (2009), we see a reaffirmation of literacy as “the communication and construction of meaning” (p. 12), however, we also see a caution in “literacy is one of those words, like love, that people use commonly and confidently, as if its meaning were transparent and stable” (p. 8). Lindquist and Seitz caution teachers and researchers of literacy to consider the social, cultural, and sociopolitical factors that dictate literacy on a personal level for individuals. What they mean by this is that being literate a century ago would be defined differently than it is today since what literacy “is” depends upon the historical and cultural precedents of the learner (p.73). To help see the importance of historical and cultural precedents on literacy, Lindquist and Seitz pose literacy as a moral issue for society by linking it to “advancement” and cultural “success” (p. 75). In this way literacy becomes an ethical consideration because it is driven by changes in society (p. 76). Therefore, as long as learners can understand, respond to, and communicate around “text, context, function, participants, and motivation” they can be considered literate within the context of their time and place (p. 73-77). By doing so learners can read to understand in their direct experience, apply that understanding “to achieve a goal, work with their peers, and be motivated to follow through” (p. 77). Lindquist

and Seitz end their work by calling for more credence to be given to literacy as it exists in relation to “sight, sound, and movement” (p. 97) as well as stating their belief that “in the western humanistic tradition the idea is that literacy is supposed to make you smarter, more humane, more receptive to change” (p. 98).

Instructional Approaches Towards Literacy in Classrooms:

When looking specifically at how various literature addresses instructional literacy strategies there is a noticeable focus towards targeted skill building. Daniels and Zemelman (2014) write at length about how “think alouds, dramatic role play, annotating text, and word walls” all teach towards literacy skill development (p. 94-173). They stress that a combination of these types of instructional strategies build students literacy skills both “individually and collectively” (p. 175). This collectivity within the learning environment is then argued to increase the “comfort level of learners taking risks, giving learners choice and leadership opportunities, and connecting learners experiences and interests to their literacy learning” (p. 206).

A specific example of some of these strategies mentioned by Daniels and Zemelman (2014) can be seen in the work of Burke and Peterson (2007) who used picture books and/or visual novels to build critical literacy skills in a secondary setting. Burke and Peterson were teaching a grade ten interdisciplinary unit on World War Two with a focus on developing students’ visual and print literacies. The incorporation of visual literacy learning outcomes was in response to the visually dominated communication mediums such as “text messaging, gaming, and computers that students use on a regular basis” (p. 74). Burke and Peterson (2007) found that

the visuals in the literacy materials increased student sensitivity around the character's "emotions, intentions, and overall struggles" in a way not possible with text alone (p. 78) with later analysis, comprehension, and engagement being enriched through theatre arts, social studies, language arts, and art curricula. Dramatic role play, done later in conjunction with text analysis, also showed an overall increase in historical consciousness among students since they could explore "alternative points of view in history, through play, to broaden their understandings" (p. 79). Awareness of the psychological and emotional impacts of war is difficult to foster but Burke and Peterson argue that text, independent of any of these other aforementioned creative supports, would not have fostered awareness to the same degree and that taking the time to develop "visual, print, and critical literacies" can, therefore, assist with the reading of texts across curriculum (p. 78).

While such drama activities can be enriching, there are certain space and time constraints that can make full productions not always possible. In these instances it is still possible to explore literacy within the dramatic setting through writing as seen in the work of Shosh (2005). Shosh had his students write as if they were "actors, directors, production designers, technicians, and critics" in order to create purposeful inquiries from complex perspectives therefore developing critical literacy (p. 70). Shosh took this arts based approach based on feedback from his students that their writing for more standard assignments was "phony" (p. 69) and not reflective of their authentic voice. However, writing in the context of drama allowed the students to build "unique texts as opposed to recreating or mimicking text" (p. 72) based off of real world observations of facial expressions, body movements, and vocal intonation that inspired students characters. It was noted by Shosh (2005), however, that for this type of writing to be most

effective, it must be engaged with over an extended period of time to allow for the development of “themes, editing, and dialogue” about the process to occur (p.71). What this does is build “bridges for literacy achievement” which was a saying first coined by McEwan-Adkins (2012) in relation to “review and retelling activities, vocabulary integration, pre-reading texts, sharing, and working with peers” (p. 108).

Another way in which drama is often interwoven with literacy is through Readers Theatre (RT) as was done by Peck and Virkler's (2006). Within their work Peck and Virkler used RT to “elicit characterization, oral communication, critique of texts, and dialogue between students” (p 788). RT was chosen for this task due to its focus on negotiating and interpreting text while still allowing for the development of “imagination, embodiment, and emotional literacy” (p.789). The process behind RT generally follows the process of reading a text, making analytical choices about script format, and then “performing” for an audience (p. 789). This “performance” remains extremely focused upon text, however, and so it often only involves a read-through by the actors. Such a focus does, however, allow for “rereading, reading for fluency, reading for expression, inferring meaning based upon contextual clues and detailed oral reading” (p. 791). As students go about RT they are not only practicing reading but also writing, listening, and speaking which translate into measureable gains in areas of pacing, expression, and phrasing. Additional literacy gains are often argued to be increases in “fluency, comprehension, and oral reading confidence” (p. 792). Gains outside of literacy directly were also seen, as they were in other studies, relating to increased “social negotiation, motivation, and student ownership over their own learning” (p. 793).

Both how literacy comes to be defined, as well as the instructional practices that surround it, do of course come to rely upon the educational setting of the lessons. Research has suggested that the “culture of literacy within primary (elementary) schools is different than the culture of secondary schools” (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013, Online). In fact, the work of Kostogriz and Doecke (2013) found that educators and administrators within a primary (elementary) setting were more likely to “perceive of literacy as situationally dependent” (Online). Secondary schools, within their same observations, were by contrast more likely to perceive of literacy as “subject or discipline specific” (Online). Within such a secondary setting there was also assigning of literacy outcomes to “all students, regardless of their social and cultural advantages and/or disadvantages” (Online). Arts immersion techniques and other varied instructional approaches can help to break such barriers down and show literacy as a socially constructed practice (Erikson, 2013) while at the same time bringing the common school cultures of primary (elementary) and secondary closer together.

Creating Authentic Arts Immersion Techniques within Schools

When discussing the concept “arts immersion,” there is often reference made to "process drama" which refers to a teaching pedagogy refined by Robin Pascoe (2002). Pascoe's work spoke about the “language of drama” while highlighting the need for discipline-specific arts languages and literacies (p.65). “Process drama” uses the medium of drama to engage with complex questions through a leaning inquiry guided by students. It is centered within arts immersion, instead of the more common arts infusion, because rather than beginning with the subject area and adding the art form (infusion) process drama begins with the art form and adds the subject area (immersion) (Erikson, 2013). For clarity, an arts infusion lesson may ask

students to role play a pre-constructed character in one short scenario to better understand the fur trade in Canada. Whereas an arts immersion lesson on the same topic would ask students, after teaching them a brief introduction to the topic, to create an original play or character surrounding the fur trade. Students would continue asking questions about the fur trade and learning more about it over the artistic process while also addressing other outcomes at the same time (script writing (ELA), set measurement and construction (Math) etc.). Both approaches address learning outcomes, however the way in which infusion incorporates the arts is more surface level and does not always allow for “discipline specific languages and literacies around drama” to develop (Pascoe, 2002, p.66). This more surface level approach is argued by Pascoe to limit the effectiveness of the process drama experience since “like other language forms, arts languages have their own conventions, codes, practices and meaning structures” (p. 64) which can only be learned by engaging with the art form itself and learning to convey meaning within that context.

Drama in particular is a unique art form due to the type of lived experience it both creates and can emulate, meaning that, within a theatrical context, literacy becomes not merely an end goal but something that is “alive, reacted to, and understood/developed through hands-on experience” (p.72). Process drama calls on students to use an embodied language of drama, as well as dramatic codes and conventions, while developing arts-languages. Examples of such codes and conventions include but are not limited to: “facial expression, movement of bodies in space, body posture and shape, gesture, and words” (Pascoe, 2002, p. 66)

This embodied language of drama helps to create a level of consistency in the language surrounding arts-languages overall. At the same time this research also shows connections

between “arts-literacies and embodied literacy, spatial literacy, and linguistic literacy” (p. 66). These were not the only complexities around dramatic arts-literacies that Pascoe noted, however, she also considered a performer’s “relationship to the audience and the performance's technical elements (lighting, sound, and special effects) as impacting the meaning of a performance” (p. 68). Pascoe felt confident that the arts lead to an enrichment of learning outcomes and that a student's overall literacy could be improved through: “improvising original texts and seeing how texts are shaped by conventions of dramatic forms, styles, genres and structures” (Pascoe, 2002, p. 70).

A way to consider Pascoe's (2002) work from another perspective is to look at the work of Leander and Rowe (2006) around the phenomenon of “literacy events” (p. 428). These “events” approach literacy in a similar way to the embodied language of drama by having students “share interpretations of texts, read original writings, display posters, and act out skits” (p. 428). Leander and Rowe also encouraged the audiences attending these performances to “make remarks, ask questions, and evaluate what they observed” (p. 431) which spoke to the relationship between performer and audience member that Pascoe (2002) highlighted. Literacy within these “events”, therefore, moved away from text alone towards a “representational approach bringing together speech, space, movement/organization, print text, images, and media sources” (p. 432). This was referred to by these authors as literacy in “use” and was said to offer insight into “textual interpretations, text production, and links between how identity impacts literacy and development” (p. 451). Performances should, therefore, be seen, in the view of these authors, as “interplay between language, image, body, and self/others for the purpose of creation and innovation in relation to a text or prompt” (p. 450).

Another consideration of the interplays which impact experiencing literacy comes from the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1980) who wrote about the different uses and functions literacy can acquire based upon context. Her work is similar to that of Lindquist and Seitz (2009) in that she also speaks to the cultural component of contextual responsiveness saying “societies also differ in terms of perceived benefits and functions of literacy” (p. 125). This conceptualization aligns well with the Ideological models of literacy outlined by Brian Street (2006) as well as to the social understanding of literacy mentioned by Marco (2015). The influence of society can, therefore, change the types of literacy events that are experienced within a particular time and place. By extension this make society a key factor in the experience of literacy within any particular space.

Leander and Rowe also discuss that a rhizoanalytic approach to literacy in the arts should be adopted, in which performance becomes less about “individual meaning and more about relational meaning” (p. 451). Such approaches to literacy move it away from acquisition of skills and/or qualifications and more towards being in relation to a student's sense of self and others while also including texts, spaces, objects, and embodiment within its considerations. Leander & Rowe fear that currently literacy learning is stuck within “the realization of the possible” which is based upon imitation, resemblance, and reference (p. 441) and hope that through process drama this literacy narrative can shift towards a “transformational approach” aligned more towards developmental and relational considerations surrounding the learners themselves (p. 452).

Further building upon the work of Leander and Rowe (2006) and Pascoe (2002) is the work of Katherine Macro (2015). Macro spoke about how she adapted her approach to drama, through reflective teaching practices, moving from an arts infusion standpoint to an arts immersion one (p. 335). While she formerly used drama as a means to act out text within languages arts exclusively, she eventually adapted it to become what she called an “exploratory tool” (p. 337). What this meant was that rather than being a single project or experience, drama became an inquiry based learning method for creating understanding and communicating meaning. This inquiry was especially effective due to the fact that it provided the opportunity to encourage the exploration of topics at a pace set by students as well as to create meaning in areas of study directly related to their interests. She justified this adaptation in her teaching approach by stating that “newer definitions of literacy talk about the social practices of literacy, including such things as the way we interact, identify, and embody a literacy experience” (p. 338). These literacy experiences were then connected directly to the ongoing practices of drama going on in her classroom as students developed new identities, perspectives, and original thought over the lessons.

Macro's work reinforces the findings of Leander and Rowe (2006) and Pascoe (2002) by again showing drama as developing its own literacy with discipline specific skills and practices. Marco (2015) herself says that “I would argue that drama is a literacy in and of itself; drama provides us with a method of making meaning and understanding the world around us” (p. 339) both through discipline specific languages and the experiences providing transferable skills that impact other areas of curriculum. Wells & Sandretto (2016) take this idea further within the early years (elementary) setting in New Zealand by asking “what are some possible affordances of

using process drama pedagogy in the literacy programme?” (p. 181). Observing both the impact of process drama on the literacy outcomes of the students as well as the supports that teachers would need to feel comfortable teaching using process drama, Wells & Sandretto critiqued the Four Resources Model (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The Four Resources Model was argued to not encourage the multiliteracies approach called for by the New London Group (1996) in the same way that process drama could (Wells & Sandretto, 2016).

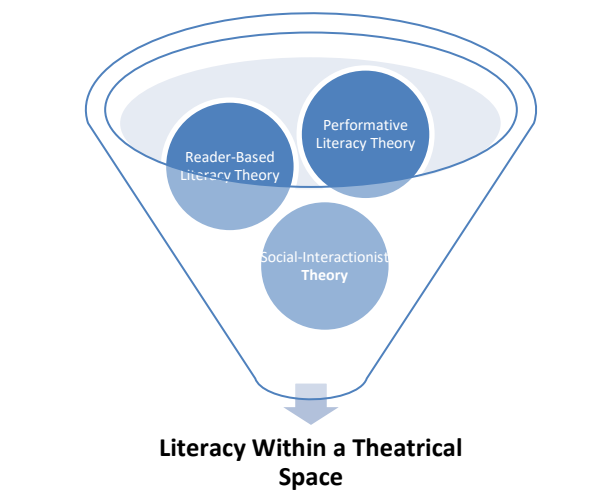
Teachers involved in Wells & Sandretto’s study attended an entire university course on drama education as well as multiple workshops on multiliteracies. Beyond teaching content these opportunities were also meant to be times for self and critical reflections on how each teacher would move forward within their literacy programs. The teachers also planned and later reflected upon a number of lessons together prior to writing exit reflections around professional growth and impacts on practice at the conclusion of the study. Findings showed “process drama as an innovative and empowering pedagogy, making different literacy experiences and opportunities possible” (p. 183). This is seen through the process of co-creation involving the development of many skills traditionally defined within literacy learning such as constructing and communicating meaning as well as analyzing and using various types of text. Indeed “the purpose of process drama is for the students to participate in a learning inquiry, or discovery, rather than present a rehearsed performance to an audience” (p. 182).

Both of the teachers and the researchers also mentioned a standout lesson which saw students aged 5-6 examine a photo of their own classroom from over a century ago and use tableaux (frozen images) to recreate the image. During the recreation, students assigned character

traits to a particular boy in the photo and tried to guess what he was thinking based upon context clues such as facial expression. This inference skill, useful in reading, was then later applied by the “majority of students during later reading assessments” as noted by the teachers (p. 186)

In a brief conclusion to this section these readings have helped to “argue for multiple literacies including the languages of the arts” (Pascoe, 2002, pp. 76) as well as demonstrate the differences between an arts infusion and arts immersion learning environment (Erikson, 2013, p. 5). Drama has been shown to account for the “embodiment and experience behind literacy including the social factors that go into defining it” (Macro, 2015, p. 338) and well as providing “transferable literacy skills developed within an inquiry environment” (Wells & Sandretto, 2016, p. 186). However, the majority of this work, and similar work in this field, has been done within primary (elementary) settings, therefore, highlighting the importance of considering the impact of drama on literacy at the secondary grade levels. Finally, it will also be important within later research to more fully account for the student perspective in relation to their own experiences.

Theoretical Framework:



The design of this theoretical framework is intended to show how various literacy and learning theories lend themselves well to a literacy program centered within process drama. Within such a program, arts immersion techniques help to both create and synthesize students' experiences of literacy through the creation of theatrical spaces. These theatrical spaces in turn enrich how students perceive of their literacy experiences, what they take away from their literacy experiences, and impact how their experiences are shaped in the future. The visual of the funnel acts as a metaphor for how student experiences come to be influenced, and in some cases predefined, by the context and circumstances of the learning environment that surrounds them.

Beginning with reader-based theories it is important to place greater importance on the “reader and their relationship to text” in order to create a theatrical space (Purves & Beach, 1972, p. 23). Not only does this account for the reader’s age, gender, and ideology in relation to their interpretations which will later become the performance (Marshall, 2000) but it also accounts for the “embodied language of drama” (Pascoe, 2002, p.66) and the “student as a whole person (intellect, emotions, imagination, and body)” (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71). It is the reader who constructs the identity of a performed character in relation to their own identity Holland (1975) & Bleich (1978) which in turn allows them to “visualize, connect, question, infer, evaluate, analyze, recall, and self-monitor more effectively over the course of their reading” (Daniels & Zemelman, 2014, p. 30). Finally it is the development of emphatic engagement with text (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998) seen within this theory which allows for better development of the later performative literacy theory.

As students move into performative expressions of the experience they form as readers they not only better account for the subjectivity of their experiences (Austin, 1975) but they also begin to see how “text impacts their day to day world” (Beach & Swiss, 2011, p. 3). Seeing and engaging with text in this way can lead to a more “open-ended dialogic search for meaning” (Edwards, 2006, p. 205) both in engagement with one another and with the audience. This can allow students the chance to better understand how social conventions, like those they are encountering in character creation and performance, impact character “beliefs, goals, and traits” (Culler, 2007, p. 175). Not only does such thought and reflection occur on the individual level but through performance students present knowledge publicly while at the same time developing their understandings (Vaughan & Caldwell, 2014). Performance builds off of the work done within the reader-based theory and by doing so also helps to show that literacy is not an “end state; instead, it will become a continuous learning process for all of us.” (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 121).

Each of these theories, and many of the sources discussed above, illustrate or argue for a paradigm shift in literacy education towards a constructivism approach. This has been occurring to various extents over the past ten years as learning was problematized and defined in a more holistically complex way. Learning's definition moved from “behaviorism, to cognitivism before shifting to what we now see in constructivism” (Richardson, & Morgan, 1994, p. 259). This shift has challenged older studies that viewed meaning as constructed through language acquisition or obtained in a behaviorist way (Au, & Carroll, 1997). What this means is that linguistic meaning should no longer be measured based solely upon a stimulus-response model:

“Imitation of the actions of a teacher or experienced peer, listening to specific lessons (external stimulus) and then repeating meaning back, or responding to reward and/or punishment systems but rather on student-centered instructional approaches” (p. 217).

Rather meaning should be generated through an examination of the learners experience with literacy through a Social-Interactionist perspective. This would mean viewing literacy not as a type of acquisition but rather as a “development resulting from social activities (experiences) that occur within an integrated system comprising language users who need language in order to interact” (i.e. a theatrical space) (Au, & Carroll, 1997, p. 207). This also helps to encourage a type of literacy development that is encouraging an “engagement with texts through action, feelings and thinking related to a purposeful social activity” (Lenters & Whitford, 2018, p. 122). Rather than just giving reading “prime time” or just engaging in performance without a deep understanding of text combining the two within a social-interactionist perspective allows individual learners to “discover and develop their own literacies through identity and group development” (Barton and Baguley, 2014, p. 97).

Summary

Modern definitions of literacy are calling for the inclusions of how we “interact, identify, and embody a literacy experience” (Macro, 2015, p. 338). However, in order to ensure that student agency, authorship, and identity are a part of this modern definition, it is imperative that we create spaces that explore literacy experiences in a more “active, social, and experiential” way (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71). One way to ensure student agency, authorship and identities are fostered, is to combine existing educational theory with

new pedagogical perspectives. Based upon the research reviewed above, I determined the need for additional literacy research at the secondary level. This would address a gap surrounding the similarities and differences between elementary and secondary students' experiences. At the same time exploring literacy through the lens of experience can help to create a consistent language around the differences between arts infusion and immersion so that they are, hopefully, used correctly on a much broader basis. Additionally, as literature has shown, it is important to understand if students are constructing and communicating meaning for epistemic purposes (exploration and discovery) or for presentational purposes (demonstration of knowledge) (Froese, 1997) since that will come to impact the presence of "authentic" literacy experiences in classrooms (Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka, 2001, P. 16).

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

Within this chapter I will illustrate my phenomenological methodological lens, my overall research design, and how the two exist together within this study. I define my particular approach to phenomenology as an existential one due to my focus upon student voice as a nature of being in the world, as well as the importance I place upon embodiment regarding performance (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006). In terms of my research design it is driven by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), due in large part to the way in which it constructs meaning as a “process between both participant and researcher” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 5). It is my view that the two complement one another well in the exploration of the literacy phenomenon and serve to answer the research question well from an ontological, epistemological, and axiological standpoint as show in the following sections.

The research question guiding this study was:

What is it like to experience literacy within a theatrical space?

This research question was answered using four distinct tasks which included: semi structured one on one interviews, multi week journaling, writing monologues, and the performance of those monologues/performance reflections. The study took place within a specialized arts immersion junior high school in Western Canada. This was a qualitative study, meaning that it placed emphasis upon participants and their unique ways of knowing. This also meant that as a researcher I had to understand that different lived experiences create different realities for participants, I had to involve participants in both data collection and analysis, and I

had to fully integrate myself within the research site. These types of considerations allowed participants to assign value as they saw fit within their own experiences when discussing literacy within a theatrical space (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was suitable for my research due to the fact that the chosen research question and focus were all based upon increasing student agency, authorship, and identity. The types of data that I gathered, allowed me to examine the phenomena (literacy) in a way that is very different from statistical or assessment based data. I was able to gather the perspectives of the students themselves and in their own voices. Data was collected using the following tools: interviews, participant journals, artefacts from participants and the capstone performances. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant journals included a mix of interview questions as well as questions regarding thematic analysis and character creation incorporating textual, visual, and thematic responses. The resulting monologues and performances came to include varied art forms depending upon the student with some students keeping performances text based, others using dance, and some even composing original pieces of music among other forms.

Methodology

Phenomenological Lens

There are certain sets of assumptions which are brought forth within such phenomenological work that need to be discussed prior to the resulting analysis. Within the realm of educational research, phenomenology is commonly concerned with “careful and systematic reflection on the lived experience of educational phenomena” (Van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 449). However, as researchers and readers we must not assume the lived experience we

observe is completely transferable to additional contexts or that the reoccurring themes and trends we observe within the data are similar to what participants themselves observe. Hence the need for various trustworthiness practices, such as member checking, which are discussed above.

In order to further illustrate possible methodological assumptions it is important to consider the research through ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological lenses:

- Ontological (the nature of reality): Within this phenomenological research, I embrace the idea of multiple realities in that each individual student has a unique perspective which has been shaped via their own life world. This is why I worked to create so many varied data sets in order to understand how the reality of the learning environment can impact the life world of students within such differentiated environments.
- Epistemological (how researchers know what they know): I knew that it was important to get as close as possible to the students being studied through prolonged field research. This allowed evidence such as interviews and journals to be assembled based on student views/perspectives/experiences and later clustered together into groups of themes and patterns to better understand how the literacy phenomenon was experienced. Coding of themes and patterns was influenced by the students themselves revisiting their own data over the course of the study in a type of respondent verification loop. Voice and action also become ways of knowing within the arts and can lead to reflection on the part of the individual as to how “social, psychological, and cultural discourses have impacted their understanding of self or the lived experience” under study (Vicars & McKenna, 2015, p. 423)

- Axiological (The role of values in research): “Value” while not explicitly inquired about was assigned to various past experiences over the course of data collection by various students. In many cases art forms that participants valued (e.g., music and dance) came to inform how that participant not only experienced literacy but also how they communicated the nature of that experience to a wider audience. I myself assigned values to early data sets using the process of coding but worked to be reflexive and consciously aware of my own values through memos and alterations to the research process. As a research methodology the arts also value “dialogue, reflection, and transformation as data is collected, represented, and created within a community” (Sanders, 2006, p. 96).
- Methodological (The methods used in the process of research): The research process consisted of interviews, participant journals, artefacts from participants and the capstone performances. Analysis following data collection helped to establish the relationship between arts immersion and the collected experiences as well as make an argument for the importance of learner agency, authorship, and identity in the discussion of literacy teaching and learning practices.

