

Cultivating a Compositional Fluency in the Elementary English Language Arts Classroom

Cassie J. Brownell, PhD

University of Toronto – Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE]



Abstract

In this interpretive project, I took an interdisciplinary approach to literacy and interrogated young children writing with a variety of communicative resources (e.g., visuals, audio, material items). Specifically, I amplified the voices of children as they developed a compositional fluency, or an expansive skill set of communicative practices inclusive of multiple cultural, linguistic, and modal ways of knowing. In doing so, I share three analytic snapshots of children composing from the larger case study and highlight how a compositional fluency facilitated new opportunities for them to engage with critical social issues of today.



Aim

To highlight children's experiences and texts as a means to challenge conventional understandings about the benefits and constraints of children engaged in developing a compositional fluency and using diverse multimodal communicative practices to engage in critical social topics.



Framing

- Sociocultural understandings of writing and literacies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984)
- "Compositional fluency" (Shipka, 2016)
- Children's varied communicative practices related to issues of race, language, class, and gender