Existential Phenomenology Paradigm:

When defining the paradigm of this research it is important to mention that it is primarily a work of phenomenology and that I am seeking to understand the life-world of the students involved and I explore collected experiences following Heidegger's notion of being in the world which is to view experience as an engaged, embodied, and subjective series of relationships that are defined as engagement both *in and with* the “other” (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006). Building upon experience as engagement it is also important to note that I take a Heideggerian approach in

how I understand the involved students as beings who care and actively seek to gain meaning. In the case of this study with the capstone of that meaning being a live performance. As a result, I lean towards an existential view of phenomenology as it integrates both the meaning of being as well as the perception of embodiment illustrated here. “Existential phenomenologies have included descriptions of the meaning of being (Heidegger), and the role of the lived body in perception (Merleau-Ponty)” (p. 31). While Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty do have differences in how they conceptualize existence as a result of embodiment, taken together they consider both the human in the world (Heidegger) and the world as an influential force (Merleau-Ponty) in viewing various types of phenomena, which is, I believe, essential in educational research.

Existential Phenomenology's primary objective is to place heavy emphasis upon thick and rich description as a means of leading to a deeper appreciation of the “objects of research” (p. 32), therefore allowing the emphasis to be placed upon describing participants and their experiences. However, interpretive approaches do interplay within this description when coming to develop understanding around those experiences, meaning that interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) can find a strong foundation in this worldview. Understanding was developed within the resulting analysis using some hermeneutic influences as well, in a Gadamerian sense, meaning that not all of the participant experiences had to “agree” with one another but each was informed through language and dialogue within the interviews, journals, monologues, and resulting performance. This engagement with the “other” (e.g., myself and the audience) on the part of each student also moved their experiences beyond simple description and additionally into practices of reflection and the construction of meaning (Gadamer, 2006). The resulting work of phenomenology is therefore a hybrid of sorts as it is both existential while

at the same time possessing a hermeneutic influence in how it comes to understand that which has previously been described. It is this Gadamerian influence which also impacted the way in which I handled the term “essences”. Husserl (2004), who used “pure” phenomenology, believed that “essences” were the way in which a phenomenon was experienced by a group of people or part of society. However, adapting this idea with a Gadamerian influence allows a use of essences that apply to particular individuals specifically (not everyone has to “agree”). This allows the construct of essences to become less static and creates enriched explorations of experiences in a contextually responsive way.

Speaking further to the nature of phenomenological inquiry, this study examined the work of Van Manen and Adams (2010) as they came to define this methodology: “phenomenology tries to show how our words, concepts, and theories always shape (distort) and give structure to our experiences as we live them” (p. 450). I take this to mean that the analysis of experience in turn develops detailed descriptions of that experience and demonstrates how the phenomenon under study is “lived” and exists in the world. More than just describing the experience, however, it is important that from the structural description (how students experienced literacy) and textural descriptions (what exactly students experienced), that the findings and resulting discussion presents the “essence” of the phenomenon as it exists for each of the individual students. Such “essence” is important not for the purposes of saying that each individual would experience literacy the same way given similar circumstances but rather so that you, the reader, walks away from the research feeling that you better understand what it was like for someone to experience the phenomenon of literacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In turn, that

knowledge may additionally impact how you conceptualize of literacy over time and in different contexts.

Setting

The specialized arts immersion junior high school that was the site of this study, is a designated charter school specializing in arts immersion located in Western Canada. This study took place on a secondary campus and involved students in grades eight and nine with the demographics of that population consisting of a possible recruitment pool of fifty five grade eight students and forty two grade nine students. A total of nine students participated in this study, however, one of them dropped out in between the interview and journal phases.

Within the school, students are grouped within mixed grade levels of 4/5, 6/7, and 8/9 with teachers working collaboratively to cover their representative curriculum. The groupings are referred to as “pods” and each grade is typically split into two sections (e.g. 8-1/8-2). All of the classrooms are designed to be large open spaces with all of the tables and desks being easily movable for quick reconfiguration of rooms. The rooms also have fold away stages and makeshift performance spaces, should the need arise, with the building itself being purpose built, with arts immersion and collaborative learning in mind, and being unique in the community. Located in the heart of a large urban setting, the school also has flexibility with its local partners, outsourcing additional performance and rehearsal halls which include three world class dance studios/rehearsal halls (also used during production and larger school events/rehearsals), which this research made use of during the later data collection phases. Students involved within the

study discussed their connections within the local artist community and the work they do within local community theatre among other venues.

Interviews and data collection were conducted within the board rooms or offices of the school (interviews and journal writing) and in the affiliated performance spaces on campus (monologue writing and performance). The early phases of the study were commonly done one-on-one between students and myself, however, during rehearsals students would come together as a group with me in order to give one another feedback, memorize lines, and develop characters and blocking. All of these research stages occurred within the school's timetable during a regular school day. Research would commonly occur during either humanities or production but this time was flexible to the needs of both the students and the school. The board rooms and offices were used both for their location in a quiet part of the school and due to the fact that they each had plenty of table space. The performance spaces were used in rehearsal due to the fact that they have plenty of room for the entire group as well as chairs, boxes, and other elements which could function as a makeshift set. The performance evening occurred outside of regular school hours in the grade 6/7 pod, which is on the school's main floor.

The Students Involved

Selection of Students

Invitations for participation in this study were extended to each of the students enrolled within grades 8/9 as this group's timetable was most amenable to the incorporation of research during the school day. Other grade levels at the same campus were not eligible for recruitment

invitations into the study based upon this consideration and due to the fact that most of the existing gaps in research stem from a lack of secondary student's perspective. I spent two weeks getting to know the students who showed interest in the invitations as well as the school environment prior to making research presentations to each of the homerooms (8-1,8-2,9-1,9-2) going over the rationale for the research, what would be expected of those who became involved, and other considerations. Out of a potential sample size of 97 students, 14 students took consent forms home and 9 students returned them signed by parents within the allotted week long time limit. The entire 8/9 pod was given equal opportunity to become involved and provided the same information prior to volunteering. Of the 8 participants who completed the study there was representation from both grades 8 and 9, each student had been enrolled at the school for at least one year, and there was a mix of both males and females.

Description of Participants (Please Note: All Names Are Pseudonyms)

The participants in my study included the eight students shown below:

Selina	Female	Grade 9	Experienced Literacy as Freedom
Petra	Female	Grade 9	Experienced Literacy as Unveiling
Claire	Female	Grade 8	Experienced Literacy as Ambition
Erud	Female	Grade 8	Experienced Literacy

			as Connection
Emilia	Female	Grade 8	Experienced Literacy as Understanding
Samuel	Male	Grade 8	Experienced Literacy as Hope
Dwayne	Male	Grade 8	Experienced Literacy as Speech
Raven	Female	Grade 8	Experienced Literacy as Trust

All students with the exception of Petra were born in Canada. Petra arrived in Canada part way through elementary school. All of the students speak English as a first language with a number of them speaking more than two languages. A number of students also work or volunteer in various art forms outside of school such as performance or dance.

Data Collection Process

One-on-One Semi Structured Interviews

I interviewed each of the involved students using an eight question interview protocol that I designed, to examine how they defined literacy and where they saw literacy in their learning at school. The questions were presented in a semi structured fashion as recommended by Harvey (2014) so as to allow the development of a dialogue with students around the research topics. This discussion also allowed for probing on my part if a question was answered by a student with a close ended answer such as “yes” or “no” since I could always ask them to

elaborate with prompts such as “why do you think that?”. These interviews were completed one on one and lasted between 20-45 minutes with each student, they were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, underwent respondent verification with each of the students, were coded first by myself and then the students themselves, and finally used to inform the eventual characters and monologues that students created to represent literacy. The purpose of this interview style was to establish what literacy meant to each of the students (conceptually), where they conceived of literacy both around their school and within subject areas, to gather examples of what they considered to be literacy experiences, to see what they would relate literacy to, and to see what other ways they would want to explore literacy in the future.

As a result I was an active participant engaging with students both during the interview and in the subsequent analysis. This process took just over two weeks to occur once with each student during pre-arranged times during related subject matter over the course of a school day.

Journals

During the second task of the study students were invited to keep reflective journals that provided them additional time to reflect upon questions, to review their own interviews identifying patterns and themes in how they experienced literacy, and to start developing characters who embodied the essence of their own literacy experiences. Research literature in medicine, specifically family care giving, as well as more generally in relation to data collected from older adults have argued that the use of journals by research participants adds to the richness, depth and extent of the generated information (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005 & Välimäki et al., 2007). Journals were completed as a type of self reflection with me coming in on average

three times a week to check in with participants to see if they needed any assistance or clarification. Beyond these check-in periods I was not a participant observer in this part of the study specifically. The reflection process occurred over the period of one month and based upon feedback students were returning to the journal prompts one or two times each week prior to submitting them. Each journal was typically begun on the Monday and handed in on the Friday with a small number of students working ahead on weeks one and two to gain additional time for the later reflections. Each student wrote a total of four journals and all of the journals, submitted in paper or digital copy, were transcribed/anonymized as needed. Four of the more open ended interview protocol questions, from task one were incorporated, into the journal's earlier written and visual responses in weeks one and two, with week three consisting of a more interactive activity around coding, and week four focusing on character creation. A succinct breakdown is provided within the following table:

Week One	Students wrote their reflection using text in response to interview questions 1-2
Week Two	Students captured their reflections using pictures (hand drawn or captured) with accompanying text as an option in response to interview questions 3-4
Week Three	Students reviewed their own previous interview data and journal responses to identify codes in the form of patterns and themes in

	relation to their own unique literacy experiences
Week Four	Students used their own data generated up until this point to identify the essence of their own literacy experience and used a character creation template in order to begin personifying that essence within a character who inspired their future monologues

During week two, some students chose to create original compositions, while others captured pictures on their phones, or took inspiration from pictures online. Later on, students were taught the process of identifying patterns and themes by first discussing and reflecting upon the themes identified by me within their interviews prior to going back into their own data and creating their own unique themes and patterns. Concluding the journals, the students underwent the complex process of character creation following a provided template comprising three sections: The Outer Layer (The Basics, Physical Appearance, and Speech and Communication), The Flesh (The Past, Family, and External Relationships), and The Core (Psychology, and The Present and The Future). Each of these sections was further sub-divided into additional writing prompts to encourage students to develop their individual characters in as much detail as possible. Understanding how to construct and communicate their experience of literacy through an original character and performance was central to this study and its outcome. This is due to the fact that the layers of complexity around creating a character not only help to further develop

student's articulation of their own literacy experiences but also develop literacy skills and “arts specific languages” that can be transferred to other learning environments (Pascoe, 2002, p. 75).

Monologues and Performance

The third and fourth tasks of the study were interrelated as task three was the drafting of a monologue and task four was the performance of it. Drama was used within this work in the way that Norris (2016) intended not only as a tool for the collection or presentation of data but also for the questioning and re-evaluating of it. In this way drama opened up a bridge to a “lived understanding” of the phenomenon of literacy during the data collection process (p. 131). While writing the monologues students relied upon the characters created during the journaling process and further expanded upon their already developed back-story and motivations. By this point students had also identified the key essence word they associated with literacy (e.g., freedom, hope, trust etc.) and so they chose a moment within their characters' lives that best showed them embodying that essence and wrote about it in monologue form. The resulting text was an original creation that reflected how students interact, identify, and embody literacy within their own learning by building upon existing data collected up until this point. Once the monologues were written, students entered into a rehearsal period and then eventually a performance of their monologue with the purpose of a full production being to show students that literacy is not something that is only consumed but that can also be created. Beyond these considerations the performance also made the research more “public” and accountable to parents, teachers, administrators, and school board members (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 29). The resulting data collected and observed was used to examine similarities and differences in themes among student responses to better understand the nature of their experiences as well as the

essence which they each uniquely connected literacy to within their work. Such convergence and divergence as well as triangulation would form the backbone of the IPA analysis process which will be explained below within the methods of inquiry section.

Certain students kept monologues text-based while others included elements of 3D modeling and projection, dance, original song composition, and ventriloquism. Each of the monologues told a story from the lives of the characters students created, which showcased the theme or essence that they most associated with their literacy experiences. The rehearsal process saw both myself and the students offering feedback and suggestions as characters and scenes developed. Some students even played cameos within one another's monologues. Each participant wrote one monologue which ranged between three to eleven minutes in length with all of the monologues, submitted in paper or digital copy, being transcribed/anonymized as needed.

The writing of the monologues occurred in tandem with the final journal reflection centered on character creation. In much the same way as the journals, the monologues were a type of "homework," with me coming in on average three times a week to check in with students to see if they needed any assistance or clarification. Writing occurred within a timeframe of roughly two weeks with rehearsals occurring over the one week leading up to the final performance. Rehearsals were another opportunity for students to come together and provide one another feedback on their character work and writing up until this point. By this time in the school term, the school's two primary fall and winter productions were over and so rehearsals occurred during the school day exclusively in production time at one of the affiliated

performance spaces on campus. The final performance was given on the evening of December 13th, 2018 following a dress rehearsal that afternoon in the 6/7 pod on the main floor of the school building to a by- invitation only audience. The performance itself was not video recorded but is discussed in greater detail in relation to each of the monologues within the following chapters.

The monologues were performed with lighting and sound cues as requested by participants and the evening unfolded in two Acts with four monologues in each and a catered intermission in between the two. The audience and students had the chance to interact with one another after the performances during an informal “talk back” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 28). The audience members were curious as to what the students thought about the research process and how their perceptions of literacy either evolved or remained the same when comparing them at the beginning of the research and the conclusion. I took extensive memos both during the performance as well as in following up with each of the participants in response to the “talk back” the week following the performance. All of the resulting data, submitted in paper or digital copy, were transcribed/anonymized as needed.

Analysis and Interpretation

Interview data were audio recorded, transcribed, and categorized in relation to both the research questions and emergent themes. This process was undertaken by both myself and the students in a respondent verification loop. A coding method, following Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was then used to further organize resulting data around the primary research question as well as to focus the content of student's monologues upon the

“essence” of their own literacy experiences. This was done by encouraging students to turn key ideas from their interviews or journals into patterns and themes so that they could observe cases of both convergence and divergence (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 56). In cases of convergence certain themes could be given additional weight and divergences often challenged students to think more deeply about data said in passing that in some cases added additional relevance to their developing essences. Monologues were meant to not only develop an original character but to show that character embodying the student's “essence” of literacy and showing the way in which that experience impacted their lives in school and beyond. Performances were not explicitly about literacy; rather, literacy skills and experiences were developed over the process of self-reflection that went into creating the performance and characters. In this way students not only came to better define literacy but had to unpack their own definition to better understand where it came from and what influenced it.

As briefly introduced above the specific method surrounding this study is Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is “concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience” and it looks for “an in depth account of each case before moving to look for patterns of convergence and divergence across cases” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 193). While there is no absolute concrete way to engage within IPA, Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) do make structural recommendations needed in order to fall within the scope of this method which included examples around the use of interview transcription and researcher memos being written in relation to interview transcriptions. This is to help build “instances of reflection” prior to the examination of either emergent themes or connections between said themes to any sort of discussion or conclusion (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 80). This is due to the fact that

meaning making, from an IPA standpoint, must be reflective of the participants' point of view, be a shared experience between participants, and be context specific to their given circumstances within the study participants are taking part in. It is important to not only read but to re-read any collected data in order to allow time for the natural emergence of participants point of view taking care to create "a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data" (p. 83) which importantly embraces the language of participants themselves. It is only with such notes that instances of convergence and divergence can begin to be coded and addressed prior to the generating of a conclusion or the description of a phenomenon. In cases where IPA moves beyond interviews these same considerations remain important as this is a method concerned with understanding the experiences of one's participants as closely as possible.

In light of this literature surrounding IPA data reporting and organization occurred following these steps: Firstly, I listened to all collected interview audio recordings, read or viewed each participant journal entry, took specific notes and memos during the rehearsal/performance stages, and reflected upon each post-performance reflection (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 10). Then interviews and journals were transcribed verbatim and read through line-by-line, researcher memos were reflected upon once a week and added to with additional thoughts, understandings, or questions, and post performance reflections were also read through line-by-line (p. 11). Secondly, each transcript, memo, or reflection was documented using a series of codes, questions, and comments on my part before being brought back to the students and discussed further with them to enrich the presence of their voices (p. 12). Thirdly, the data underwent a thick and rich description, which is the first section of this chapter, outlining each data collection point and detailing how each student responded and engaged with them (p. 13).

Fourthly, this description was directly connected to the research question for each student further developing their self-identified themes and patterns which emerged over the analysis process. Fifthly, patterning between various participant's responses was noted for the purposes of convergence and divergence across accounts, which helped to highlight recurring themes and points worthy of consideration at both the “personal and collective” level (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 56). Finally, I brought together these emergent themes in order to relate participants’ accounts back into educational discourses and literature.

In summary, from the perspective of relevant literature, the resulting analysis in this study is structured according to the following principles (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014): (a) multiple read-throughs and detailed descriptive note taking, (b) adapting researcher and participant notes/data set into emergent themes/patterns, and (c) both highlighting and examining relationships between themes that are recurrent, identifying themes that are outliers, and understanding data both individually and collectively. Speaking to the coding process in more detail it was done over a multistage process of analysis beginning first with myself who reviewed the data and coded it using twelve thematic areas that emerged as convergence across student's experiences. This was done after careful reading and re-reading. However, the data were then taken back to students who, after being taught the process, reviewed their own data identifying both convergence and divergence between their own interpretations and those that I provided. This allowed for “engagement in dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in light of the participants’ responses and I was able to enquire after other interesting areas which arise” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 57). It was these data, reviewed by students, which would move forward to inform later character creation sheets, the monologue, and performance.

Respondent verification and student reflexivity were encouraged at each stage of the research process in conjunction with the analysis. This was done in order to better attend “to all aspects of this lived experience, from the individual's wishes, desires, feelings, motivations, belief systems through to how these manifest themselves or not in behaviour and action” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 5) and to encourage “co-research” in relation to the process drama discussed above. While students were not involved in the formation of initial questions or research design, their responses to said questions did inform future design choices leading up to the performance evening and how that performance evening would come to be discussed within the findings, therefore, maintaining the integrity of their voices and perspectives throughout the research process. The central research question of *what is it like to experience literacy within a theatrical space?* was, therefore, addressed in a way that accounted for “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 45) with some additional trustworthiness and consistency measures considered.

Trustworthiness and Consistency

Over the course of this research various measures were taken in order to help insure trustworthiness and consistency between the research process, the phenomenon under study, and the eventual results (Golafshani, 2003). To begin with the establishment of credibility (internal validity) and dependability (reliability) a form a triangulation was used wherein multiple data methods (interviews, journals, monologues, and performances) all built upon one another and the resulting essences of each student's literacy experiences were the result of self reflections upon each and every prior data set collected (Casey & Murphy, 2009). Furthermore, when discussing a thematic breakdown of interview data, specifically, triangulation was also used to develop

recurring patterns within student responses to ensure a more comprehensive and diverse set of findings as well as proper pattern recognition and fair representation. Another method of credibility used was prolonged contact with both the school and the students themselves that totaled four (4) months. This time not only helped to ensure a well paced research process but also helped to create a level of transferability (external validity) through rich and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of student's accounts using researcher memos to demonstrate decision making processes and to ensure transparency. Finally, there was an opportunity for respondent validation through a process of member checking. What this meant in practice was giving students the opportunity to both review and comment on a copy of the transcribed interview notes, audio recordings, and in having them help in establishing the themes and concepts that resulted from said interviews in order to adequately reflect the phenomena under study as it related to each individual student. By keeping the students actively involved within the research process continually in this way, this study also addressed what Harvey (2014) called for when suggesting a continuous member-checking loop as a method of consistency and dependability.

Practices of respondent validation and member checking were born out of researcher reflexivity in an effort to be proactive in countering personal biases and to establish confirmability. Additionally, such practices helped to establish comparisons between the similarities and differences in how both the students and I understood the data, thus representing diverse perspectives in as fair a manner as possible (Casey & Murphy, 2009). The resulting essences of what came to form each individual student's experience of literacy as a result of these

processes challenged the pre-existing assumptions I had as a former language arts and literacy teacher.

The performative element of the study also helped to enrich and provide the opportunity to address a common gap with qualitative trustworthiness--“the public disclosure of research processes” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 29). Through inviting members of the community associated with both participants and the school (including other students, parents, teachers, board members, and academics), and engaging them in dialogue, the full process and nature of the study came to be revealed, with those directly impacted by its results having an opportunity to not only witness or read about the conclusions but to also understand and inquire about how those conclusions came to be arrived at. It should be noted that at the time of writing this chapter I am also engaging in ongoing critical reflection of the various data sources and engaging in regular meetings with my supervisory committee to provide an element of peer review/debriefing to reduce/acknowledge overall biases. It was extremely important to me that over the course of the research process that I was not the one solely dictating student’s experiences but rather that I was having a dialogue around their experiences with the students acting as equal partners (Clark, 2017). It is hoped that the measures discussed above help to show the arrangements designed to increase both student engagement and ownership of this research. No element of the data collection process occurred without their involvement and resulting analysis, while undertaken by myself, received high levels of feedback and input from students at multiple opportunities. The practices undertaken here are supported by literature outlined within this section and serve the practices of educational research well.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

Within this chapter I will outline the findings of my study from each of the data collection points discussed within my research design outline. I have chosen to organize the information within this chapter into three distinct sections for the sake of optimal clarity. The first section details the one-one semi-structured interviews that began the study and is organized chronologically by student. These interviews act as a baseline for where student's understanding of a literacy experience began at the start of the study. The section that follows this details the student's experiences of literacy within a theatrical space and includes written and visual reflections, category and coding activities, character creation, performance data, and post-performance reflections. This large section is organized by the “essences” (or keywords) that each student assigned to their own experiences as is meant to tell the story of how each student reflected, flushed out, and expanded the way in which they perceive of literacy. The final section of this chapter is the data analysis section which seeks to use the technique of convergence and divergence in order to analyze student's data, both individually and collectively, to understand reoccurring themes and categories as well as outlying themes and categories.

Findings

Interviews:

My footsteps were heavy with anxiety as I approached the school on that cold September morning. Wind was blowing off of the nearby river and there was a light touch of frost on the trees. After two weeks of observations getting to know the campus, staff, and students my

research, a year and a half in the making, was finally getting underway. As I begin thinking about the students who signed up to be a part of this study I hear the familiar click of the door unlocking as the school's security buzzes me in. I wave to various staff members as I enter the building and say my good mornings as I sign in for the day at the office. It is early in the day and there are not many students around beyond those in the gymnasium practicing and so when I enter the grade eight/nine "pod", which is a nickname for the collaborative learning spaces, I am not greeted by anyone.

I take my seat at the desk the teaching team was kind enough to share with me and take out my researcher's notebook, interview protocol, and little recording device. This will be the first of many steps over the next four months—a conversation with the eight participant students around various questions relating to their experience of literacy. I chuckle a bit to myself in response to my research topic, a path that I never thought I would be on but one inspired by years teaching in language arts classrooms. I take out my participant list and begin to glance over it as the morning bell rings, has it been that long already?, and students file in, sitting by the whiteboard and television screen as the teaching team enters and takes their places for attendance. I join them as they go through their morning routine and explain that day's schedule. I always marvel to myself during this exchange at the level of flexibility that each of these teachers and students have, since the schedule will often change depending upon the needs of school productions and rehearsals.

"Just one of the realities of teaching in an art school" one of the teachers whispers to me and we smile to one another as students begin to move to their various classes. It is at this

moment that my first participant Selina, who is a grade nine student who has attended the school for more than three years, approaches me prepared to begin the interview as we had arranged the day before. She smiles briefly in my direction to indicate that she is ready to go and as we descend back onto the school's main floor we discuss how rehearsals are going, since Selina is directing one of the scenes in the upcoming fall production. She speaks to the fact that it is going well and she is enjoying working with the actors assigned to her scene as we enter the conference room.

Student One—Selina

Selina takes a seat at the oak conference table and glances out of the room's long window at the last of the leaves falling outside as I set up the recording device. I take my seat across the table from her and review the protocol we will be using, ask if she has any questions, and obtain her consent to record our conversation. Nervously, I begin by asking her “what does the term literacy mean to you?” and she responds confidently that:

“Literacy is something that lets you express who you are with no limitations, all you have to have is, um, a simple understanding of a vocabulary and a pencil and paper”

This answer surprises me and I ask if she enjoys writing, to which she nods vigorously and explains that if she is trying to work through something going on in her life she will often use writing as a means of getting her thoughts out onto paper to process them. I start to gain confidence of my own since Selina seems comfortable responding to the questions and move the discussion into experiences of literacy around school. Immediately, the Star Wars performance,

which is going to be the school's fall production comes up. The play is centered around episode three and written using Shakespearian English, exploring themes such as the hero's journey. Selina begin to discuss how her role as a director helps her to develop her own literacy in that:

“we have to write out what we think the scene is about, what the characters are doing, what they're feeling in that moment, how much they change due to it.”

I ask her to elaborate on the importance of this connection and she mentions her director's book, which is both where she has to compile all of her notes and reflections about the scene as well as being what she will be primarily assessed on over the course of this project. She says that without processing her ideas in more manageable peices and taking the time to break it down she could quickly become overwhelmed. I mention how she must feel a lot of pressure in the role of a director and while she does not deny that fact she is also quick to acknowledge the group supporting her:

“with a story you can add all these metaphors and visuals. With a script, you have to leave some of it open for your actors to interpret or your directors to interpret....That's what a good director should do. Leave some stuff for the actors to do, not just take over completely.”

By this point I was frantically adding notes to my researcher's journal around the collaborative nature of what I was witnessing. I was begining to conceive of a literacy experience as involving elements of writing, production, and community but I urged Selina to continue. I wanted to know what other kinds of connections she would choose to make and if they would

continue to be centered specifically on the arts and so I inquired about other experiences around school that she also identified as involving literacy. The trend did indeed continue as she mentioned a social studies project that centered around turning a time period/historical event into an art form. I discovered that she personified the black plague, through a monologue, as a woman infatuated with death and her character wanted to show death that she could help him achieve his goals. The character became worried that death would be more impressed by “another pretty little plague” and so that became justification for the rapid spread of the Black Death in history: “I loved that project because he (the teacher) gave us freedom to do what we needed to do.”

This freedom gave Selina a rush in that she both loves to perform and to now connect this project to other performances she had seen in the past, deepening her appreciation of the art form. She spoke to how playing with character traits (merciful/vengeful or bold/cunning) while writing the monologue inspired her to want to learn more about the history itself to make the character authentic. This authentic communication of meaning is where literacy began to manifest itself for Selina and it was in the character’s body movement which was stiff unless in the presence of death, where it became more open, that this first began to be communicated to an audience. This description of movement, eye contact, and changes in intention got me thinking of literacy as a kind of embodiment experience again related to performance but Selina was carrying on describing how to learn to better make use of metaphor over the length of the project:

“I use the metaphor my children shall spread, riding on the backs of rats into their storages of wheat and food, and that sticks out to me because something so small can be so deadly.”

With such a strong foundation of literacy within the humanities and arts I became curious about the ways this experience of literacy was translating outside of such subject areas and Selina had a bit of trouble at first articulating how literacy exists outside of the humanities. However, after a period of thought she did draw parallels between science and literacy due to the way in which science utilized technology and coding as a method of communication, however, when pressed for more specific examples the experience she described centered again around a play this time from the perspective of animals advocating against the destruction of a public park space by a larger corporation. The theme of technology would rise again, however. When asked about its importance and daily use Selina said that technology helps to make an easier editing process and can increase confidence in the rewriting process as well.

I thought to myself could technology be another possible category? So far much of the conversation had centered on physicality and performance but perhaps online tools were a type of performance in and of themselves. Selina spoke to the fact that the school does a lot of performances with one usually based upon Star Wars, performed at the local public library this year, one performed around dance at the local performance auditorium, one original production created each year for the local mystery theatre, and one centered on a fashion week in the winter term. For example, the auditorium performance can involve musical elements such as singing while the local mystery theatre show last year involved:

“The story of a bell that went through the ages, um, from historical black plague time to the future it get stolen, it had it used in one of Leornado Davinci's ah, um, in, inventions, it was in a Shakespearean play, it was on a pirate ship, it was a part of a cult...”

The way in which meaning in each performance is constructed and communicated is different and encourages different approaches to literacy or different resulting experiences. However, for Selina the experience through art always gave her freedom to express herself. While speech made this process easier she also saw clear opportunities to do so through wordless pieces as well. Of course these types of experiences come very much to depend upon the context in which they are formed so I knew that it was important to discuss the school community itself as it was clear that once Selina began speaking that she felt that same way:

“It's supportive. It's flexible. It's, um, gentle but it's also firm when it needs to be. It's, it's kind, it's caring, it understands when you need a break.”

She would go on to speak of how the school is a part of her and that she will try to bring the feelings this school inspired for her to other places of learning that she attends such as high school, since this school concludes at grade nine, and university. As the interview concluded and I walked Selina back to class I was left with a lot to think about. For her, literacy seemed to be experienced primarily through performance and was enhanced through community with elements of technology being mentioned briefly. I wondered how her experiences would compare to those of her peers as I picked up the next student on my list for an interview Petra.

Student Two—Petra

Petra was up in the grade eight nine pod having just returned from guitar class and so I found her putting her instrument away in the back of the pod and talking with her friends. After waving her over to me we headed back down to the same conference room where I had just interviewed Selina. Petra seemed a little nervous as she sat across from me and listened to the review of ethics and procedures. So, before turning the audio recording on I made sure to remind her that there were no right or wrong answers and just to relax and have a conversation. This seemed to lower her apprehensions a bit so I turned the recording device on and asked her what literacy was for her. She paused ever so briefly before responding that:

“Well, to me I feel like literacy...it's more like in really creative writing, really creative reading...you're really taking, like leadership in your reading and your writing and...you're not doing it because you have to, you do it because you want to”

Such a response was both similar and different from the one Selina gave me earlier. On the one hand both were drawing connections to the humanities early in the discussion but on the other performance was not in this definition. That said I was interested to see an element of self-motivation in what she was speaking of and I thought that the “doing it because you want to” statement could relate to the “freedom” Selina spoke about. I pressed for details to see the extent of the connection I was witnessing and Petra talked about the Star Wars play as a way of learning different interpretations of language and seeing different ways of how people have spoken throughout history. Not only was this another potential connection between the two interviews thus far but it also offered two potential ways to conceive of a literacy within the arts, one

through embodiment and one through language. Another key discussion around the performative aspect of literacy immediately followed as Petra also established a connection between the original creations undertaken at the local mystery theatre:

“I feel like that is what really, literacy is because you're not really reading off something, you're making your, making like your own....thinking out of the box”

This element of intentional creation is an important one as it relates to the rationale of using process drama as a means of encouraging better student agency, authorship, and identity around the experience of the phenomenon of literacy. The original production referenced here has students in both grades eight and nine helping to write, create technical elements (such as costume and make up) and perform the script for an audience. Roles depend upon if you are in grade eight or nine but in the previous year Petra got to write her own character's lines and block their movement and so the process more fully reflected literacy for her due to her active role within it. I wondered where the inspiration for creating an original character would come from given that it is a rather complex process especially when you are new to it. Petra laughed and explained that she loves to read and then write new and original stories inspired by what she reads. In this way she has a stockpile of character concepts to pull from when thinking about a new type of performance or assignment. She smiled though as she said on paper her characters were a lot quieter than when they got to be performed since she has quite a powerful stage presence and strong voice.

“I’m just like technically a loud person, um, just like always bouncy, always moving around, so like, my characters, for me, they have to be really be something that I’m comfortable with and something I really want to and something I won’t regret doing after”

This response prompted me to think of yet another connection to Selina in that embodiment and self expression could be evidenced in this explanation of literacy and I made a note of this in my researcher memos as we continued. I was curious about how the winter performance felt different for Petra since it was mostly wordless and dance based. I had heard a rumour from her peers that Petra was quite a talented dancer and so I wondered if this talent would inspire uniqueness in her experience. When I asked in more detail about dancing specifically she told me a story about a school dance meant to symbolize different types of waves in the ocean and their impacts of marine and costal environments. She spoke to how the music would build as a wave gained momentum and connected dance to literacy as a means through which to tell a story.

“I just wanted to use every part of the body because I feel like in dance, to tell a story you have to use like every part of your body. You can’t just use your legs, you got to use your arms, your head, and your fingertips, like every part of your body to tell that story”

Such movements had to be precise, clear, and big in Petra’s eyes to be able to communicate the intended meaning behind them and you wanted to be sure to move in a way the resonates with the lyrics and meanings of the song without being too repetitive. It was clear that

Petra saw clear connections to literacy within production and humanities, similar to Selina, but I also wanted to know how their experiences possibly divulge and so I asked Petra about literacy in subjects other than those we had discussed previously. To my interest, she discussed Science and a research project centered on the concept of wonder, a concept also seen in phenomenology, the project called upon students to investigate a scientific phenomenon that was of interest to them. There were guidelines in how to conduct research and how to present the findings from that research but otherwise students had a high degree of freedom and personal choice in what they chose:

“I did Tsunamis...cause I've always, I don't know why, I've always just been interested in Tsunamis. So we did like a whole poster on that, I wrote about the way that they work, and I just like created a whole art poster”

This level of intellectual freedom and choice is one of the reasons that Petra enjoys and engages with school in the way that she does. She feels more able to take risks and sees her learning more broadly. So even though writing in science is more formal than writing in something like creative writing Petra is able to see literacy within both due to the language and communication elements. Wheatear writing about Tsunamis or what it was like to live in Edo Japan Petra enjoys seeing the writing that everyone is capable of and seeing how diverse everyone is in how they communicate.

From a production standpoint Petra also wanted to be clear in that for her literacy was both on and off stage. Technical elements such as costume design, which she often volunteers for, came to also define a large part of her own literacy experience:

“I know that I'm doing costumes this year and I'm excited because we are doing Goth punk and I know that for literacy I will have to like do research on Goth I will have to like um I will have to research how far it went back, what it really means to other people not just because I feel like it is really important the research and literacy part because you want to get it right you don't want to just do what you think it is you want to like see what, cause, so the audience really like understands what your trying to put in”

This element of research relating to literacy also comes up again when she briefly mentions fashion week and how the mock marketing campaign will involve a lot of literacy due to the research that goes into it and how that impacts the designs of the resulting costumes. Research was also mentioned in relation to a project undertaken the previous year which saw the grade eight and nine students designing a Disneyland like fair in their gymnasium and researching not only how to design and contract rides but also how to write a story about their fair and convince students in the younger grades to partake in all of the activities offered. The fair also had performers acting out skits, singing songs, and dancing to establish the mood and tell the story decided up by the collaborative group.

An example of a dance and song was “Viva Vida we did last year and I felt like that really represented it because it was just like a year full of fun”. With this reoccurring theme of

music within Petra's responses I decided to ask more explicitly for a response in relation to this interconnection:

“I feel like we do literacy in music too because the songwriting and I love like I seriously love to song write and I'm always doing it on guitar and as soon as like I started music with the school I started songwriting and I feel like that just like it can be like...the song writing can be whatever you want it to be there is no line there is no like stopping you”

The notion of freedom reoccurred yet again as Petra when on to explain that you study the words at a different level when you song write because you are interconnecting the words to cords and strings. The music itself must exist in harmony with the text to ensure that the proper story gets told. This sounded like such a rich learning experience that I wanted to know if Petra saw this learning experience as a result of learning through art and she responded with the belief that she felt she could never learn without art again. She thought that to do so would be boring and that this school was better off because it was not always “stuck to the curriculum” but instead uses things that the students are interested in to explore the curriculum more deeply. Petra and her friends, for instance, are always writing stories and reading when outside of class. I myself recall seeing them doing so in the school's main stairwell over the lunch hour on my way to the staff room.

Outside of school Petra spoke to school clubs as a means of engaging with literacy in things such as dance club and organized sports, an example of particular interest within the realm of sports were the speeches that students give one another, over the course of a game, as a means

of providing encouragement and motivating each other. I asked if during either of these clubs Petra felt that she had an experience that she was truly proud of and she spoke of one particular contemporary dance piece:

“It was Human so it's like it's really about how you can't be perfect you're only human and no one can expect perfection from you. They have to expect a couple mistakes and they can't expect you to always be strong they have to expect you to fall down and break”

It was a song which spoke to her due to both its content and the fact that she got to share it with her family as she developed the choreography which held a great deal of meaning for her. She is hoping to create a similar project for what is known as her grade nine exit project but instead center it around fashion and involve her teachers within the creation project since the community that exists around her learning is not only important for support but also in helping to shape the resulting project. This exit project is of great importance to Petra because:

“I feel like your exit project really has to be something that everyone remembers, remembers, like it represents you and something people remember you for”

It is a chance to show who you are, what you've learned, and to demonstrate various types of literacy that the unique learning environment of the school has helped you to acquire. As the bell rings signifying class change and we begin to wrap up I quickly ask how the school fosters literacy:

“It doesn't get planted into your brain unless you're really experiencing the work you're doing. You can't just be sitting, it won't properly get planted into you, like your mind of how you're doing it, you won't really be interested, and it has to, like you have to be interested in something to be able to do it and to understand it.”

As we begin to walk back to the pod Petra reiterates the importance of this interest and how that can foster love in what you doing making learning connections easier to see. As she rejoins her friends I realize that she has left me with a lot to consider. As I make notes of some of these observations at the teachers desk there is a tap on my shoulder and I see my next interviewee Claire.

Student Three---Claire

Claire is the first of the students I will interview that is in grade eight even though the majority of student volunteers are in grade eight. She is a cheerful girl who I've heard is very interested in music and singing. As we sit across from one another in the conference room and go over the protocol I wonder what kind of connections this conversation will unearth. Both of my previous interviews spoke to freedom, although to different degrees, as well as to the importance of text, performance, and dance. Music seems to fit well within our developing dialogue and as I ask Claire what literacy means to her she would appear to agree:

“I think it means, expressing yourself using words. So you can use anything, really, like, when you're mad you say words...but you can extend your learning using words such as stories, you can, obviously you have to write, and with poems or, songwriting, you use literacy to express yourself within the arts”

This focus on oral and written language corroborates her peers' belief in text as a means of understanding literacy while also providing an opportunity to conceptualize of it through performance and even specifically song writing which connects to what Petra was speaking about earlier. I asked Claire why these examples came to mind and she said that these were the kinds of things she witnessed around her school itself as being literacy experiences:

“I've seen lots, I've seen poems, creative writing is a big one, songwriting, that's another one, that's a big one too...there's all types, also like reading, reading's a good one too”

Claire went on to speak about how in the past she has chosen to present evidence of her learning, in various classes, through song or rhythm. Sometimes these songs would even come to include elements of dance as accompaniment although it is not always the case. What stood out as she spoke was that these examples were not all within the humanities some of the work discussed naturally extended into science making for a strong first example of interdisciplinary experiences. One of the most vividly described experiences was around a jar of buttons that Claire's creative writing teacher brought into class to serve as writing prompts:

“you got to pick a button and then kind of describe a button and then you'd create a character from a button and I created this whole universe and like a huge story and it all came from a button”

From such a simple prompt Claire created a story about a boy and a girl working together to save the world from aremegetton. The experience stood out to her due to its simplicity and the

level of fun that she had while doing it. In this case literacy did not have to be complicated it just had to be allowed to occur within certain parameters. Curious to extend this line of thought I asked Claire if there were any other instances of literacy in subjects we had not already previously discussed. Claire laughed a bit to herself as she said production while describing a playwriting activity that had her adapting elements of Romeo and Juliet into a parody called “A Plague on Both Your Juiceboxes”. From reading the original script, writing an adaptation, creating characters, memorizing lines, and deciding upon blocking and other directoral elements Claire was able to develop different skills that she attributes to her own overall understanding of literacy.

She then took the learning from this previous experience and applied it to the current terms Star Wars production. Claire had gotten a role that she really wanted and even though the lines were few she was able to tell the meaning behind them and the importance of communicating them well. As she was speaking I assumed to myself that she must have been enrolled at the school for many years given how artistic she is and how she speaks about the arts within her learning, however, to my surprise when I asked I discovered that she has only been enrolled since the beginning of the last academic year. She said that she has been much more engaged with her learning since coming to this new school and that she is grateful for all of the opportunities afforded her here.

In particular she spoke to how she loved working with poetry because she could connect it to her guitar classes at the school and use it as she wrote original songs. The beat and rhythm of these songs would help her to remember important subject matter content and connect that

content to additional topics. She lit up when she was telling me all of this and how different it was from her old school. When I inquired as to what made this learning environment so different and unique she said:

“I feel like, the people here are really supportive and everybody has great ideas and we help each other. And with literacy, we would always work on something new, every day we'd do something with literacy, this year we're reading, right after lunch and, we're also doing that creative writing class, and we get to, like, explore different aspects”

These different aspects of course being the fine and performing arts of drama, music, dance, and visual art. For Claire, all of these different aspects relate back to literacy with the only major differences being how each one expresses itself to the reader or viewer. However, it was in part because they are so different that such a high level of creativity can be present within each of the classes offered at the school and the high level of technology integration helped Claire to learn even more transferable skills within each area. She spoke to the school as doing a great job in teaching to the curriculum while adding “extra stuff” through careful arts immersion.

It is this unique community that not only helped Claire to better think of literacy within different ways but also kept her engaged with school as a whole moving through junior high. As we walked back to the pod I thought more about the school itself glancing at art installations in the foyer and watching students fill out the walls with artwork about the water cycle and electric currents. The powerful influence of this learning environment itself was not to be understated

moving forward. Following the lunch break, which allowed for some more self reflection on this topic I found Erud the next of the grade eight students waiting to be interviewed.

Student Four- Erud

Erud is one of several students attending the school who is involved in many different extracurricular activities both within and outside of school time. It was no surprise to her teachers that she chose to take this study on and due to her heavy involvement in various extracurricular activities and I was curious as to how she would choose to articulate her own literacy experience. Her opening interview statement to what she believed literacy to be got the ball rolling:

“I think literacy is a way of sharing stories and communicating with other people, it doesn't necessarily have to be written...I think it's a pretty broad term”

Right from this onset it was clear that Erud was already thinking of literacy as a multifaceted entity. She quickly expanded upon her opening statement by saying:

“writing can be literacy but also like physical movement, like dance, where you're sharing stories or even, I guess, scientific research is a way of sharing things.”

These stories which she speaks to can be created by the people sharing them or they can be created by other people entirely since we can also share one another's stories as we construct meaning. This meaning can come from the story itself, the way in which we speak the story, or the way in which the story is discussed moving forward from the time of sharing. As I listed to

this I began to wonder what stories the subjects taught within school had to tell so I inquired. The response was the first time that math came up specifically this far as an example of literacy as Erud told me about how they learned Pythagorean Theorem through an interactive lesson that had the whole class building upon the meaning together. The concept, which was new for many of the class, became easier to learn in this group environment with strong peer support.

Outside of math Erud also spoke about literacy in relation to creative writing in much the same way that the peers that came before her had but again through the lens of a story:

“in creative writing, it's a way to come up with your own stories, not tell other peoples...we did an assignment where we had to write from the perspective of a character, with the emotion that was driving them, and I think it was a way to take someone else's story and put your own spin on it”

This idea of one's “own spin” also led quickly into a discussion around current events and how news is a kind of story communicating information that we the characters need to know while also often creating an emotion. The two interflowing themes I noticed of communication and story were both unique from and similar to the descriptions of her peers. Story after all is used in each of the types of performance surrounding the previous responses but applying it directly to learning and communication, as compared to an artform used for learning, is a uniqueness. As we continued to discuss these matters Erud briefly mentioned an element of physicality within literacy and after having made a note of it I steered us back in that direction as our conversation began to expand.

When asked in greater detail what she meant Erud explained that she does a Korean martial art names Hapido and she sees literacy in how she moves since it is indpired by coaches corners which are meetings that her coaches have with them to share annicdotes and techniques that they have learned and refined over their years doing Hapido. These stories help her to develop her martial arts skills and see martial arts as a form of self defence but also a form of self expression. Knowing that she also does other activities outside of school I asked if she happened to see literacy anywhere else in her work and/or hobbies. After thinking for a moment she described the work in musical theatre that she does locally because it helps her to bring the words off of a page to life and see them differently as she embodies them within a character. When this happens literacy both comes to be shared externally through the performance and also internally for the indiviual acording to Erud.

For her this internalized feeling of literacy also becomes a motivational factor inspiring her to do better in her actions in case someday they become the subject of her own story. She takes these feelings into both her own studies as well as other activites such as Cross Country and Volleyball in order to do her best win or lose. These feelings of literacy are discussed within individualistic terms, however, for story to exist there must be more than one individual; there must be a community to send and recieve the stories amoung one another. Within communities, therefore, I came to wonder what literacy manifests as and for Erud at the school "It's not mentioned very much but it's sort of, in the air" meaning that even when it is not explicitly stated connections can still be made given the learning environment in which it occurs. Erud has been enrolled at this school for her entire student experience so she does not have a comparison but I

was curious as to why she was able to make so many connections and felt comfortable taking risks while doing so:

“I think that I've learned from here is you gotta trust yourself, even if you feel like you're doing it so wrong, and I think the sense of communal literacy...we kinda need a community to work things out and stick together”

This strong community and space in which learning occurs has again come up as an important point of consideration in conjunction with various artforms and ways of engaging with the curriculum. Patterns around writing, performance, embodiment, community, and even technology were beginning to become repetitive between participants and I wondered as I concluded Erud's interview if this would be the extent of connections witnessed or if more had yet to be unveiled. Among my remaining participants were more grade eight students among whom were the only two male students involved in the study and I wondered if their perceptions would be radically different. In the meantime, however, Erud and I returned to the pod and I picked up the next of the students Emilia.

Student Five- Emilia

Emilia is another of the involved grade eight students and has some of the highest energy levels of the day thus far. As we walk to the conference room she tells me that she is excited for this project and the opportunity to perform again later in the semester. She speaks quickly due to her high energy and wastes no time as we sit down in telling me that for her literacy is:

“Like creative writing and a mix of writing and Language Arts...it's where you can express yourself within writing”

She tells me about how at the moment she is writing a reflection for the Star Wars play that she thinks of as a literacy experience. She is having to rewrite some of her Shakesperian style lines into more modern English while also explaining the emotional inflection that follows each of them. She speaks to how engaging in this process helps her both to better understand the lines and learn how to express them her own way back to her understanding of literacy. Not only does this connection to writing and Star Wars, in particular, line up with her peers experience but she also goes on to mention role playing in social studies and writing poetry and song in production. For Emilia all of these various art forms are just the way that the school communicates since it is involved with everything that the community does on a daily basis. Everything from the more embodied art forms such as performance to what she calls “the quieter arts like drawing, painting, writing” have to do with this communication of meaning. This is another very nuanced answer so I ask Emilia how long she has been at the school only to discover that this is only the beginning of her second year here and that it was a quite radical change from her previous school. When I ask in what way was it different she explains:

“when I came to this school it was such a huuuge change because every subject is in everything. All the subjects are muddled up together... and you learn so many different things”

I asked her then if literacy also moved between the subjects in this fluid way and she cheerfully nodded:

“lots of writing is involved with everything and you can...have more freedom and you have more choice on what you want to do”

I pause briefly here and reflect to myself how the concept of freedom has yet again emerged as an important throughline in these dialogues. I wonder if it is the arts that encourage this thought process and inquire about subjects outside of the arts in curiosity. Once again the subject of science is broached in specific relation to the writing of lab reports and other written documentation of experiments. Interestingly, when asked in more detail about the importance of writing in literacy and what that writing may need to look like Emilia spoke both to writing for an audience (that needs to keep the audience in mind) and writing for yourself (that can be personal). When writing for an audience Emilia thinks about subjects such as math where:

“you answer the questions, and then you get all that done, and then you can talk about it and then you can think how can I change this question in a way for me to understand, and then you're using your creative part of your brain”

So while this kind of experience begins in writing for an audience it can also encourage communication, creative thinking, and problem solving which taken together round out a mathematical literacy experience for Emilia. I wanted to know more about these types of experiences so I asked if literacy was evident in this way anywhere else in the school. After a moment I was told of a social studies project which had students choose a location in Canada to

make a website about, based upon real research, to make others want to travel there. This was another writing for an audience example and had travel cost sections and recommendations as well as lots of suggestions for things to do while there. After over a month in development the sites even went live and were set out to parents and other school community members.

As we were discussing this I wanted to see if it would be possible to draw a connection to language arts since it was the last “core” subject to be discussed and so I asked once more if there were any additional literacy experiences to mention. I was not disappointed as Emilia talked about a novel study involving the book *Hatchet* which involved a process of reading the book, discussing it, and then creating a movement/dance piece that communicated the major themes and events present within the story. The movement piece even came to be presented at the schools winter celebration at a local performance auditorium. This was another way for Emilia to turn words into something else entirely taking repeating words like fire and themes such as empathy and transforming them into a wordless presentation of the story. Written and spoken language were no longer present but rather embodied language which took its place and built upon it. I could tell that performance was a big part of Emilia's experience as she wrapped up this question by being sure to add in that the Shakespearian language within the Star Wars play was "weird" but after seeing it and working with it through drama the words became easier to understand and were more relatable overall. Learning about this older style of English has been a standout moment for Emilia and a big part of her overall experience with the learning outcomes associated with it.

As the conversation moved on I wanted to touch on the topic of the arts outside of school as I had heard that Emilia is involved quite heavily in dance. When I asked if she saw any part of dance as a literacy experience she spoke to the importance of understanding rhythm as you try to communicate intent. Similar to Petra, her grade nine peer, she spoke to how understanding the intent behind a dance helps to make that character more believable for both the performer and the audience. The importance placed upon the movement of the body during drama or dance is sometimes overlooked at so young of an age so I was most impressed that Emilia was already making these types of connections.

As our conversation began to wrap up I wanted to be sure to also ask her about the community surrounding the school as it is a topic of discussion common among her peers thus far. When asked about it she said:

“It's just an amazing school...the way they teach is so different that you love it...and it's just...it really helps”

Curriculum and learning are not always traditional here, however, each interview with students seems to be demonstrating why that is an extremely positive conclusion given their unique conceptions of a literacy experience as well as the throughlines that are evidenced between accounts. As we walk back to class I reflect on how all of the interviewees have been female thus far and I note that the first of two male students in the study is next up for his interview. I wonder if similar connections will be identified by the male students or if their experiences and perceptions of that experience will alter to a small or wide margin from their

female classmates. As Emilia and I enter the pod once again I find Samuel, the next student on my list, working on a computer developing a photo shopped image for a class project. As I walk up to him and tap him on the shoulder he saves his work, returns his computer, and follows me down the stairs to the conference room.

Student Six- Samuel

Unfortunately, due to some reading assesments we discovered that the conference room was already taken and so our interview moved into one of the smaller administrative offices. Samuel seemed nervous and quiet as we went over all of the preamble and so I did my best to calm his nerves prior to starting to record. As the interview began properly I opened by asking Samuel what he thought literacy was:

“So literacy's kind of like anything to do with, different languages and reading, writing...um, I guess acting could be a part of that...um, monologues, dialogue, every day back and forth”

During his discription he seemed a bit reluctant to include acting within his answer and I wanted to be sure that he was not including things that he believed I wanted to hear. In response to this I probed a little deeper with the question asking for specific examples of what the different factors he mentions look like in practice. Specifically, he spoke about reading periods, which occur after lunch, and the daily mathematical practice questions that go home as homework. This was the first time that the conversation did not immediately steer into a detailed account of a performance based tasked and I became intrigued that this may be the case of an

outlier in his responses. I wondered if perhaps Samuel had also spent less time at the school similar to his two peers Claire and Emilia, however, when I asked I discovered that he has actually been enrolled since early elementary, far longer than either of the two girls before him. I asked if he remembers any differences between his past school and his current one and he said:

“it's a bit different now, the school's kind of shaping up a bit more for me, mentally, but for my first few years at the school I didn't feel like I was being taught as much as I was at the other school”

Samuel's past school had a more traditional set up and a strong Spanish program which sparked an interest in Samuel to try and become bilingual. He was quick to link this language learning to literacy as well connecting it through saying that:

“literacy is like, kind of like, not really communication but understanding communication. Getting a good, like feeling for communication in the different forms”

Language was then described as a vessel for communication and described both in a traditional and non traditional sense. For instance, Samuel sees math as its own language with numbers and symbols holding the place of words in much the same way that he would think of English used in the humanities or Spanish used in a second languages course. In another diversion from his peers Samuel followed up this series of points by saying that he did not feel other subjects or extracurricular activities at school beyond what he already spoke to explicitly contained literacy from his experience. When asked to consider production he did make a brief

connection to the memorization of lines as a way of understanding what you had to say as an actor in order to communicate clearly. Beyond that, however, at this point there did not appear for him to be any more explicit connections.

He did communicate a very good reading strategy in understanding new vocabulary by cross referencing unfamiliar words with one another and using context clues to construct meaning. Or in understanding them through how they were spelt or spoken but all of this literacy seemed to be happening prior to the performance as opposed to during it. Of course such work does still inform the intentions and motivations that come to be shown in the performance itself but that was not touched on as much within our current dialogue. For Samuel this work in building the character, through tools such as character sheets was more of the explicit literacy connection.

As I moved to asking how Samuel would like to express his understandings of literacy to his teachers and parents he did mention that he wanted to improve the way in which he was able to articulate his thoughts on these concepts and how to would like to explore connections between literacy and different types of writing. Going through the process of writing seems to help Samuel think and he spoke to better understanding the character he plays in the Star Wars production by writing about his emotions:

“Anakin, like he has a bunch of different things driving him throughout the story and everything, like, they're slight things but when they all click together they just make him bubble up and become Darth Vader”

As our conversation began to draw to a close Samuel seemed almost apologetic as he said it was difficult to pick “stand out moments” even though he does see the school as overall doing a very good job at what it does. As I walked him to his next class I said I appreciated his responses as they did help to show a different perspective to what I had witnessed thus far. For the first time in this study the arts did not dominate the conversation per say, however, literacy and the experience of it was still evident. From an interdisciplinary sense these responses were also strong in that they helped to show more concrete connections between subjects outside of production while still touching briefly on the latter. I wondered if my other male participant would feel the same way or if perhaps the remaining female participant might also have similar connections. I made note of how enrollment time in the school may not always predefine the experience and went to pick up my next student Dwayne who also happened to be one of Samuel's close friends. I found him in his humanities class and with the permission of the teacher excused him for his interview.

Student Seven- Dwayne

As we sat down to conduct the interview I noticed that Dwayne did not appear as nervous initially as some of the students before him. We chatted briefly prior to the interview about how his day was going and he had just gotten back a mark he was proud of so he was in high spirits. After quickly going through the required ethics forms we got right down to the interview and I asked him what literacy meant to him keeping Samuel's answers in the back of my mind:

“I think it's a lot about reading, writing, it can be in acting, it's a lot to do with, expressing yourself...it is really self expression, to me”

He went on to talk about how when your writing is shared or read by someone else that it can help the reader learn about the expression of others. Performance was also mentioned briefly as another modality for such expression. He talked about each of the three main school performances brought up by his peers through Star Wars, the Winter Celebration, and The Original Play speaking to how “we embody each character, we have a script... and each person gets a role”. This acting is not only a fun and interesting lesson for Dwayne it is also an opportunity to learn ways of better communicating and writing via props in actors journals.

These three performances were of great importance to Dwayne and he took the time to speak about each individually in relation to his own literacy experience. He spoke first to the original play students create:

“I think that was a lot of character development because you didn't have a set script, just a moderate description of the scene...and you just created it all from there. You wrote the script, you designed your character, you created the entire show”

This was different from the winter celebration which involved all of the grades from kindergarden to grade nine as opposed to just the grade eights and nines. Moreover, the celebration was two individual dance peices for each grade and then a school wide opening and closing. Character and story were both still present and original but the way in which they were communicated was very different. Dwayne went on to say that he has been at the school since kindergarten and so he has been involved in many different winter celebrations over the years. The dance/movement as a way of developing what he called “physical literacy” and the original

twist that his classmates put on songs has always been a standout for him. Outside of these more formal performance components literacy does seem to take on a more traditional outlet for Dwayne. When asked about literacy around the school specifically in different subjects he had this to say:

“There is L.A., but that's not the only time you do literacy, there's also our acting time to work on our Star Wars performance. We have Science, we write down notes and make memos. In Math there isn't a lot of literacy but there's still the writing aspect, cause you have to write down notes again (vocabulary), you write down the equations...and in Social Studies you do a lot of writing, like, the, we are analyzing news articles right now, and learning about current events.”

This emphasis on writing continues into the description of specific assignments in those subject areas where he describes the same social studies website design project as Emilia but more from the standpoint about how many paragraphs they had to write or the focus on text in descriptions. Out of curiosity I ask if literacy in these more traditional subject matter areas has ever moved away from writing in his own particular learning experience. After some self reflection he answered that sometime technology can take the place of writing in cases where the learning prompt is to create a video or to use Photoshop to design a 3D image.

This part of our conversation seemed to get him more excited as he spoke to all the examples of literacy you can find within movies as they tell their stories and develop their characters. Excitedly, he talked about how because of all the work in production he had done

over the years watching movies has become more exciting for him because he can always ask “I wonder how they did that” or say “I think I know how they did that” while also better understanding the choices around things such as character development. He then mentioned another very interesting connection to his peers in regards to saying “you choose what you do and that often has to do with literacy”. Once again the notion of freedom appears at some point within these dialogues. This point is made in relation to the experience of literacy through extracurricular activities and production in a way that is again similar to how it was brought up in the past.

Given what I have heard within this conversation this far I begin to try and circle the conversation back to some key points for further discussion. I ask Dwayne about literacy outside of school and he mentions piano as a way of developing literacy because of all the theory that goes into learning both how to play the instrument and its history. When I asked how he chose to undertake learning the piano he said that he learns mostly from a book which introduces new songs and genres as skills develop through small assessments. He talked about how the process involves a lot of patience and thought and how the theory/history behind the music is a lot like developing a character.

For instance, within the Star Wars play Dwayne plays the main antagonist and for him the literacy skills around understanding that character in depth come from:

“understanding that character's motivations...cause your character doesn't just wake up and be like...I am going to be evil today...he has those motives, so if you create a back

story for him that's giving him this, then, like a reason to do what he's doing, then it adds a lot to the character cause you understand why he's doing it”

He then went on to explain in detail why he felt that the Galactic Empire was formed, why Anikin was seen as an easy target to convert to the dark side, and how an Empire is different from a Republic especially for the primary ruler. This backstory was important for Dwayne both for helping to communicate the desired expression, as he mentioned before, but also helping to inform the physicality of the character itself. When Dwayne speaks about the character he says “he's high and mighty so he has his shoulders, spread out, he walks very properly, (and) he's less emotional” all of which is informed in part by his worldview developed through his expanded character backstory. Considering the high level of thought in how he is working with this character I follow up this question with Dwayne to ask if there are any other ways he wishes he could show his experience of literacy to his teachers parents and family?

His answer is an intriguing one given the strong sense of community within the school. He wishes that his family could see more of the process, rather than just the end product, that go into these types of performance and art pieces. Ideally, he said it would be nice for parents to be able to spend an entire day at the school working with their children, getting to know the teachers, and getting to know the other parents that make up the community. At the same time Dwayne knows that this presents a lot of logistical challenges but even if it could just be for a production period he thinks that everyone involved could gain a lot of benefits.

As he says the “performance is the best, you're with your friends, you're singing, you're dancing, you're acting” and this in addition to the types of writing mentioned earlier all contribute to the literacy experience in his case. An experience that Dwanye hopes to continue to be able to share with the important people in his life as he moves forward in his learning. As we wrap up our interview and return to the pod I reflect on how what began as an understanding of literacy as primarily writing evolved over a short period of time to a more expanded view. I wondered how this research process would impact others understandings over my time here and made a note to be observant to that fact as I picked up my final interviewee Raven from her class.

Student Eight- Raven

Raven is the final student who has chosen to become involved within this study and another grade eight student. As we sit down and begin the interview she mentions that the number assigned to her interview happens to be her favorite which makes us both smile. As I ask her what literacy means to her she says:

“It's like, writing and like, acting so literacy would be like the script and then like the actual like, I guess like, so the writing would be just like writing a book or something”

This tone of writing as the basis for a literacy experience is similar to my previous interview but I decide this time to probe the question a little further and ask if she enjoys writing. She quickly smiles and explains that she does very much enjoy writing as it can help her to make sense of things and tell interesting stories. Within this description she also talks about the schools creative writing class and production periods as various opportunities to write and communicate

through text and speech. One thing she does mention is that Star Wars is really dominating the narrative of her learning at the moment with even assignments in creative writing class connected back to the play.

When I inquired into the types of assignments she was referring to she was unable to get to specific as they were so general for her that she has already forgotten much of them. So instead I asked what literacy could look like in different subjects if and when it moves away from the Star Wars focus. For Raven this could look like the opportunity to write about her feelings and expression in a less structured way, still with instructions and a rubric, just not on such a fixed prompt or source material. Moreover, since Raven views literacy as very much centered within writing she says that for her it is in each subject to a certain degree and that “drop everything and read” is also an example of literacy since it has to do with understanding expression which is similar to what is done in writing. As the name suggests “drop everything and read” is a period after lunch lasting between 15-20 minutes where students recenter themselves for the afternoon by reading silently in their pod.

During this time Raven enjoys reading non-fiction books about problems that could occur within real life. This is because the problems can sometimes relate back to her real life directly or indirectly and seeing how the characters and author come to deal with that type of problem gives her ideas that she can relate back to her own life and experiences. This presents an interesting case in literacy appearing as a kind of emotional support for the reader or active participant. When I asked her what got her into reading so much I discovered that it was her mother's love of reading and encouragement to read that inspired her to expand her reading practices. Since she

has changed these practices she has come to see reading, and by extension literacy, in whole new ways including among others as a way to build empathy by understanding characters.

Seeking to expand this line of thought I move onto my next question set asking how literacy could relate to other aspects of what is going on at the school. Her reply broke the norm of the interviews thus far:

“I like doing plays but at the same time I don't really like doing plays, they're fine, I find that we do a lottt of acting, which is fine but I just wish that we did more like, writing based kind of stuff”

When I asked her why she felt this way she said that she wanted to see other ways of going about reading, writing, and speech since she felt a lot of the acting process for her seemed to revolve around the memorization of lines. She sometimes struggles with this element of the process but has also developed approaches to make it easier such as setting lines to music as she tries to memorize them. For Raven what was both extremely important and interesting was that literacy and the arts did not seem to be flowing together in the same kind of way as earlier interviews had shown. This was not a bad thing in the slightest, however, I wanted to figure out why this was occurring. I asked about the social studies project two of her peers had brought up as being about literacy since I knew they were in the same class and she also designed a website. In response she said:

“I think that like the Arts immersion is brought more into, like Social Studies than like literacy is”

With “arts immersion” in this context referring to when the assessment task moved away from writing as the primary focus. A trend which continues to demonstrate her experience of literacy across various subject areas. For additional context it should also be mentioned that Raven has been enrolled since the fourth grade and does appreciate the group work and team building in various collaborative classes it just does not directly impact her understanding of literacy. I wondered how her past school, if she remembered it, was helping to shape this narrative and I asked how literacy looked in that environment:

“My (old) school was more traditional, we did like exams, tests, and written, written tests and stuff like that and we'd do writing and all of that stuff and we'd have to do like reports and all of that”

Raven said within this environment she had more of what would be called an experience with literacy as it was more explicit. The move to this arts focused school came as a result of overcrowding in her past school and so for Raven there had not been high motivation to attend when she entered the school. As we began to conclude the interview I wondered if other students felt this way and if, for some, more traditional structures were sought after. Raven had been at the school for a fair length of time and had still not changed her opinion. Still, I appreciated her viewpoints as by breaking from the norm of what I had been witnessing she was allowing me to get a more holistic view of this complex learning environment and the place of literacy within it. I

walked her back to her class and in so doing completed the first stage of data collection by finishing the interviews.

Major Themes and Patterns Among Data Sources

In the early stages of data collection, just after the interview process, I began the first of many coding cycles based off of my researcher memos. I sought, at this early stage, to group student's experiences into categories such as: self-expression, writing, communication, emotional support, multimodality, performance, embodiment, digital technologies, community, curriculum, self-motivated, and musical. However, as I engaged in researcher reflexivity I realized that this was not proper form for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). If I truly wanted to make sense of the participants making sense of their own experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) as well as gain “insight into a (students) intimate experience” (Murray, & Holmes, 2014, p. 17) I would have to take the student's interview data back to them for respondent verification. As I did this I also provided supports to the students to assist them in identifying their own categories and themes which are the codes presented above in the data. By doing so the data preserves each student's voice in relation to their own experiences and helps me to make sense of those experiences “with” them as opposed to “for” them but keeps me, as the researcher, an active member of the meaning making process (Smith, & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). The various research steps were meant to scaffold this sense making process into manageable and clear stages with the resulting monologues, performances, and performance reflections acting as a capstone of students' experiences while also creating entirely unique new experiences at the same time.

Convergence and Divergence Across Student Experiences

When examining the data for instances of convergence and divergence across student experiences several themes and/or considerations stood out from the norm. Speaking first to convergence it should be noted that each and every student made mention of: performance, writing, self-expression, and community in that descending order of frequency in relation to their literacy experiences. This is noted in the following table which organizes information surrounding frequency visually so as to illustrate and justify both the convergence and divergence discussed within this section. Areas mentioned 1-3 times by a participant were considered to be made in passing, if the frequency increased and occurred between 4-8 times it was considered to be mentioned repeatedly, and anything mentioned above 9 times was considered mentioned extremely frequently.

Thematic Area	Mentioned Extremely Frequently	Mentioned Repeatedly	Mentioned In Passing
Performance	Petra, Dwayne, Claire, Selina, Emilia	Samuel, Raven	Erud
Writing	Claire, Emilia	Raven, Dwayne, Selina, Petra	Erud, Samuel
Self-Expression	Petra	Selina, Claire, Emilia, Samuel	Dwayne, Raven, Erud
Community		Claire, Dwayne, Emilia, Raven	Petra, Erud, Samuel, Selina
Understanding	Emilia	Petra	Erud, Raven, Claire, Samuel, Dwayne
Curriculum			Dwayne, Selina, Claire, Erud, Petra, Emilia, Samuel

Reading	Emilia, Raven	Selina	Petra, Dwayne, Samuel
Song and Dance		Petra, Emilia, Samuel	Selina, Claire, Erud
Communicating		Erud, Samuel, Dwayne	Emilia, Raven
Self-Motivation			Raven, Petra, Claire, Emilia, Dwayne
Self-Reflection	Raven	Petra	Claire, Erud
Dialogue/Speech		Dwayne	Selina, Samuel, Petra
Identity		Selina, Petra	Samuel, Raven
Self-Esteem		Raven	Erud, Samuel
Critical Thinking			Dwayne, Raven, Selina
Assessment			Emilia, Samuel, Raven
Connection	Erud		Raven
Context		Samuel	Raven
Gaming			Samuel, Dwayne
Math Word Problems			Selina, Claire
Leadership			Petra
Ritual			Samuel

Performance is the most easily justifiable of the commonly mentioned categories given not only the research question itself but also the arts based immersion setting of the school. However, while each student did mention performance generally the specifics of how they described performance and what they gained from it varied quite a lot. Erud, for example, spoke

about performance in relation to “the people who are a part of it” whereas Selina focused more on “the freedom the arts give you to be yourself”. Moreover, one of the reasons that community is also such a large category is due to the fact that the majority of students mentioned community in conjunction with performance and the arts more broadly. Performance was without a doubt the most discussed theme/consideration with five of the eight students mentioning it extremely frequently, two mentioning it repeatedly, and only one mentioning it in passing. Erud was the student who mentioned performance the least, at least directly, focusing instead upon connection “as it occurs around the whole school” not just within formal performance. This is juxtaposed to students such as Petra and Claire who both make performance a highlight of their discussions Petra because “creativity allows me to communicate differently” and Claire because “music is my passion and a big part of my identity”. Certain students, such as Raven, also mentioned performance more moderately since their experiences were focused on different areas with the example of Raven's being more focused upon “reading, writing, and storytelling”.

Writing was another popular topic of discussion between the students with Claire and Emilia both mentioning it the most but again in different ways. Claire spoke more about “song writing” and the “use of lyrics” while Emilia described writing more indicative of a language arts class as “stories, novels, poetry, and scripts”. Both girls described writing as a means to “self-reflect” and “develop identity” but the way they went about doing it differed based upon their interests. Erud was again within this category but mentioned writing only extremely briefly at the onset of the study. When she reflected upon why she said writing at a later point in time she said “I thought at the time that was the right answer” but over time in the study she felt able to “take greater risks” and expanded her responses. Raven also mentioned writing only briefly and always

as “reading and writing” since reading came to be more of an overall focus for her. Writing was, however, a way that Raven “gained empathy and perspective” since when she created characters who were “going through something that I was going through” she would use writing as an opportunity to be reflective about her own life. Finally, Samuel also only mentioned writing in passing and very rarely directly. Writing was usually more about “performance and communicating” for Samuel and so it was spoken of more as “a tool” than a standalone part of his literacy experience. Overall, two students mentioned writing extremely frequently, three mentioned it repeatedly, and three mentioned it in passing.

Self-expression saw a similar trend in response patterns to writing with only one student mentioning it extremely frequently, four students mentioning it repeatedly, and three students mentioning it in passing. For Petra, the one student who mentioned self-reflection extremely frequently, the connection she made was to her essence of “unveiling” and how she chose to present it in performance. She spoke often about how “I want to have a canvas on stage that I can paint to show how I'm discovering more of myself” and “I want to hold the finished canvas out the audience to show them how far I've come”. While this category worked well for Petra certain students did not connect with it as strongly, for example, Dwayne, Erud, and Raven all only spoke about self expression in passing. Dwayne was more concerned with “communicating with others” as a focus of literacy and Erud and Raven each had their own considerations as brought up previously.

Finally, within the top four most mentioned categories is community which even though no one mentioned it extremely frequently still saw all eight students mention it. Four of the

students mentioned it repeatedly and four mentioned it in passing with one of the biggest divides in frequency being grade level. The majority of grade eights in the study mentioned community repeatedly whereas all of the grade nines only mentioned it in passing. When asked why this was a lot of the grade eights such as Claire, Raven, Emalia, and Dwayne spoke about how “emotional support” and “belonging” are important elements of going to school. So much so that they even influenced “literacy in the arts” since the arts are so “community driven”. The grade nines spoke to some of the same factors just at a lower frequency. This is in part due to how grade nines like Selina and Petra were also concerned with “subject specific” literacy and “reading and self-reflection” since those are skills more directly related to formal testing in grade nine. This divide also seemed to depend upon the importance that students placed upon collective experiences vs. individualistic examples with the grade eights tending to speak more collectively and the grade nines tending to be more individualistic.

Outside of this “top four” categories there were also other common areas of discussion and reflection including both understanding and the curriculum. Emilia mentioned understanding frequently making it her “essence” since “I read and write to understand a topic” or “talking and working with others helps me learn and understand something”. Petra on the other hand mentioned understanding repeatedly and more in line with “self-reflection” by saying “in order to understand myself I have to understand others” or “understanding myself is important so I can pursue my passions”. Curriculum saw a passing inclusion by everyone except Raven, however, it was usually in response to the prompting of a question or during discussion with me in the semi structured interview. As Claire said “I know there is a curriculum out there but I don't always think about it” which seemed to be the case for her peers as well.

Certain categories also acted as focal points for different students with one example being reading. Both Emilia and Raven frequently mention this category over the course of the entire study Emilia for “storytelling and sharing” Raven “for self-reflection and empathy”. Selina also mentions this category repeatedly although more as a way to “gain ideas for characters” or “enrich performances”. Only Erud and Claire did not mention reading directly outside of a brief interview mention focusing instead on “connection” and “musical creativity” respectfully. Other examples of categories include Raven's, and many of the grade eights, focuses on self reflection. Interestingly, another thing of note surrounding self-reflection is that it is entirely spoken of by the girls of the study. Both in a personal sense (Raven) and an academic one (Petra, Claire, and Erud). For the latter three girls self-reflection helped them “to do better”, “to understand”, and to “think more critically” about assignments and learning tasks in school. Samuel and Dwayne had their own unique category that acted as more of an outlier or divergence in video games. This is separate from the board games mentioned by Emilia since these were “entirely online” and had Samuel and Dwayne “creating a gaming community with people all around the world”. Many of the other categories came together for the boys in video games including “community, self-motivation, identity, and critical thinking”. Erud was also a bit of an outlier within her data in how she focused upon connection with Raven being the only other one to use that term and only in passing. For Erud “connection was different from community” because you could “be a part of a community without forming close connections” meaning that her view of both categories was rather nuanced. She valued the former over the latter due it's “depth” and this came through throughout her reflections and performance.

Two other categories of convergence were of course communication and identity. Beginning with communication Erud, Samuel, and Dwayne each mentioned it repeatedly. Dwayne had the highest number of mentions given his “essence” being “speech” which he views as “the primary way to communicate” but Erud also mention communication quite frequently as “a way to build connections” and Samuel spoke of it as “a way to tell stories” since that was such a major component of what would become his performance. This was a category that again saw none of the grade nines included with every grade eight but Claire mentioning it explicitly at least once. Again this speaks to the collective nature of many of the grade eight responses and the individualistic nature of the grade nine ones. This point can again be argued due to the responses around identity which see a reversal compared to communication. Both Selina and Petra are included here while only two of the six grade eight students are. Selina and Petra both speak to their own identity Selina as “exploring who I am through the freedom of the arts” and Petra through “using dance to tell my story”. Comparatively, Samuel and Raven both speak about the identity of the school Samuel saying how the arts “bring people together and show us who we are” and Raven mentioning again “how fiction can influence real life, who we are, and how we talk with one another”. Samuel and Raven also often connected these two categories together, appearing in both, compared to Selina and Petra focusing more exclusively on identity despite similarities between the two.

Complete outliers, or divergences, in the categories include Petra's sole mention of leadership, as well as Samuel's mention of ritual (through Scouts), and Dwayne's mention of what he called a “mathematical language”. All three of these examples relate directly into each individual's personal lives or interests with Petra viewing herself as “a leader among her peers”,

Samuel learning “order and religion” through Scouts, and Dwayne having “a love of math and numbers”. While these were not the areas these students chose to focus the development of their essences they do help to illustrate the diversity that literacy as a phenomenon can encourage. Based upon the observation of this data and what is reoccurring, the findings both support and challenge the traditional paradigms of literacy. The additional consideration of a theatrical space, on one hand, reinforces reading and writing as remaining foundational to understanding literacy. However, the way in which reading, writing, and understanding are encountered changes and is enriched through the arts (termed by the students as: performance, song, dance, self expression, and community among others). A “theatrical space” would therefore appear, within this learning environment, to expand upon the more traditional definitions of literacy while at the same time allowing greater communication and identity development since the students agree they are “central to the arts”.

The themes and categories which come to act as outliers in this analysis can be, to a large extent, connected to student interests or extracurricular engagements. It should also be noted that even though certain students showed trends within the data that did not always translate directly into how they came to define their own experience through the use of essences. Selina spoke most about performance but chose freedom as her essence because that “was the result of literacy through the arts” for her, Claire spoke many times about writing but chose to translate her writing into music in order to better show “who I am and my ambition to improve as a musician”, and Raven wrote and talked heavily about reading and self reflection but due to her own use of “reading and reflection to improve the way in which I respond to things” her essence came to be about trust. The large diversity in both areas and in the nature of responses also show

that students need time to work out what literacy does in fact mean to them and how it manifests itself within their learning.

Even in cases where students wrote, discussed, or performed in relation to similar categories or codes the results would often mean entirely different things to each student. With that said the areas that did emerge as recurrent have implications for research on the importance of arts based pedagogical approaches and unique school design. Furthermore, divergent codes and categories speak to areas that could be possible future gaps in addressing how literacy relates to topics outside of the arts for learners. Areas of divergence which could form possible future interest areas include literacy as: gaming (only discussed by the males in the study), connection (only discussed by a small number of grade eight females), assessment (only discussed by grade eight participants despite formal testing in grade nine), and self-esteem, self-reflection, and communicating (all only discussed by grade eight participants).

Experiences of Literacy Within a Theatrical Space

Literacy As Freedom

The experience of literacy from Selina's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with freedom and self-expression. The theatrical space itself came to be defined through the community around it and the arts were seen as an overall enriching element of the literacy process. This is seen in the data shown below:

After reflecting upon her interview Selina took the time in later written reflections to speak to how literacy was “more than simply putting a pen to paper”. Instead, she articulated that literacy has to “be felt and have emotion put behind it” which she saw herself doing when she went about “converting” words into different art forms such as song and dance and using such storytelling methods to better express herself. She spoke to me about how the act of artistic creation in and of itself is meant to be free and should take the form of in that it could take the form of “whatever an individual needs it to be” since art is “a form of self-expression helping to develop identity”. It would be these kinds of responses that would begin a conceptual shift for Selina building upon the ideas of expression and freedom that she brought up in her interview before more prominently connecting her overall experience of literacy learning into the arts. Selina had always been very clear that she saw literacy, in one form or another, “Every. Single. Day.” at school, however her early responses within the interview and later data sets kept much of her literacy understandings connected to either the arts or humanities.

She would occasionally, within her writing, mention “word problems in math” or “lab reports in science” but she never chose to linger on these examples. Instead she became much more animated when discussing creating an entirely new game in gym “with one ball and three hoops” or by discussing literacy as “anything that you can use to make art”. When asked at a later time to visually capture her experiences of literacy Selina chose two distinct photographs: one being her student file folder and one being a written copy of one of her original monologues.

The file folder had labels for each class Selina was taking at the time of the study and was accompanied by a written reflection that sought to connect each subject area to a particular

literacy experience that Selina had over the year: math became about “word problems”, social centered around the “storytelling aspects of history”, science was about “the physical act of experimentation”, and language arts was “reading and writing”. This first picture and its explanation struck me as odd since aside from storytelling in social many of these responses were different from the earlier tone of freedom or art and it made it appear as if two separate narratives were ongoing for Selina.

Her second visual seemed to be about Selina working out a more concrete stance on how she viewed literacy. The particular monologue chosen was Selina's Black Death Monologue which was also one of the literacy experiences discussed during her interview. Selina came back to this assignment because it was “an important learning moment” a time when she could “bring herself and her interests into her school work”. To this day Selina remembers many historical details of the Black Plague because of this original character she created and because she had “the freedom to explore the topic in a unique way”. Selina also saw freedom within art in the way that “each individual can understand something different from a piece of art or a performance and take what they need from it”. Still at this point Selina seemed a bit conflicted about her understandings.

To help Selina unpack her understanding of what she believed her experience of literacy to be I taught her how to code for themes and patterns and invited her to review her own interview data before having her identify her own unique codes. After some review, Selina identified “work” as a form of literacy experience due to her perception of literacy as one of the primary skills needed to find successful employment. She also mentioned “learning” as a major

category in relation to presenting, discussing, and gaining knowledge in school. These two larger categories then branched off to be more specific to Selina's day to day life and she included creation, technology, and writing as subcategories since those were what she believed to be key drivers of the learning environment within the school. It would be these subcategories which would lead Selina to her eventual essence of *Freedom*, during the process of creating a character, due to how the meaning all three generate and help to express are “driven by the artist and no one else”.

The character that Selena created came from a troubled past and would eventually find meaning working as a freedom fighter with a small close knit group of companions. Her family is almost all gone by the time of her monologue and she has just recently suffered a betrayal from one of those she works with and trusts. Her character is struggling to find meaning within chaos but continues to fight for the freedom that she holds dear so that others do not have to experience the pain she went through. Selina's monologue was about a page and a half in length that ran for about eight and a half minutes. She performed on an empty stage in front of a white background. This background was intended to have a pair of black wings projected upon it to symbolize finding “freedom” and independence. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a simple and clean white wash with a tinge of blue mixed in to signify the clear blue sky over the ocean on a sunny day. In addition to the sounds of waves and sea birds Selina also included a recording from a narrator which set up the premise for her monologue after she went through losing her commander, her squad, and being labelled a criminal. Even though her war is over the voices asks “why do you still fight?” and this drives the story onward.

Her monologue was delivered in a series of stages beginning with describing the loss of her father at a young age and how that changed the family dynamic between her and her mother. Not knowing for sure if her father was dead or just missing was a hurt that sticks with Selina's character even to this day. Despite the distance growing between mother and daughter Selina would still stand up for the underdogs at school and her mother would still get to see a small part of her father shining through. Until one day her mother vanished and she was transferred between various homes, never staying for long. Selina broke out of that foster system and went into a spiral feeling that no one wanted or needed her. The squad she became a part of would eventually find her and help to change her perspective by making her feel included and accepted for who she was. This connection saved her but it was not meant to last. Her squad was betrayed by one of their own and in the ensuing chaos it shattered. Still, however, she fights, she:

“fights so that no child has to get told their parents are presumed dead, fights so that no kid has to leave school and come back to a empty home, fights so that no one else loses their love or loses the fight”.

She ends her monologue by saying how the squad inspired her to get a tattoo of a pair of wings because it is with them that she finally felt free and as her character dies she wishes that her sacrifices one day help others to get their own wings as well.

When connecting the performance that she wrote to the wider questions of literacy Selina said that she placed her monologue setting on a boat to show how “literacy goes everywhere” and chose a younger character because “art and its power are often underestimated”. She not

only connected the arts specifically into her own literacy experience but also said that her understanding of art and literacy are “young and still evolving” implying that she hopes to continue learning over the course of her life. The wings within her story helped to give a physical form to the arts and the reason they were a tattoo that her character had on their back was a part of how “art helps to express who you are”. Depending upon how and where art is used Selina felt that it “can be a healing process” which again speaks to its power and relationship to the self. The squad became the personification of connections established through an arts based approach and by the end of the study Selina also spoke to the importance of community within a literacy experience overall. At the conclusion of her self-reflection Selina added specifically how freedom was central to the message of her monologue since “art and literacy can look different for different people” and so “you have to be free to pursue the experience right for you”.

Literacy As Unveiling

The experience of literacy from Petra's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with unveiling both the true meaning of subject matter content but also the true nature of yourself. The theatrical space itself came to be defined through community both at school and in Petra's personal life. For Petra dance was used as an overall enriching element of the literacy process and this is seen in the data shown below:

Following the interview process, Petra took the time to write about literacy as something “not restricted” to a single subject area. When I asked her to explain more of what she meant in a later follow up she spoke about how literacy exists “within writing but also within dancing” as well as other types of performance. She intentionally used words like “wild” and “unpredictable”

when describing it and went on to say when enriched through the arts “the sky is the limit” with literacy. Such responses were already beginning to move beyond the “reading and writing as long as they were creative” Petra discussed more exclusively within her interview. However, even within her interview she mentioned that she felt that the literacy process should be more “self-motivated and that the reader or writer should add something of themselves to the text”.

Moving beyond that through, her personal definition of literacy eventually came to contain elements of "leadership and performance" which are central to her student identity. When writing about literacy as it is experienced around her school Petra kept the theme of performance a strong one but also integrated it with considerations of history (“you have to know the history of an event if you write a script about it”) and community enrichment (“performance can really bring people together and create community”).

When asked to visually capture her experiences of literacy Petra chose images from a local Caribbean festival occurring at the same time as this research study. The reason that such a festival constituted a literacy experience for Petra was because “it was about using music and dance to share stories about our culture”. She spoke to me about how attending such events helped with her cultural expression and to be close to the culture she left behind when moving to Canada. Petra told me that being able to connect with her culture here in Canada was a major influence on who she was and that she felt the cross-cultural connections helped her to “better fit in with both cultures” through “communication and sharing”.

Petra's second image was a picture of her family's music room which she said “brought the experience of literacy from the festival home”. The room itself is full to bursting with

instruments speaking to the importance of music within Petra's family. In fact, when she described to me how members of her family tell stories or communicate she said that it was often “done through music because it is a large part of our identity and it brings us together”. Such a connection to the arts helps to show how family life and school life share a number of similarities for Petra and helps to explain her strong interests in music and visual arts. It was this revelation which had Petra first connect literacy to music and song writing at school since she felt “self-motivated, self-directed, and able to explore her identity though learning guitar”.

To further explore the depths of Petra's experiences I had her reflect not only upon her interview data but also upon her personal reflections and conversations with me. We translated those reflections into codes and categories with Petra determining the concepts most closely tied to literacy as: dance, music, singing, choices, leadership, poems, acting, and photos. Her rationales for each of these concepts were as unique as the concepts themselves with dance being “a way to tell a story through your body”, music as “a way to get the mood or tone of a dance across”, and singing “a different kind of text...a way to bring text to dance” (lyrics). These three smaller categories were then all grouped under choices since "literacy offers many different opportunities for choice and self expression" and “how one person thinks of literacy may not be the same as someone else”.

I encouraged Petra to take this idea of “self” further and to try and understand how she fit into her own literacy experience. It was from this prompt that the category of leadership emerged and it was due to the fact that Petra always tries to understand an experience “for myself and for others” since she enjoys the act of mentoring and supporting her peers. At this point she began to

consider instances of her own mentorship and this is where poems, acting, and photos played into her reflections since she had previously helped peers in these areas. All of these concepts also acted as ways to further communicate and well as to explore “who you are as a person”.

Due to the fact that she kept returning to the idea of self-discovery Petra decided that the essence of her character should be “unveiling”. Moreover, since her own identity is very much “inspired by dance” she chose to embody the work she did through an original dance composition set to the song “Human” by Christina Perry. The song was meant to reflect how “no one is perfect but that does not mean that we can't work towards making ourselves better” which paired the idea of self-awareness with self improvement. Dancing was Petra's chosen medium because of how it communicated meaning “your movements have to be sharp and clear to be understood with the right intentions and you have to follow a beat in such a way that the rhythm also becomes a part of the story”. To dance to this song Petra created a character that came “from a strong family background and who was also actively involved within her school community”. Her family all support one another and she develops “a sense of belonging through both dance and sports”. She dreams of becoming a fashion designer and takes life as it comes to her. As she continues to grow up and discover more of who she is “she unveils more and more of her true nature and sense of purpose”. It is from these character choices that “unveiling” became a cemented essence for Petra.

The different approach Petra took to her monologue created a four minute dance piece performed on an empty stage with the exception of the back two corners which each had an easel with an original piece of art on them (created by her) which she interacted with during the song's

quieter moments. These canvases had a self portrait and a pair of eyes on them which were meant to symbolize Petra “unveiling” what literacy meant to her through dance and art. The live interactions during the dance itself included adding painting and elements to each canvas in turn. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a simple and clean white wash with a tinge of red mixed in to signify coming to terms with internalized questions. The sounds remained only within the realm of the song itself, however, the powerful lyrics of “I can do it” and “I can hold the weight of the world if that's what you want” prior to the chorus of “I'm only human...I crash and I break down” helped to reinforce a developing theme of self and humanizing what the experience of literacy meant to Petra as an individual.

The contrasting colours on the two canvases also helped to express both the external (left) and internal (right) of Petra's character with the inside being “a colourful mystery” that new knowledge can help to refine. The costume Petra chose which began completely white and had colour added to it over time also helped to show her expressing more of herself to the world and showing more of who she truly is. Taken in conjunction with dance, painting, and costume work Petra reveals her humanity in harmony with the music and created a new type of literacy experience for herself. Her dance had many quick motions during the chorus which had her in her own words “reaching for understanding, thinking deeply, and feeling stabbed with frustration”. Quieter moments saw her walking lightly in a flowing motion and interacting more directly with her internal self through painting.

When connecting the performance to the wider questions of literacy Petra took the time to break down what literacy had come to mean for her in different elements of her day to day life

at school. Similar to her performance she spoke to seeing literacy in “music, performing, and within the school community”. She also talked about literacy as “a colourful thing shaped by the individuality of the person”. Within more traditional subjects Petra mentioned literacy in various ways, with it taking the form of “word problems, explanations, and even equations” in math as an example. This discussion of a mathematical language was not present within Petra's interview prior to the performance and so this is quite a significant point of growth. Within humanities literacy remained for Petra within “essays and writing” but also expanded outwards to include “current events and debate” with a similar inclusion of “discussion and community” also given within practical science. This inclusion of communication and community within literacy be it through writing, discussion, or music moves literacy off the page and helps to make the overall experience of literacy more tactile post-performance for Petra.

Literacy As Ambition

The experience of literacy from Claire's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with ambition and the desire for self improvement. The theatrical space itself came to be defined through Claire's own desires to grow as a young artist and music was used due to it being an enriching element of the literacy process.

Within her early written responses Claire's definition of literacy became far more focused upon “reading and writing” than her initial interview had been. Her interview had presented literacy as a “storytelling tool rooted in the arts” but her writing told the story of literacy as a “description of perspective” centered on text. When writing about literacy she also chose experiences around text to describe such as “reading books and writing to suit the situation” and

“expressing myself through written words”. This trend continued for Claire when she wrote about literacy around her school wherein she discussed “reading over the lunch hour...getting lost in the worlds of novels”. It was not until she wrote about language arts class, specifically, that Claire connected reading and writing back into the ideas of “storytelling” from her interview. She begins writing about language arts as a place to practice “critical reading and writing skills” but then takes it one step further when she connects those ideas to reading a script for the first time as an actor. These “critical reading and writing skills” can then be used in that situation to better understand the story, characters, and allows Claire to self-reflect about how past characters she has acted as can influence her current role.

I encouraged Claire to look for more concrete connections between reading, writing, and literacy as the study continued. Then, as she began looking for visual representations of her literacy experiences I also reminded her to look for literacy in the moments of her day to day life and consider why being able to read and write critically is important to her. This led to her first image being a soda bottle from an Italian restaurant that she had while out to dinner with her family. In her description of the image she wrote about how she knew that she wanted to order this drink “even without being able to read the Italian text on the label” because she was able to “infer it's flavour from the color of the liquid and the visuals on the bottle”. She was also able to tell that it would be carbonated (something that she likes) due to “the little bubbles” she saw in the liquid. The ability to make such inferences was the skill that Claire connected back to “critical reading and literacy” and the “importance of context in language arts”.

Since much of her reflections centered back upon language arts, I encouraged Claire to consider if there were any stand out literacy experiences she could take from those classes. After reflecting, Claire came back with the image of a pile of coins and a single button. I recognized this project as having come up during her interview and I remember that it had been memorable because as she said “I had never been able to write so much so quickly”. You see, the pile of buttons served as the beginning of a writing prompt and once Claire had picked one button to focus on she had to “describe the clothing the button came from and who was wearing it”. That character then became the protagonist of Claire's writing and she had to create an entire new world around her. Claire's writing included many details about both her character and world: how she began with “a yellow button”, how it came from “a fancy pea coat”, and was worn by “New York City’s most famous fashion designer”. Claire wrote about how “the freedom to choose whichever button I wanted to work with and the creativity behind making a whole universe behind it all showed me new ways of approaching writing”. Her character above everything else was “ambitious” and since that story had been a huge success for Claire that “ambition” began to become the essence of her literacy experience.

Knowing that “ambition” was becoming a focus point for Claire I was curious to see what categories she would create if asked to review her interview and writing up until this point in the study. With “ambition” in the back of her mind Claire considered “what am I ambitious about?” and came up with the following categories: song writing (“as a way to express myself”), expression (“a way to show others who I am and what interests I have”), language (“a way for people to talk to each other”), script (“something you can read, as an actor, and make it your own”), and poetry (“a way to express text and words creatively”). More than simply establishing

these categories in isolation, however, Claire also wrote about the interrelations between each category discussing: poetry and song writing (“as two forms of communicating text using strong metaphors”), song writing and expression (“connected due to my personal experience”), language and expression (“connected due to how they influence one another”), and language and script (“connected due to how the two come together to influence meaning”). The undercurrent of all of these connections then centered on Claire's goals as a person and, therefore, reflected the “ambition” essence she chose.

Claire continued to expand her own understandings over time in relation to literacy based upon these types of connections and brought them into her character work. The character which she created came from “a close family background” and was “actively seeking to make a name for herself” as an up and coming performer within the music community. She is still a senior in high school at the time of her monologue but this does not stop her from “creating a strong online persona as well as performing at various coffee shops” to promote her original music compositions. More than just a sense of belonging music helps her to “achieve her dreams of one day being known around the world”. As she continues to grow up and discover more of who she is she displays true ambition and a strong sense of purpose.

Her actions are embodied through an original song composition, written by Claire, which is a reflection on how Claire will work to always “fan the flames of her own ambition” and work towards a career in music even if it becomes extremely difficult. In Claire's own words, for this character, “music is both a big part of who she is and is also the way in which she most strongly communicates who she is with others”. Claire choose to approach to her monologue, centered

around “ambition”, through a three and a half minute original song composition performed on her ukulele. She also recorded the parts of her monologue that occurred both before and after the song to act as internal thought and bring in elements of mime to her work. She performed on a stage set up with a table and chairs, to signify a coffee shop, since her character was attending an open mike night there. One of her fellow participants acted as a waitress bringing her coffee at one point to help both establish setting and create an opportunity for some comic relief about her extremely complicated coffee order. The coffee shop was meant to symbolize her characters “ambition as she is attempting to begin a music career at a young age” and going anywhere she can that people will listen to her. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a simple and clean white wash with a tinge of yellow mixed in to signify the calming atmosphere of a coffee shop on a summer evening. Sounds used included the sounds of dishes and far off chatter as well as both recordings mentioned previously and the song itself played and sung entirely by Claire. The overall theme of ambition was strongly reinforced within the choice of lyrics in the song itself as well as within internal dialogue.

Claire's internal monologue recording begins by establishing that she “has come to these types of open mike nights often and that if I want to become famous I am going to have to keep trying”. She then orders her extremely complicated coffee prior to tuning her instrument. She reflects upon if she can make it in the music industry prior to opening up her song book and choosing one that she just recently finished writing. The waitress returns with her order which moderately satisfies her before hearing her name and going up on stage after someone finishes a rather rough performance. The song she sings is about “working harder everyday to get to the flame” with the flame signifying her dream of becoming famous and renowned for her music.

She sings of how “my sparks will turn in to a flame” helping to show the role that ambition plays within her life journey. Outside of the chorus the song speaks of “my heart will tell when I break out of this shell” and how Claire wishes that someone she cares deeply about could see what will become of her. The song ends with her renewed determination to continue doing better and practicing until she reaches her goals. Another recording following the song wraps up the monologue as Claire comes off her coffee rush and realizes that even if she does not reach her goal “tomorrow, in a week or even a year” she has to keep working at it even though a part time job in an ice cream parlour is her “today”.

The performance seemed to help Claire establish a more fleshed out understanding of literacy as well as herself seeing literacy as “a combination of movement, storytelling, understanding, adapting and performance” and “the creativity that goes into the teaching of an idea”. For Claire, song writing was an example of these factors coming together in a way that helped her to “learn, create, and express”. Outside of her own personal connection Claire also took the time, in post performance reflections, to connect literacy to other subject areas through visual or concept mapping (social studies) for “examining connections”, word problems (math) for “improving comprehension”, and within diagrams and formulas (science) for “labeling, describing, and memorizing”.

Literacy as Connection

The experience of literacy from Erud's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with “the connections formed with others as they share stories, information, and learn from one

another”. The theatrical space itself then came to be defined by the community that surrounds it and by those connections Erud has established through her work in the arts.

The way in which Erud choose to undertake her written responses differed from her peers in that she wrote her responses in a series of stanzas resembling a type of freestyle poetry. She titled her written responses “of story or of truth” and spoke to how “words are a spell of ideas and unique fantasies”. Words are, after all, used to form stories of “happiness, heart break, fights, and forgiveness” as people use both “fantasy and reality to connect better to both themselves and one another” making “the impossible possible” and “never being truly alone thanks to storytelling” Erud's writing continued this mentioning of storytelling over time speaking to how story allows people to go “down to our roots” since the stories people create and share “become a part of who we are”. This formation of “identity, community, and connection” for the foundation of what Erud came to call a “literacy experience” which involved the creation of small moments of connection such as “a girl smiling to herself in the corner of a crowded room” or telling “a story of connection and care something which often goes unnoticed but is always there”.

This exploration of connection continued into Erud's visual representations of literacy which was a piece of original artwork showing two people with their arms around one another, sitting close together, as they watch the sun descend beneath the horizon. Erud explained this image as showing how “understanding literacy within distinct subjects is made more possible when a community of students share their own unique understandings with one another”. Such an explanation would seem to be moving literacy, for Erud, into a collective space as opposed to

an individual one since it is both “the teacher teaching and my friends and I helping each other that helps me to understand lessons”. Getting to know one's peers and working with them also creates “opportunities to share stories and again provide connection and care”.

Since Erud was so focused upon “connection” from the onset of the study I was curious to see how that focus would impact the coding of her data. When her codes were complete after reviewing her data up until this point she has identified: connection (“people coming together to better understand”), wondering (“a kind of curiosity created by connecting with others and hearing their stories”), possibilities (“understanding something from a point of view different from your own”), expression (“better understanding who we are by connecting with other people”), and understanding (“coming to better engage with something like literacy because of connection and wonder”). Furthermore, Erud made the presentation of her codes cyclical since “connection leads to wonder which creates new perspectives that challenge or change the way people think leading to new understandings”. Erud was also clear in her writing that the connection piece which begins the cycle can begin “anytime that you meet someone new”.

As a result of her writing the character Erud created came from “a well developed family background who is actively seeking to become involved in as much of her school community as possible”. Erud chose to place her character in high school at the time of her monologue since within that setting she could “develop a sense of belonging through all of the clubs, sports teams, and school events she becomes involved with”. For the character this feeling of belonging has to do with being “both well known and respected by her peers” and it is not until later in the monologue that she begins to see how such belonging influences “who she is as an individual”.

The essence of this character remains “connection” and her actions are embodied through a traditional monologue given in an empty classroom at her school. Erud has just run into this classroom after her crush asks her out and she is “unsure how to process a response”. The idea of a connection she has never made in the past (romantic) flusters her due to her lack of experience to fall back upon. Her monologue has to do with her coming to terms with what to do and deciding whether to risk such a connection or not. Erud choose to approach to her monologue through a four and a half minute traditional delivery format. She kept her stage, costume, and props minimalist in order to focus upon “the character and their internal struggles”. She performed on an empty stage that was meant to signify an out of use classroom in her school since that was “the first place of solitude she could find after being unexpectedly asked out” at her locker by a boy she likes. Her character longs for connection but is reluctant to establish new ones on an account of “being shy” and so the classroom was meant to symbolize this conflict as she struggles “coming to terms with the choice of wheatear or not to trust her crush enough to say yes to his question”. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a simple and clean white wash with a tinge of green mixed in to signify “the slightly nervous atmosphere of the situation” Erud finds herself in. Sounds were deliberately not used as the silence became a character in and of itself adding to “the overall anxiety and uncertainty of the moment”. The overall theme of connection was strongly reinforced at the conclusion of the monologue when Erud decides to take the risk and form a connection with this new person.

Erud's monologue begins as her “whole world is crumbling before my eyes” and she can't tear her “eyes away from the wreckage of my old self, my old beliefs”. This is in reference to her previous isolation within her social group that has now been challenged since one of the popular

boys she has a crush on asks her out. Prior to this “very few of my peers paid attention to me or were rude and cruel to me...so I am apprehensive”. She would ask her best friend Astrid for advice but since the “ask out” happened Astrid has become much more distant. She speaks to her level of confusion in that “one day we were kids with princess dresses and tea sets, then we're boy crazy, drama craving teenage girls” and she wonders “where teenagers more fun loving selves go in junior high?” The tone of her monologue then shifts to her home life and childhood which was often spent alone with “silent comrades and invisible foes” and that as a result she often hides within childhood fantasies trying to be “brave, smart, and composed” when in reality she is full of “self doubt and fear”. Her troubled home and school life left her only with her one friend, Astrid, and she worries that if she forms a connection with this boy she will “lose the connection to Astrid I hold most dear”. They both like this boy Cato you see and she worries in the end that “they could both abandon me”. In the end, however, she decides to take the risk and accept the date while hoping for the best with Astrid. She knows that it will be hard and that this choice may backfire but she is willing to take the risk to possibly find someone else who “actually cares”.

When connecting the performance to the wider questions of literacy in her post-performance reflections Erud created a visualization mind map that took the form of a tree. The trees roots were centered on both “literacy and connection” and branched out into various examples of how Erud now thought of her literacy experience. Each of her school's main subjects was listed with a separate section being dedicated to the school itself. Math was discussed in terms of “problem solving, communication, understanding, and visualizing”. This was due to the fact that “problems create opportunities for critical thought and skill use” as long

as “people communicate with one another to solve these problems”. Solving the problem was then described as first “collectively understanding and then visualizing a solution” before finally solving it. Practical science was discussed differently around concepts such as “wondering and collaboration”. Wonder being defined as “the natural extension to curiosity and the process which drives scientific questioning” and collaboration as people “bringing together unique skills in order to properly test labs and to prove a hypothesis”. Language arts was then spoken of in terms of “creativity and listening” since the “openness of language arts allows for many different answers” and “it is important to listen for feedback to improve your writing and reading”. Finally, social studies was discussed in relation to “critical thinking” since much of the learning, from Erud's perspective, has to do with “larger global challenges that require critical thought and research to propose solutions to”.

When speaking to literacy within the learning environment of the school itself Erud wrote about “performing, opportunity, and community” as central focuses. Performing was spoken of as “central to student identity, unique each and every time, and an extremely motivating learning experience”. Opportunity came to be defined by the “diversity of learning opportunities in the classroom and outside of it in the form of clubs and other activities”. Finally, community was defined in terms of the “high level of supportiveness and the opportunity to connect with people across grade levels and create something amazing together”. Erud ended her post-performance connections by saying that “the arts are central to the community of this school and are an opportunity for self reflection and improvement while being a part of a strong community”.

Erud had been thinking of literacy as connection since the early stages of the research process, however, it is only as the process itself reached its capstone that what began as an abstract concept was given concrete descriptors in specific relation to her literacy experiences. In this way each of her contributions built upon one another and deepened her understanding of her own experience over time both in relation to herself and in relation to her peers around her. By studies end it may have been most appropriate for Erud to not term her experiences as mealy literacy but rather “communal literacy”.

Literacy as Understanding

The experience of literacy from Emilia's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with the quest for understanding as well as communicating that understanding to others. The theatrical space itself came to be defined through storytelling as the character she created used story as a means to reach their own form of understanding and personify the literacy process.

When writing about literacy Emilia discussed the experience as relating to “reading, writing, and understanding” with understanding being “what brings reading and writing together”. With this focus upon understanding Emilia wrote about how “working together with others makes understanding easier” since “different people can add different pieces to the puzzle” inferring building a shared context. Examples of this in practice for Emilia included both academic settings such as “creative writing” and personal settings such as “baking a cake”. This reason such different examples can be looped together is because, for Emilia writing and baking both involve “a series of steps that need to be understood” and the “end results can be shared with others” which taken together speak to the literacy experience for Emilia.

Once I was able to establish how Emilia was viewing literacy I wanted to know more of how and where she saw it at play within her school. So as her writing continued I encouraged her to expand upon it with school specific examples leading her to first say that she sees literacy “everywhere” and that it occurs “every day”. Interestingly, as she went to explain this in more detail, she spoke to literacy both from the students’ and teachers’ perspectives. Emilia thinks that teachers use literacy “as an assessment tool” to tell if students are “paying attention” whereas students use literacy to “make connections as a way to understand something”.

With the consistency of understanding present within her written responses the study moved on to examine visual representations. Emilia chose to capture three different photographs as evidence of her own literacy experiences each connected to experiences of “personal interest”. The first image showed Emilia's feet with one in a jazz dance shoe and one in a ballet shoe. The photo was chosen because Emilia dances both in school and competitively outside of it. Within these settings she has come to see that “in dance there are many different styles that communicate and perform differently using some similar techniques and some very different ones”. Emilia goes on to say that despite the difference in dance styles “what you learn in one could still be applied to your learning in another” and that by learning many different styles dancers become “better able to adapt in a dance show” and “understand various types of dance”. This understanding and adaptability was then connected back into literacy learning since there are also “many different styles of reading and writing”.

The second image chosen was an up close image of a violin meant to demonstrate “the connections between music and literacy” in the way that “in order to play an instrument you have

to understand the language (notes) and be able to know how to use those to play”. When writing about the image in more detail Emilia spoke about how “understanding context is important for reading comprehension which can be a big part of literacy” and that sometimes you need the “help of others to really understand that context”.

Emilia's final image was a card game, which is not explicitly identified, chosen to show how in order to play a game you have to “understand the rules, know how pieces work, and how to play well with other players”. In much the same way as dance or music “can build an understanding of language and content over time” so to do board games. When learning various types of games Emilia noticed that “many of them draw upon similar languages and structure making it easier to understand a game if you have played a similar one in the past”. Players, after all, use combinations of “reading, dialogue, and interaction with others to understand the overall rules and structure of a game”, they use “specific language to progress through play phases”, and “they build a community of fellow players”. In this way Emilia applied her understanding to this type of literacy experience while also teaching her peers about the games.

As Emilia moved on to review her data and develop categories and themes she also chose, as a number of her peers did, to begin with literacy as a starting place and branch out from there. Branching categories included: people (“people create what literacy is and what it becomes with one another”), learning (“you have to learn to understand and understand to learn”), talking (“talking is one of the best ways to share ideas with others”), and creativity (“the arts are a way of making a person a person and helping them to express themselves”). From these categories

Emilia further clarified her essence of understanding as needing “engagement with others and understanding one's self” with the arts being the primary “way to accomplish that”.

From all of this data, Emilia created a character that comes from a broken and abusive family background and who ran away from home after a family tragedy. She is not in school at the time of her monologue and has not attended any formal education for “a very long time”. She has “a quiet and guarded personality that is not open to trust as easily as others”. She has a difficult time developing a sense of belonging due to the isolation of her current life situation, however, as she reflects back upon the past, in the form of revisiting memories, she begins to develop “a better understanding of herself and the role her family played in shaping her”.

The essence of the character is this “understanding” and her actions are embodied through a traditional monologue that makes use of shadow projection to convey images and emotions. The monologue is a self reflective piece that takes place inside her characters head and occurs over a long period of time although the exact extent remains undefined. As she gains understanding of herself and her life situation she also develops forgiveness towards her mother, who caused the family tragedy, and closure around her sister who she lost” as a result of said tragedy. This theme came up following numerous discussions with Emilia and through all of her questioning, self reflection, and dialogue she was able to develop her own unique understanding of literacy which became the essence of her literacy experience by the study's conclusion.

Emilia choose to perform her roughly five minute monologue using a mix of traditional delivery and shadow projection work to “enrich individual scenes and beats”. The stage was kept

empty with the exception of a large white canvas dominating the back wall which would be backlit, using a projection light behind it, to create large shadows. The quest for understanding her character is undergoing “focuses on various key events and people within her life”. Therefore, the shadow work was meant to signify “the remaining confusion and lack of clarity around these people and their influence on her life”. Understanding has not yet been reached at the beginning of her monologue but by the end of her performance “the shadows become less frequent and the projector dims as she comes to accept and understand her life as she has lived it”. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a dim white wash with the bulk of lighting coming from the backlit projector. An added effect of this is that Emilia's face was also often kept in partial shadow during the performance, however when the projector dimmed Emilia noted that “the audience were able to see my face more clearly as my character changed”. The tableaux and vignettes that Emilia's peers helped to make for her behind the canvas added visualization to her words with the removal of shadow near the end helping to fully “complete my character arc and show how I came to an understanding around my experiences”.

Emilia's monologue begins with a brief aside where she describes “how quickly life moves and how certain key moments stick with you even if it is not always clear why”. She tells the audience that “sometimes we don't have time to think” and “decisions we make or experiences we have sometimes become distorted due to our own lack of understanding”. She then moves into a series of memories in order to illustrate her point which begin with the tragic murder of her sister at the hands of her mother, shown in shadow work, and her subsequent decision to run away from home and leave the country. At the time Emilia did not understand that her sister would “always be with me” and so part of her running away from home was to run

away from the pain of a bad memory. Over time she learned that this hurt became so powerful that “it takes over everything”.

Lost in her hurt and pain Emilia made her way to South Africa, a place that both she and her sister loved, where she became a fruit picker working at a mango plantation. The days were long and full of hard work but they taught her “the meaning of sacrifice” making her reflect more fully on her decision to run away from her own problems. It made her think that running away from home was in a way “cheating” and by not facing her problems head on she was making it “impossible to move on from and accept”. Living in a foreign country was also difficult due to the fact that the death of her sister had made Emilia closed off and not prone to make connections easily. Even though people around her were kind she had built a wall around herself and “shut everyone out”. It was not until she truly faced the fact that her sister was gone that these walls began to come down and she was able to connect with people once more.

Determined to continue facing her problems the final scene of Emilia's monologue sees her returning home only to find everything she knew devastated by fire. All that was left was “my garden and the oak tree down the street” and the scene overwhelmed her. All that she was able to rescue was a single family photo, where everyone was together. Despite the tragedy of the moment, and the hardships that lead there, Emilia walked down to the oak tree and began to process her life and understand that “everything happens for a reason”. When speaking to literacy more broadly and conceptually Emilia included her previous accounts of “reading and writing” as well as making allowances for both “critical and creative thinking”. These varied thought processes allow people, in Emilia's view “to better process information they receive and

put it into their own words”. This ownership helps to lead to a measure of understanding which harkens back to the essence of Emilia's literacy experience. This post performance reflection was difficult for Emilia to put into words since she had come to see literacy “in so many different places and things” over the course of the study. However, she settled upon this description since it connected well to her overall reflections.

Literacy as Hope

The experience of literacy from Samuel's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with hope and always making the best of whatever you are faced with. The theatrical space itself came to be defined through various ways of storytelling, communities, and connection with those around you which were elements all described by Samuel as enriching the literacy process.

Samuel's written reflections began almost immediately by saying “literacy is communication” and using that as a transition to define the experience of literacy as being about “speech, writing, and expressionism”. All three of these types of experiences were then connected directly to Samuel when he described using “hand motions, vocal tone, and wording choices when performing” and how the arts “help to communicate what is important” in a variety of ways. Samuel, like others in his grade, also mentioned the “self confidence” of both himself and his peers as enriched by “the arts based learning opportunities available” to them.

As Samuel moved into his visual representations I asked him to consider what it is that the arts communicate and why whatever that is so important. As he began to consider this he also chose two images which represented literacy for him with the first being the Scouts Canada logo.

When justifying this choice, Samuel connected literacy to a concept that had not come up before for him: ritual. Samuel defined “ritual” as “passing both order and religion between people” and said that Scouts communicated both order and religion to him in such a way that it helped to “influence my identity”. I was curious to know what it was that this ritual had helped to establish within Samuel's identity and when I asked him he briefly but decisively said “hope”.

Samuel's second chosen image was a little more unique in that it was an original creation combining what Samuel called “figurative visuals”. What this meant was that this art piece had different elements representing “democratic discipline, developmental assets, the circle of courage, and contract learning”. Samuel knows of these concepts, and engages with them on a daily basis, because they are central pillars of his schools structure. From Samuel's perspective he describes democratic discipline as “keeping things fair”, developmental assets as “what we learn and how we learn in school”, the circle of courage as “how the school handles bullying”, and contract learning as “the responsibilities students agree to in order to big a part of big projects and productions”. Samuel's second image represents each of these factors visually using various pop culture references (from fantasy or science fiction) since those sources are of direct interest and/or relevance to Samuel.

Both of these visuals provided Samuel ample material to reflect upon and so by the time he created his own categories and codes he had quite a lot to write about. Samuel's categories placed literacy at the center of a number of different influences including: “gaming” (which referred to both “online video games and board games” since “communication with other players and analysis of those players strategies is needed to ensure victory”), “performance” (referring to

how “music, self expression, and character development are all a part of our character studies and learning contacts”), and “communication and expression” (since “together they tie literacy to the other concepts”). It was also within this coding exercise that Samuel began further developing the notion of “hope” as a result of “communication” since “the community around productions was always so positive”.

With “hope” in the back of his mind Samuel created a character that was much older than that of his peers so that he had “more life experiences to relate to”. His character was “an orphan who had a hard life between various homes and the streets” but was still able to get a “somewhat decent” education as well as maintain a “positive outlook towards others”. Now in retirement, he shares his “love of stories” by reading to children at his local library using his “skills as a ventriloquist to connect with others, make them smile, and develop a sense of belonging”. The “hope” that this character personifies comes from how in spite of difficulty Samuel maintains “hope grounded in realism” and realizes, with the help of his beloved puppet “Tick”, that you “can always stand up if life has you down” which is what he wants to share with the children.

Samuel choose to perform his roughly eleven and a half minute monologue, the longest performance by far, using a handmade puppet named “Tick” and self-taught ventriloquism skills to communicate his character’s life story. The stage was designed to be divided into two areas with one being a library and the other Samuel's apartment. Samuel would “volunteer at the library to read stories to children, to perform for them, and to teach them life lessons from his long experience”. The puppet “Tick” acted as both “a companion and storyteller” often taking the lead on more difficult or dark content that Samuel has trouble dealing with himself. The two

had a charming back and forth over the performance and in many ways Tick came to “embody the hope that is central to the story”. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a white wash that was split between stage left and right to separate the sets. The library was lit well and had multiple set pieces to “show the hopefulness of that space” whereas the apartment was darker and empty to “contain more of the character’s strife”. Sounds were kept fairly minimal with the performance relying on sounds that Samuel himself could generate. The overall theme of hope was primarily captured through Tick and the dialogue itself with Samuel reading much of the monologue from “a storybook of his life”. These stories came from “the various important beats in his Samuel's life that shaped who he is as a person today”. In sequence they discussed “the death of his father”, “his mother losing him to the foster system”, “life in the orphanage”, “meeting Jack” (his best friend who he says “was always there for me to fight a bully or steal a midnight snack”), “Jack being adopted and leaving”, “running away from the orphanage”, “life on the streets”, “finding Tick”, “busking to make money” and “creating a stable life”.

These series of life beats all eventually led Samuel to write a book “meant to inspire hope like Jack had done” which is a part of how his character ended up working in a library later in life. Perhaps the biggest single beat in the story relating to hope had to do with when Samuel reconnected with Jack much later in life after hearing he was in hospital. Samuel “sacrificed the life he had spent years building in order to help finance the growing hospital bills” even making “Tick” “a causality of sacrifice lost in some now forgotten pawn shop”. Despite the high cost Jack's medical bills “would be covered and he would recover” leading the two to become closer than ever and realize that “with a little bit of hope anything is possible”. Samuel as a character by

the end of the performance then came to better “appreciate the roles that various people played in his life and works to spread hope to others through story”.

When speaking to literacy more broadly, within the post-performance reflections, Samuel broke down the experience of literacy into different subject areas and interests. The area with the most details of experience, however, were in relation to the school itself: “expressing emotion through movement in dance club, bonding with peers that share similar passions, communicating strategy in sports and games, and passing knowledge onto others”. Within each particular subject area including “math, humanities, practical science and music” each and every point of reflection had to do with “furthering communication within a context specific way”. Communication was without a doubt a central factor, however, because a lot of this communication had to do with “knowledge and relationship building with peers” the end result of it continued to be “hope”. For Samuel, the essence of his experience became instead the “end result of said experience” because that is what keeps him invested in returning to “literacy” again and again. “Reading, writing, and languages” mentioned so regularly in earlier data sets are not included explicitly within the post-performance reflections raising an interesting question around the nature of this conceptual shift. Reflectively, it could be seen in part as a result of the overall process of research, in particular the integration of drama as a research methodology, which expanded both the way and the scope that Samuel engaged with the research question.

Literacy as Speech

The experience of literacy from Dwayne's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with speech and communication with others. The theatrical space itself came to be defined

through this same communication with his chosen art form designed to share a relatable message to the audience and establish empathy as a part of the literacy process.

Within his written reflections, Dwayne compared what he called “the standard definition of literacy” meaning to him “the ability to read and write” to “a skeleton that skill needs its skin and organs”. What he meant by this was that “while reading and writing have a place within literacy it is also about having meaningful conversations and listening to others”. This talking and listening was how Dwayne said that he “best developed meaning often through the arts”. This line of thought continued in how Dwayne wrote about literacy as it appears around school. He again reiterates here the importance of the school’s three main performances and how “literacy here would not be the same without them”. Dwayne also takes the time to relate literacy back to the concept of “freedom” saying how “personal choice is a large motivator in a literacy experience”. As Dwayne moved into visual representations he chose images similar to both Selina and Samuel. The first image was of his school schedule chosen to show “the relationship between my school and how I see literacy”. Within his explanation Dwayne expands upon this idea by saying “since each of our creative projects take literacy up in their own ways it seemed right to include each of our classes in the image”. Additionally, Dwayne also mentioned how schedules “communicate important information to a wide audience” in much the same ways as different types of literacy, such as text, try to do as well.

Dwayne's second image was the same one chosen by Samuel (the original character design). However, rather than focusing upon the specific “pillars” Samuel mentions Dwayne focus upon how “creative flexibility can make learning more exciting and engaging” and that

“creativity can enrich communities”. This is the only instance where two students chose the same visual representation and also the only instance where both students had a hand in making the image themselves. It appeared to me as if they were speaking to an element of their shared experience. As he moved into identifying categories and themes Dwayne organized them into the shape of a face to represent the essence of how he “felt that people express themselves” primarily through “facial expressions and speech”. Within the categories themselves the concept of literacy was spilt into what Dwayne called “personal and academic considerations” with the “academic” side consisting of mentions to “reading, writing, and note taking” and the “personal” side focusing more on “speaking, video games, and acting/arts immersion”. Interestingly, the “academic” side of the categories were considered to be more “passive” overall with the “personal” side being described as a more “active” literacy. There were also outlying categories due to the fact that they are present in both “academic” and “personal” senses of literacy and they were “debate and communication”. It would be this “communication” piece that would prove to be “the strongest link between literacies” and the reason why Dwayne's eventual essence became “speech” since it is as he put it “the primary tool of communication”.

Based upon these reflections Dwayne created an older character who lives “a fairly average life working a typical nine-five job in the hospitality industry”. Like some of his peers Dwayne described his character's level of education as “somewhat decent” but with an “outgoing and strong personality”. Despite initially wanting to work with people, hence his career choice, Dwayne has “fallen out of love with this particular job due to his clients all being quite rude and demanding”. The resulting monologue takes place at a hotel's central desk after a particularly bad day with clients. Dwayne speaks about how he wishes “people would be more respectful and

easy to deal with” and recounts some clients that left an especially bad impression on him. As he does this a number of calls come into the desk and he deals with them in stride reflecting on “how important it is in this job to be able to speak well”. While off the phone Dwayne also speaks to himself as a way of “gathering and processing thoughts” reinforcing the importance of speech in his day to day life.

Dwayne choose to perform his four and a half minute monologue sitting at a customer reception desk, located in a hotel lobby, attending to a backlog of paperwork. Dwayne has worked at this hotel for “many years” and in his “position of prominence” chooses to work alone. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a white wash that had a tinge of yellow “due to the typical climate of Hawaii” (where the hotel is located) and sounds akin to “elevator and/or hold music” were used to further set the atmosphere of the hotel. Dwayne's monologue begins with a phone call from one of the hotel's guests who “is in an extremely bad mood about what they perceive to be a lack of service”. Dwayne does his best to address their concerns and hurries them off the phone before returning to his papers and addressing the audience. “Why is it the receptionist who gets all the grief?” he asks those watching as he details examples about how some people in the hotel will “never be pleased” no matter how hard he tries. He recounts how he has worked at this hotel his “entire life and would trade jobs with the bellboy in a heartbeat” to get a break from difficult people who constantly complain. Unfortunately, the bellboy job is “no longer open” to Dwayne since in his younger days he was caught stealing from clients and “the only other job away from the desk is in the kitchen”. Since the only other thing Dwayne “has less patience for than people, is cooking” that job is quickly ruled out. He decides to

reevaluate his current situation and ask his boss for a raise in pay or some time away from the desk to relax as the monologue ends.

Within his post-performance reflections Dwayne makes specific mention of how he “enjoys communicating the back story and motivations of his character to an audience” in order to best show them “the reason behind his actions”. As well as to mention how the audience’s perception of a show “builds the community around the performance” and that is also essential to both “literacy and the arts”. Dwayne also discusses his experience of literacy in the reflections over three distinct ways relating more specifically to school: “math, humanities, and options”. Within the realm of “math” Dwayne discusses what he calls a “mathematical language” meaning “the symbols used in equations” (+, -, /, X, etc.), “notes/memos”, “mathematical vocabulary” and “word problems since they involve reading to understand”. Outside of “word problems” any specific mentions to “reading and writing” within these reflections are kept within the humanities connected to other previously discussed categories such as “communication and speech” and “critical thinking/analysis”. Options add a new dimension to previous reflections in that Dwayne mentions “collaboration” in addition to a “communication” focus when talking about “the arts and production”. Literacy as a lived experience, for Dwayne, was almost always connected to performances and arts immersion with “each of the different styles of performance creating new types of experiences, community, and learning” through adding both greater breadth and depth to the experience. It is clear though these reflections that speech, language, and communication are all forms of moving literacy across subjects for Dwayne and that they are shaping his overall literacy experience beyond reading and writing alone.

Literacy as Trust

The experience of literacy from Raven's perspective, within a theatrical space, has to do with trust and emotional support. The theatrical space itself came to be defined through using the arts, and other modes of literacy, to develop “self confidence, empathy, and understanding”.

When presenting her reflections through text Raven discussed literacy in a multifaceted way incorporating elements “from reading and language to solving mathematical problems”. These different “ways of doing literacy” were not only written about in terms of what they do for learning but also how, in a case such as reading, “literacy can serve as an escape” for the reader. This personal connection to her understanding of literacy afforded Raven the opportunity to define it as “a vital component of education which can also be very empowering and raise self-esteem” as well as “a right for all students”. Translating how this impacts the way in which literacy exists in her day to day life at school Raven wrote about literacy in math, since “numeracy is a type of language” and language arts, since “reading and writing are used in order to understand and communicate”. She expanded these ideas by writing how “strong use of language can lead to empowerment” since you “will not only be able to understand things better but you will also be able to get your own points across”. When talking about language within different subjects Raven said that “language can become specialized within specific subjects, however, reading and writing remain central to understanding and communication regardless of the subject area under study”. I encouraged Raven to continue considering how self-esteem, understanding, and language play a role within her literacy learning as time in the study wore on as well as what else she might need to enrich those three things.

Visually, Raven chose to present two original photographs that she took to represent her developing literacy definitions. The first photograph showed the Seattle skyline as seen from the Space Needle. The accompanying text explained how the Space Needle was built during the 1962 World Fair and that the World's Fair itself personified literacy as a place to demonstrate “ideas, culture, technology, and other achievements”. Raven wrote about how she learned the Space Needle itself was built at the fair to be “a symbol of the future” and how “ideas, culture, and technology can shape people's identity”. It was this identity piece and futuristic orientation that helped Raven to see that she wanted to approach her literacy experience “looking forward not back” which, as an educator, I interpreted as a growth mindset.

Raven's second photograph tied, as she put it, “much more directly with school” and showed a large library in Seattle. This photograph was meant to demonstrate what Raven called the “central pillar” of literacy being “critical thinking” arrived at through “reading and understanding”. A library was chosen to represent this because Raven felt that books “explore topics at a deeper level” than a conversation could while also talking about text in script format and how “arts immersion can also help with deeper thinking”. Importantly, the growth mindset from her first image and the deeper thinking from her second both require the high “self-esteem” Raven had mentioned previously as well as “a high level of trust” which is where we can begin to see the essence of Raven's experience forming.

As Raven began creating categories and themes she adopted a top down structure with “literacy” at the top followed by: “motivation” (something “individual and personal”), “expression” (which can be “individual or group based”), and “community” (the “result of

individual and group expression”). At this point in her categories she began to further diverge them including “singing”, “acting”, and “arts immersion” under the “community” umbrella (since “the arts are central to community here”). Underneath both “motivation” and “expression” Raven also grouped “writing”, “music”, and “math” as their own distinct literacy experiences since “they relate most strongly to my own interests and ways of expressing myself”. Raven finished off these reflections by saying the “trust mostly comes from the community” meaning that the two are closely interrelated and it was this relationship that would be seen within her character.

Raven's character personifies literacy as a high school student with “a relatively decent home life”. She describes her character’s biggest conflict as “the desire to better understand who and where her father is” which in turn causes a cascading with her mother who thinks “that some doors should never be opened”. The monologue begins as Raven, in defiance of her mother, sets out on a quest to find her father “armed with nothing but her outgoing personality and the clue of a decaying asylum”. Raven feels that she needs to find her father in order to get closure to “many childhood questions” as well as to explore “the broken trust she now has with her mother” since she was previously told by her mother that her father had passed away. The truth of her father had only come out during one of the “many fights” the two have but now “in order to better understand her mother, herself, and her place in the world” Raven enters the local asylum and discovers more than she bargained for.

“Trust” is touched on in this performance as something Raven “is seeking to re-establish with those around her” since that trust is broken right as the performance begins with the fight

and shocking revelation surrounding her father. Raven feels “a deep sense of betrayal” that her mother lied about her father's death so she researches where he ended up being sent in order to find him. She sneaks out of her house in the middle of the night to “avoid her mother's anger” but by the time she arrives at the hospital she “begins to doubt herself and questions if, perhaps, her mother had good intentions” hiding this situation from her. She muses “what am I doing here?” and “can he ever be a normal dad who does normal dad stuff with me?” before resolving to take the chance and walk into his hospital room. When she finally sees her father “this resolve leaves her” and the two sit in an awkward silence until her father “speaks without recognizing her” and the two have a short conversation before Raven leaves. The encounter shakes Raven who had expected someone cold and distant “like concrete” but instead got a genuine, if somewhat confused person “like a grassy field full of flowers”.

Raven realizes, to a certain extent, that “keeping certain secrets hidden is sometimes done in the best interest of someone you care about” and she slowly comes to understand “trust as a grey area not black and white”. It is these moments that move the notion of “trust” for Raven from something “she did not have, something that she lost, something that was mercilessly taken away” towards something she is “slowly working to attain”. Her performance ends in uncertainty as she is unable to grasp “the extent of her father's mental condition” while at the same time becoming “all the more uncertain” of her mother's intentions.

Raven chose to perform her four and a half minute monologue in a traditional format utilizing an empty stage. Rather than a complex stage design Raven relied upon her strong descriptive writing skills to establish the backdrops of her kitchen, bedroom, neighbourhood, and

the hospital where her father was committed. Lighting wise the stage was lit with a white wash that had a tinge of grey due to “the darker weather conditions” over the course of her journey to the hospital. Raven choose to utilize sounds in the form of recordings, similar to Claire, to make certain sections of dialogue internal thoughts which she could assign actions and mime work to. These recordings captured the moments that Raven was “the most self reflective and critical” often responding to her environment or new people that she has encountered along the way.

Within her post performance reflections Raven mentions how “trust is often a major factor in the lives of both my own original characters and those I read about” which helped to influence how she chose to communicate her literacy experience. She also took the time within post-performance to reiterate instances where she still felt that literacy was “actively present” such as whenever she engages in “critical thinking, problem solving, writing, and visualization” across various subjects and classes. However, it is “the trust and empathy gained through reading and writing” that truly help Raven to see “more of what could be than what is” as she continues to develop her own understandings of literacy into the future.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Since The New London Group began expanding the scope of literacy pedagogy twenty five years ago, other scholars have also been writing about terms in literacy education such as “multimodality” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), “visual literacy” (Arizpe and Styles, 2003) and “linguistic landscapes” (Landry & Bourhuis, 1997, p. 25). This has also led to calls that literacy is changing and being literate in the classroom is not always the same as being literate outside of it (Anstey & Bull, 2006). However, viewing literacy in this way can make room for discussions and research around the areas of student agency, authorship, and identity since, if literacy is indeed changing, this change should be examined from the perspectives of students going through this change.

The research question of this study designed to address the gap of student agency, authorship, and identity was: *What is it like to experience literacy within a theatrical space?* While research into the impact of the arts and understanding literacy has been undertaken before, the work often focused upon students in primary education Pascoe (2002), and Wells & Sandretto (2016). Or the research is done with multiage students from various grade levels Barton and Baguley (2014). Furthermore, in the case of Pascoe (2002) and Wells & Sandretto (2016) while the studies did absolutely make use of drama it was more so used as a teaching tool for a specific learning outcome, as opposed to an exploration of the experience or phenomenon of literacy itself from the student's perspective. The end results of such studies instead provide practical applications for drama to enrich students' reading, writing, and vocabulary skills.

What this study did differently was challenge what constituted literacy itself while looking for commonalities and differences between student experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008), since “literacy is one of those words, like love, that people use commonly and confidently, as if its meaning were transparent and stable” (Lindquist & Seitz, 2009, p. 8) when in reality it is inherently complex. The purpose of this study was to create a space in which participants explored their own conceptualizations of a literacy experience using a variety of mediums, building in reflexivity and reflections, and eventually leading participants to personify what they believed the essence of literacy to be centered around. Not only was such creation observed to build better agency, authorship, and identity on the part of students but by engaging with literacy in this way the dialogue with students proved not only that “language is the basis of communication and the primary instrument of thought” (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1) but that language can also take many forms as well as be enriched through artistic influences.

The artistic influences were seen within the theatrical space (performances) that capstone this study demonstrating phenomenological attitudes as the uniqueness of each individual life-world was brought to the forefront of a shared lived experience between audience and performer (Van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 449). A deeper understanding of each experience came about through language and dialogue both surrounding the performance, in written form, and spoken at the performance and later talk-back. Each participant's “way of knowing and being” (p. 451) in relation to literacy was exposed without taken for granted assumptions on the part of the audience and the resulting analysis does its best to maintain that integrity.

Discussion

Scholars, within the realm of literacy education, have recently become concerned that literacy in classrooms is not always allowing for “thinking” and “meaning” (Greene, 1995, p. 4). In part, scholars argue that this is because the way in which we are defining “literacy” is currently undergoing an “epoch” of change (Leu & Forzani, 2012, p. 76). Within the educational authority of this study literacy has come to be defined, in part, as “the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living” (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 1) with additional recent consideration being made that when engaging with text or communicating the learner “engages in action, feelings and thinking related to a purposeful social activity” (Lenters & Whitford, 2018). With this context in mind it is important to discuss the data of this study in relation to various types of literacy theories in order to best observe how literacy is experienced within a modern school. The theories through which this data are first discussed include literacy as: “text based, performative, reader based, socio cultural, or centered on new media” (Beach & Swiss, 2011, p. 5).

Text based literacy theories date all the way back to a educational development called New Criticism (1929) which was an extremely objective view of literacy that only saw the meaning of texts as “valid” if they bracketed out subjectivity and experience (Beach, 1993). Subjectivities were viewed as a type of fallacy (Blau, 2003) and modern day English Language Arts (ELA) teachers still make use of New Critical Theory in assignments centered around character type, perspective, setting, story arc, and thematic development (Beach & Swiss, 2011). Such a way of looking at literacy links well with both Emilia and Raven's frequent mentions of reading as central to their literacy experience. Emilia even specifically mentioned “doing well on

reading tests” and “finding the correct answers” within some of her reflections on the importance of literacy. Raven, more specifically, mentioned how “I will read things through a few times to make sure I understand it” relating of course to the strategy of re-reading which in also included within text based theories as a way to develop how student's come to interpret and respond to text (Applebee, 1993). The connections students made with writing could also fall well within this theory with both Claire and Emilia mentioning their “creative writing classes” which were centered on the productions from a writing standpoint and according to Claire had them “writing about the characters we are acting in the play so that we can see them differently”. Emilia saw the classes a bit differently and instead used the writing as a way to “understand what the author (playwright) intended”. Both of these examples have to do with using text to understand and construct meaning just that Claire took a more personal approach in this particular example and Emilia took a more analytical one.

Not all of the students thoughts fell into text based theories. In fact many of them fit well within performative literacy theory. Within this branch of theories subjective experiences are more commonly embraced rather than bracketed out. This is especially true in speech-act theories (Austin, 1975) where learners’ lived experiences are explored in relation to how they were influenced by the learner’s relationship with various texts. Performative theories go another step beyond the text though, in that they also take into account oral and embodied language alongside written language. How text comes to be phrased, what is inferred, and how that impacts both the learner and the character’s beliefs, goals, and traits is also examined within this scope (Culler, 2007). Petra, Dwayne, Claire, and Selina all mentioned experiences that could be considered performative literacy theory frequently within their responses and reflections: Petra in

the sense of how through performing “dance can take the place of text in telling a story”; Dwayne in how “no one can tell you how to act a character but the choices you make will influence how the audience sees the story”; Claire speaking to how “music is a big part of who I am and it changes the way I look at text (lyrics)”; and Selina in how “acting a character helps you understand them much better than if you just read about them”. Each of these students approaches different types of text in unique ways given their past experiences with different types of performances and it showed in how they each talked about their experiences of literacy.

Reader based literacy theories, which have been around since the late 1960's, were meant to bridge earlier text based theories with the subjectivities of whoever was reading the text (Purves & Beach, 1972). The reason that the reader came to be seen as central to understanding text was because it was through the reader that factors of “age, gender, and ideology” could begin to be accounted for (Marshall, 2000, p. 387). While consideration of such factors go against the earlier text based theories’ attempts to bracket out subjectivity, it is through considering the individual engaging with text that literacy research began to give weight to the learning environment, teacher feedback, the readers identity (Holland (1975) and Bleich (1978)). More modern scholars also argue that by considering the reader to a greater extent, teachers could more strongly encourage empathetic engagement with text (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998), sometimes through performance, as a way to understand a character’s past in relation to the readers own past (Zunshine, 2006). Raven had a direct connection to this idea of emphatic engagement when she said “I read books where the characters are going through problems that relate to my own life” she went on to say that “seeing how the characters handle those problems gives me ideas to consider myself”. Selina, Petra, Samuel, and Raven also all expressed

connections between literacy and identity, as well as Claire and Erud speaking about self-reflection and self-awareness. Petra placed herself within the painting she did to show how “literacy is tied to culture and my culture is who I am”; Erud talked about how “I still have a long way to go in figuring out what literacy is but reflecting on who I am helped”; and Claire talked about how “I read lyrics differently from how I read like a book since with lyrics you also have to consider the music”. Each of these instances brings the reader into the text and no longer makes the considerations of it bracket out subjectivity. Surprisingly for myself as a researcher, however, across both grades levels reading came up far less often than writing despite daily reading time allotted into each school day. While reading was discussed by the majority of students it fell below both the arts and writing due to a lower frequency of overall mention. Raven, Emilia, and Selina all brought up dedicated reading times after lunch, however, Raven only mentioned that “we read books everyday”; Emilia spoke of it as “a relaxing way to start after lunch”; and Selina only mentioned to as “we read every afternoon”. Reading, at least in the case of specifically the after lunch reading block, was not directly connected to other experiences going on at the school.

Socio-cultural literacy theory, which focuses on the social and cultural contexts behind the creation of text (Misson & Morgan, 2006), are perhaps the least mentioned of the common theories in this study. In other research, this theory would be used to discuss how culturally diverse texts change the linguistic landscape of a classroom for learners (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith 1995). Within this study, this theory relates directly to Petra who included cultural images within her visual representations, as well as cultural implications within the justification of her “essence”. She spoke about how “my culture is very important to me and when I have the

chance to see it I also see more of who I am”. It would be this understanding of self that would, in large part, inspire the connection to “unveiling” as an essence. Petra was the only student in this study to be born outside of Canada and so her inclusion of her culture and how it interplays with Canadian culture in an important distinction within her understanding of literacy.

Finally, New Media Literacy theory focuses on online texts and readers co-constructing online text (Hayles, 2008). Based upon this study the two students who fall well within this category are Samuel and Dwayne. While neither of them spoke about text directly they did speak to “online communities” with Samuel talking about “creating a strategy with other players to win” and Dwayne talking about the “community of players that form around different games”. Both of these factors, communication and community, contribute to the construction of meaning within an online setting. Other students did not specifically mention digital technologies focusing instead either on other areas or, in Emilia's case, on card based games or board games as opposed to online examples.

Within each of these theories as students discussed the nature of their experiences it became clear that many saw literacy as “public” given the focuses on performance and community. This, in turn, speaks to the linguistic landscape that surrounds literacy within a theatrical space and influences how an observer, such as myself, comes to understand literacy within this particular “time, place, and space” (Landry & Bourhuis, 1997, p. 25). Relating further to community, briefly, Erud mentioned that for the experience of literacy to be complete she has to “share my own perspectives with the group I'm a part of so that the way I understand something is reinforced or changed so that I can grow”. Speaking again in greater detail about

the “theatrical space” of this study it is important to discuss the role of drama in literacy over time, as well as how drama and literacy came together for the students involved in this study. McMaster (1998) was one of the earlier academics calling for greater weight to be given to the experience of students, while at the same time believing that drama could serve as a strong teaching tool in the literary arts due to the “high variety of communication techniques at play within a dramatic performance” (p. 575). The students of this study reaffirmed this statement with Erud mentioning “you never have to play a character the same way twice there is always something new you could do” and Emilia saying “literacy is never boring here we are always doing something new and exciting”.

Dramatization has been argued within literature to be more than just exciting, with research saying that drama supports skill development in “decoding, vocabulary, discourse, and reflection” (Shosh, 2005, p. 70). Each of these areas did in fact also come up in their own ways over the course of the data collection and performance, however, it was not always using these exact terms. Samuel for example spoke about understanding new types of language using context: “when I was learning how to read the Shakespearian script there were some words I did not understand or know. So, I looked at the other words around them to try and get the meaning”. This is in fact a type of decoding that incorporates context as a reading strategy. Raven spoke about vocabulary when making reference to her writing and how she “always tries to use new words” to make her stories more descriptive and “real”. Dwayne built her entire character and performance around speech and how “talking with others is the best way to understand something”. While a number of the grade eight girls including Raven, Claire, and Erud all spoke about the importance of reflecting on who you are to, as Claire put it, “know what really drives

you”. Even in cases such as Raven's, whose literacy experience did not rely as heavily on performance, it is possible to see examples of her collective identity being shaped by the learning environment that dramatization creates such as what she describes as “self reflection and community” seen through what I as a researcher would term as critical thought and problem solving.

More than just these skills, though, drama is argued to foster “a strong community of learners” (Leonora, 2016, p. 311) along with “better listening skills and group collaboration” (Barton & Baguley, 2014, p. 96). While listening was not directly identified by any particular student, as a researcher I observed in my own memos how students spoke to one another about the study, asked questions to their peers, and gave one another feedback, in particular during the monologue writing and the rehearsal process prior to the performance. Community, on the other hand, was mentioned by each and every student at least once with the grade eights mentioning it at a higher frequency than the grade nines. Erud was mentioning community also mentioned connection saying that “sometimes you can be in a community without real connections,” since she saw community on a surface level and connection as something deeper. Even with that said, everyone, including Erud, spoke about the positive community of the school and how the arts “bring people together”.

Many of the students also spoke of drama in the way that Selina first put it: “the arts are something that can help you in all of your classes”. There is research to support this idea of transferability since within drama students “definite pronouns, clarify ambiguous terms, choose objects to symbolize, and introduce topics” and all of that occurs in various literacy settings

(Chizhik, 2009, p. 392). Moreover, since the arts were seen by all of the students as highly motivating, each of them engaged strongly in the art based classroom activities. Meaning that not only were these aforementioned skills getting constantly reinforced but students were also seeing “gains in fluency, comprehension, and oral reading confidence” (Peck & Virkler, 2006, p. 792) that scholars attribute to the positives of drama. It is not only on the page itself that students benefit within a theatrical space but also within the space itself. Shosh (2005) says that as students;

“read, write, see, feel, touch, move, act, and interact they are developing styles of literacy as they discern and interpret social cues, respond to questions and difficulties, and adapt to problems as they arise becoming textual experts” (p. 72).

This links many of the prior skills of listening, communication, collaboration and others together in a way to justify the multifaceted literacies that are present within the arts. Problem solving and teamwork may also fit within this vein of thought; as Dwayne says, there is “no set script on how to act a particular character” and because of that those involved in the production must “work together to create, design, and perform a show based upon a shared vision” that they develop together. The arts also further enrich literacy by adding to the depth of its definition. Multiple scholars agree, after all, that our uses of literacy are in a state of constant development (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012) with a number of them saying that “literacy will no longer be an end state; instead, it will become a continuous learning process for all of us.” (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 121). This idea of continuous learning and development was not lost on the students with nearly all of them speaking to it in one way or another. In a group conversation,

Selina once said that she “still feels there is so much to learn” and Erud added to this by saying that her “understanding of literacy is still changing” as she moves on from this study. This learning process is also evident when comparing different data sources, with Samuel, Raven, and Emilia making the biggest changes in how they defined literacy from the time of their interview to the time of performance. However, each and every student did add to or enhance the way in which they spoke to literacy over the study. This change seemed to be first encouraged when the way in which students reflected about literacy moved outside of text and into more visual and creative representations. Erud talked about how it was during the visual representations of literacy experiences that she felt that she could “begin being creative and not worry about the right answer” and Claire mentioned how it was during the character work and performance that she felt “better about to take risks when talking about literacy”.

Part of what I, as a researcher, believe helped to not only encourage this shift in thinking but also created the opportunity for such rich conceptualising of literacy was that the theatrical space (and the arts immersion learning environment of the school) created opportunities for authentic intellectual work (AIW). I'm defining AIW for myself under the same terms that Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka (2001) does when they say that AIW creates “a product or presentation that has meaning or value beyond success in school” (p. 14). I say this because this study involved original knowledge (knowledge created by students) application in contexts that Newmann et. all (2001) states as developing aspects of an AIW environment. The students practiced inter-personal communication both on a one-one level and in small group dynamics, they constructed meaning via their own inferences and research through the multistage process of the study, and they applied the resulting product and knowledge into their performances which

were presented to a community of peers, parents, teachers, administrators, and professors that extended well beyond their classrooms. This AIW environment was important to this study because it helped to make the research more public, trustworthily, and a part of a wider conversation.

As I have said before, I'm not the first researcher to explore a link between the arts, drama in particular, and literacy. Shosh (2005), for example, had their students take on multiple roles such as actors, directors, production designers, technicians, and critics but almost always through writing. With that being said, the writing still allowed the development of student voice as students were asked “to build unique texts as opposed to recreating or mimicking text” (p. 75) in so long as sufficient time was allotted in the lessons for such developments to occur. The group dynamic within dramatic writing activities between peer groups also creates the space for students to not only organize but to also understand and apply information (McEwan-Adkins, 2012.) which has been argued across other scholarship to also increase literacy overall.

Of course, to have a strong arts program schools take on different approaches. However, students felt that what their school did was unique with Claire saying, “this school is very good at what it does”; Raven mentioning how “this school is very different my last school”; and Dwayne saying he did not think there was “any school like ours”. From a pedagogical standpoint, at least in the region where this study took place, Dwayne was correct. Rather than beginning with the subject area and adding the art form, as arts infusion does, arts immersion begins with the art form and adds the subject area (Erikson, 2013). The immersion approach emphasizes the art form itself, adding credence to Pascoe's (2002) “language of drama” (p. 72)

by highlighting the potential of discipline-specific languages and literacies in order to meet learning outcomes. The students themselves describe this process in different ways. For Selina an example was “things we learn in social studies are brought to life since knowing the history around a character changes the way you act and talk about them”; while for Raven this infusion meant that learning “was never boring because it all mattered in production”. Petra made an offhand comment at one point in the study saying that “performing is exciting because we perform in the real world”, when she was discussing an upcoming performance at a local library. This direct and “real world” application was reinforced by Petra's peer group and speaks to a point brought up earlier around making research, and by extension all work in schools, more public.

Taking a brief moment at the end of this discussion, it is also important to consider, again, one of the outlying findings of this study: the experience of literacy through video games as told by Samuel and Dwayne. Digital media and literacies research is a growing area within the academy as seen within Burwell and Miller (2016) work examining the impact of social media influencers on literacy practices through Let's Play's (interactive pre-recorded video game walkthroughs). Burwell and Miller's (2016) argued that Let's Play's (LP's) combine various digital technology storytelling techniques with other more traditional literary skill development. Both Samuel and Dwayne talked about the frequency that they engage with digital content and if that frequency rises among similar students into a dominant trend this could present areas of pedagogical growth that need to be encouraged.

Finally, it should be noted that at the beginning of the data collection, without prior prompting, students were not actively using the specific terms of “literacy” and “multiliteracies” in relation to the experiences they would mention. However, this perception of literacy evolved over time, with students such as Erud saying she eventually became “more comfortable pushing boundaries and limitations”. As a researcher I noted within my memos, this shift beginning to be noticeable as students moved away from one on one interviews and text responses into the more “creative” data collection points. When I asked the students if they felt this way as well in a group meeting the consensus was that over time the students became less concerned with saying what was “right” for me because they were better able to see that what was “right” for them. Within the performances that ended the study, the nature of student’s experiences not only demonstrated ways in which they use and perceive of literacy skills such as code breaking and text analysis, speaking to the work of Wells & Sandretto (2016), but also seemed to encourage the development of agency, authorship and identity around literacy within their learning context.

A Note On Agency, Authorship and Identity

Throughout this thesis, there are multiple mentions about the importance of student agency, authorship, and identity. This is because I argue that these three factors are the gains students can achieve if they understand and articulate their own experiences more clearly. I’ve connected these terms to creating classrooms that are more “active, social, and experiential” (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71) as well as research which spoke to the importance of students as equal partners (Galgut, Border, & Fenwick, 2017). Furthermore, I established connections between how agency, authorship, and identity improve literacy skill building (McEwan-Adkins, 2012) as well as to how these concepts substantiate the importance

of viewing literacy as a social experience with importance placed upon the experience itself (Marco, 2015). For optimal clarity, I believe that students displayed agency not only in how they chose to respond to research questions but also in the way that their feedback impacted the research questions themselves. Certain questions or ways of responding to questions changed as data was collected and feedback on the part of students was given. Additionally, the way in which students presented data, both within the journals and the later performances, occurred with a high level of creative freedom and could be done in response to the identity and characters that they had created for themselves. This speaks also to instances of authorship, which were most common during the monologue creation process. Students not only created the characters themselves but were asked to author complex back stories and histories which helped to demonstrate how that character personified literacy for them. While they were provided structural advice and scaffolding, the end result was entirely their own creation. These characters also showed the scope of students changing identities in relation to literacy. Chapter four was written in such a way so as to highlight where students' understandings of literacy began and how those changed over time given prompting and creative response modalities. I believe that such involvement on the part of students was important because they truly do gain the status of equal partners within this context. They are given the chance for ownership of their own learning and, as educators, by working within this context we can also challenge and enrich our own understandings of complex educational phenomena.

It was as the students themselves worked to develop their own agency, authorship, and identity that my own preconceptions as an educator began to change. This was the moment when my own working definition of literacy adapted from purely skills based to meaning based. It was

as I became comfortable letting go of control, to a certain extent, that I was able to better reflect not only on their growth in understanding and articulating literacy but on my own as well. The experience of researching student experience will forever change how I approach my own literacy classroom in the future and the importance I place upon meaning making, students' experience and student agency.

Recommendations for Future Research

Moving forward, into future research, it is important to consider work that already coincides with this study, with Lenters and Whitford's (2018) article being a prime example since they examine the role of improv as a way to encourage different approaches to literacy. As a form of theatre, improv relies heavily on comedy while at the same time remaining unscripted. Both the presence of comedy and the move away from any pre-determined text keep improv from commonly being associated with literacy practices. However, it can be used in much the same way that Pascoe's (2002) work was in that it can "intertwine story and play in order to both develop and present experience" (p. 73). Lenters and Whitford (2018) talk about an untapped potential in the discourse of improv due to its ability to both serve as a kind of embodied literacy, similar to embodiment discussed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as collective creation a process of meaning making and role playing similar to the work discussed by Wells & Sandretto (2016). The findings of Lenters and Whitford (2018) also helped to substantiate the presence of professional collaborations within the arts themselves by incorporating working comedians in their work to help discuss the embedded language of their chosen art form again connecting to points around arts languages, ideas raised by Pascoe (2002) and others. These findings are then shown to help students better create stories and connect to

various forms of text showing the practices of interaction, identification, and embodiment of literacy experiences that Macro (2015) spoke about as being essential for future curriculum and pedagogical development.

This particular article has implications for the way in which work around drama and literacy could be undertaken outside of a dedicated arts immersion environment. Improv is an extremely accessible form of drama and a wonderful introduction to those less familiar with full arts immersion. At the same time it remains complex enough to offer insights and enrichments for those who have used it before making it a well rounded addition to future work in this area.

Another area of consideration between this discussion and wider literature is in the concept of “linguistic landscapes” spoken of in the work of Burwell & Lenters (2015), wherein the authors had grade ten students venturing into their local neighbourhoods in order to better understand how various forms of texts influence the spaces in which they live their lives. This exploration of text beyond the linguistic, and into the visual and spatial, is what serves to create this “linguistic landscape”. In turn the landscape acts as the catalyst for the multimodality, contextual responsiveness, and linguistic diversity called for by the New London Group (1994) in their seminal work on the pedagogy of multiliteracies. As an example of contextual responsiveness, Burwell & Lenters (2015) had students analyze the text they discovered by creating “place-based documentaries” (p. 2), showing various representations of students’ communities and their own realities in a way that would help them to become more critical and analytical with various forms of text.

The linguistic landscapes created by Burwell & Lenters (2015) were a unique pedagogical tool within a secondary space focused on meaning making and engagement with text. In a way, the theatrical space that this study created was its own type of linguistic landscape but it was centered within the learning environment of the school itself and did not often venture outside of it. The interplay between students' lives both inside and outside of school and examining how the two closely impact one another could serve as a future focus area for similar work undertaken at a later date. While this study did its best to explore such a complex phenomenon, there are a small number of areas that could be refined if it were to be undertaken again or if a similar study wished to expand upon this topic matter in the future. Firstly, while sampling occurred in order to include both grades eight and nine, as well as both males and females, a more concentrated effort would be made in the future to achieve a greater balance in both areas. This would allow for the opportunity to better speak to trends and patterns if there were more than two males in the study or if there were more than two grade nines involved. Literacy experiences as influenced specifically by grade level and gender were not an explicit consideration of this work, however, this type of focus could potentially be expanded upon in future work. Another way to potentially create opportunities for additional data collection would be to adapt this study's interview protocol, if it were to be used again. If the second question had asked "how" (as opposed to "do") do you see literacy within your learning at school? The question would have had better open-endedness which is important in a semi-structured interview. This same critique could be leveled against question four where it could have said "please" provide an example of... (As opposed to "can" you provide an example of...) and question six should be omitted in the future due both to poor phrasing and a low response rate.

Journaling could also be adapted in the future to focus more on alternative means of representation perhaps excluding the text response or adapting it to not be solely text based. Participants did not overly engage with the text responses as compared to other means of responding with Claire mentioning how “we already use text a lot” and Emilia saying that “writing can be boring if I have to do it too much”. Furthermore, collecting the journals occurred over such a long period of time (one month) that students became a bit disengaged Erud said that “the journals are a bit hard to keep up with on top of everything else” and Selina mentioned how “with production becoming busy it can be easy to forget about the weekly journals”. Perhaps work in small focus groups or one on one with the researcher could help to improve engagement in this type of task since many of the students enjoyed working with their peers. The prompts which called upon students to think differently or push boundaries got them the most excited and yielded greater responses with Erud writing poetic verse, Claire, Emilia, and Raven capturing great photos, Selina including a monologue, Petra drawing personal and cultural connections, and Samuel and Dwayne sharing an original creation. Alterations to data collection points could also undergo further refinement. Questions of greatest engagement for participants had to do with what literacy meant, where they saw it, and how they could possibly demonstrate it differently. If the study was to take on a wider scale in the future it would be intriguing to see groups of students from all secondary grade levels or from different schools also responding to these types of reflections. If the way in which students defined literacy changed outside of school, as compared to in school, this would also be telling. Interactivity, in particular the coding journal, also helped students to create more data and feel more comfortable in the data they were creating according to each of the students.

It would also be interesting to conduct this same study again in the future at a non specialized school to see how a “theatrical space” is understood outside of a strong arts based environment. Would the nature of the performance change? Would it even be called a performance etc? Given that this type of specialized environment is less common allowing this kind of work to translate to more mainstream schools would expand the audience and reach of these arguments. Finally, the question directly relating to physicality within the interview protocol could be omitted since most students opted either not to answer at all or, even after an explanation, still did not fully understand what was being asked of him. Rather physicality, and other similar areas of discussion, should be allowed to develop naturally over time or not at all.

Overall, I feel that within this type of research it is important to be responsive to the input of students in order to create data collection points that are properly reflective of their experiences and the research questions being explored.

It is also my belief as a researcher that IPA can be used extremely well within arts based research questions. This is due to the fact that analyzing the data in such a way allows for engagement with a double hermeneutic as taken for granted assumptions about the phenomenon are challenged and re-defined as meaning is constructed. This meaning making process comes to involve the researcher “trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2014, p.17). With the performance itself becoming a part of this meaning making process. There are also ways to go about accounting for embodiment as a factor within the IPA process (Murray and Holmes, 2014). This in turn relates the methods of this study back to the influence of Merleau-Ponty as they align embodiment as

central to authentic perception. This phenomenology of perception helps to more holistically understand the experience of a theatrical space and gives voice to an ethical claim that “we must re-think space and time as place, and we must listen to the subject’s struggle to make meaning of this place” (p. 28) thereby showing how performance and the theatrical space can influence our understanding of experiences.

Outside of the methodology, one element of the research design that could be further improved upon to be more direct and sustained is the talk back that occurred after the performance. Within this study’s setting, it felt rushed, awkward, and as if it never had its potential fully realized. I asked the students what they felt could improve it and Erud suggested that “in the future the talk back could be based on questions we get beforehand”, so that students could better prepare, or when I brought up the idea of a series of small focus groups, Emilia liked that suggestion since “it takes away the pressure of answering questions on stage with everyone looking directly at you”. I feel that if such suggestions could be incorporated, the overall quality of the talkbacks would be improved. Finally, while this study did expand the conversation of this topic into the secondary space there is still ample room for future work to expand this further.

Conclusions

While there are a number of conclusions and implications to be considered examining these findings I have chosen to begin by highlighting how literacy within a theatrical space affords a direct connection between arts immersion techniques and successful reading practices. Reading, after all, still dominates the research around literacy discourse, however, many of the

skills that Daniels & Zemelman (2014) attach to successful reading are greatly developed in the arts. These include being able to:

“Visualize (mental pictures/sensory images), connect (own experience in relation to readings), question (to wonder about and investigate the text), infer (predict, interpret, and draw conclusions), evaluate (determine importance and make judgments), analyze (notice text structures, vocabulary, theme, point of view), recall (summarize information), and self-monitor (act on confusion, be a proactive problem solver)” (p. 30).

I would in fact argue that each of these steps occurred during the character creation segment of the research alone as the students connected, reflected, and expanded upon their prior data following the same pattern as successful readers. This helps to show, since these skills could be used in multiple contexts and that there is not just one literacy, or a moment where students become literate, but rather that it is important to view distinct literacies, as they exist in various discipline areas, and observe the instances where they overlap (Barton and Baguley, 2014.). An instance of overlap can be witnessed when you consider storytelling in a drama classroom as compared to an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom with drama being a more “active, social, and experiential process centered within critical inquiry and creative problem-solving” (p. 94). Research has shown that drama takes the foundations of storytelling from ELA while at the same time working to “engage the whole person, calling upon intellect, emotions, imagination, and embodiment within a highly social and collaborative space” (p. 97).

The next conclusion of note that I will focus on is that literacy within a theatrical space is defined in large part by the community that surrounds it. This is supported by additional research that states defining literacy is based upon the “historical and cultural precedents” of the learner and those around them (Lindquist & Seitz, 2009, p. 95). Performing within a theatrical space creates an opportunity to not only acknowledge this but also to purposely create links, in relation to literacy, across the community involved in the production. Greene (1995) also spoke about literacy within the arts as preparing students to be “multimodally literate” while also speaking about skill transference in relation to “effective problem-solving skills, creative and critical thinking, and ethical understanding” (p.41). Furthermore, both Greene (1995) and Pascoe (2002) speak about being “arts-literate” (p. 64) as dependent upon the art form itself. Meaning that students need a rich understanding of the conventions of drama in order to be considered dramatically literate with the same being said of other fine and performing art forms. This means that the experience of literacy within a theatrical space is not a single experience but rather an interconnected web of experiences that occur over time and through active participation.

Once we look at the theatrical space as an interconnected web of experiences we must also consider the types of boundaries that we place on such experiences as educators. Both this research and additional scholarship over this area of study call for flexible boundaries that acknowledge multisensory distinctions (sight, sound, and movement) as a part of being both “literate” and “arts literate” (Lindquist & Seitz, 2009, pp. 73-77). Literacy, in this way, is developed and refined in equal partnership with our students and is, therefore, self aware of the linguistic landscapes that influence the construction of meaning in our classrooms. This means that the work we do around literacy can be more contextually responsive to discipline specific

languages, context and experiences. Within the realm of being “arts literate” the resulting theatrical space, as long as it is scaffolded, can also lead to enhanced recognition and understanding of student experiences as a method for curricular and pedagogical reflexivity.

Theatrical spaces and presentations of the research also create their own unique experiences, within a study of experiences, and creates a space for interpretation of what is presented, both on the part of the “students and the community” attending the performances (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 31). By integrating the community as a whole into the research process, and by extension the construction of meaning, the research can also create an even “thicker and richer description and influence the resulting discussion” around the phenomenon of literacy (Murray & Holmes, 2014, p. 25). By doing so the theatrical research space is both making the research more public and more actively engaging the audience as “others” with a real stake in the meaning that is constructed (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 29). Dramatic process research techniques, used in conjunction with phenomenology, also allow students to engage with types of literacies they may not be activity thinking about at first including: “embodied literacy (bodies in space, movement of bodies in space, gesture, and facial expressions) and spatial literacy (relationships between objects and space) in addition to the more common linguistic literacy (words and dramatic tension)” (Pascoe, 2002, p. 66).

This research also helped to show what Leander and Rowe (2006) termed literacy in “use” meaning an understanding of literacy that is primarily student generated through “literacy events” (p. 435). These “events” are moments such as the various data collection pieces that eventually come together to form an experience. The performances that resulted from these

events then helped to bring together language, image, body, and self/others for the students as they developed their agency, authorship, and identity.

The final set of findings I shall attempt to describe in relation to existing scholarship are connections to the work of both Katherine Marco (2015) and Wells & Sandretto (2016). Beginning with Marco (2015), this study made use of drama in a way that aligned with her definition of an “exploratory tool” (p. 337). This means that the work that students did immersed them in what she called “the social practices of literacy, including such things as the way we interact, identify, and embody a literacy experience” (p. 338). The scale on which Marco addressed the experience of literacy within her own work were larger but also only done within primary grade settings. The work done within this study shows the applicability of Marco's thinking within the secondary space. Marco's focus on exploration of an experience and on the students themselves also aligns well with Kostogriz & Doecke (2013) who said that “teaching literacy well...is not so much about a teacher's response to numbers but rather about her response to a call from a student” (Online).

Briefly it is also prudent to mention Wells & Sandretto (2016) since this study was, in large part, inspired by the work these two scholars did in lower primary. Wells & Sandretto saw process drama “as an innovative and empowering pedagogy, making different literacy experiences and opportunities possible” (p. 183) and they believed that they could convince young students to buy into that idea through play. They scaffolded supports by insuring that teachers had proper development and encouraged “a learning inquiry” (p. 182) through drama.

Without the work and risk that these scholars undertook this study that you are reading right now may never happened.

Finally, I would like to end this thesis with my own teaching and researching reflexivity similar to my researcher memos. I had a lot of pre-existing assumptions about literacy coming into this study as a former language arts and literacy teacher. I thought I knew exactly how “the average student” would respond to the types of prompts I designed and much of my initial coding (before I took the data back to the participants to weed out my bias) had me looking for those same expectations. This research challenged not only my expectations of literacy but also my expectation of “the average student” (which I don't think is a term I will ever use again). I had thought that assessment and grading would play a much heavier role in the experiences than they did because I had assumed students would see grades as “proof of success”, since that was an attitude I had encountered in the past. I would never have thought community or connection would be as common in the data, as they were mentioned centrally but I never expected to this extent, and I never realized that students were actively thinking of identity in so many different contexts. It makes me wonder in my early, and overloaded, teaching years what student experiences I failed to encourage in my own practice. There was definitely a limit but working on this study has deeply reinforced the importance of student feedback into my teaching and research practices moving forward.

The level of depth and creativity explored by the students here surpassed all of my expectations, while also putting drama education into perspective. Drama remains one of my favorite classes to teach (and learn) and it has helped this research in remarkable ways but it is

also not unlimited. I better see the supports non specialist teachers may need now; I see what was easy in this study given the space and learning environment that may be next to impossible elsewhere; and I see how even small drama activities can lead to big results. I wish that I had done work like this sooner and that I had trusted my students in the past to respond to formalized research but before this I was reluctant on giving up control of learning.

However, the way in which these students and I worked together to construct meaning changed the way I myself look at literacy as well. I'm not sure what I would say my own essence of a literacy experience would be but perhaps discovering that is the next logical step in my growth as an educator. I hope that teachers and students reading this thesis consider what they would do in the students place. This type of work adds nuance to this area of educational research. From a personal point of view, my pedagogical considerations to teach literacy have changed. As a practitioner, in the future, I would avoid explaining the concept of literacy to my students but instead; I would ask them what literacy meant within that particular space for those particular students. I will end this story for you dear reader with a quote that still inspires me from this works literature "I would argue that drama is a literacy in and of itself; drama provides us with a method of making meaning and understanding the world around us" (Marco, 2015 p. 339).

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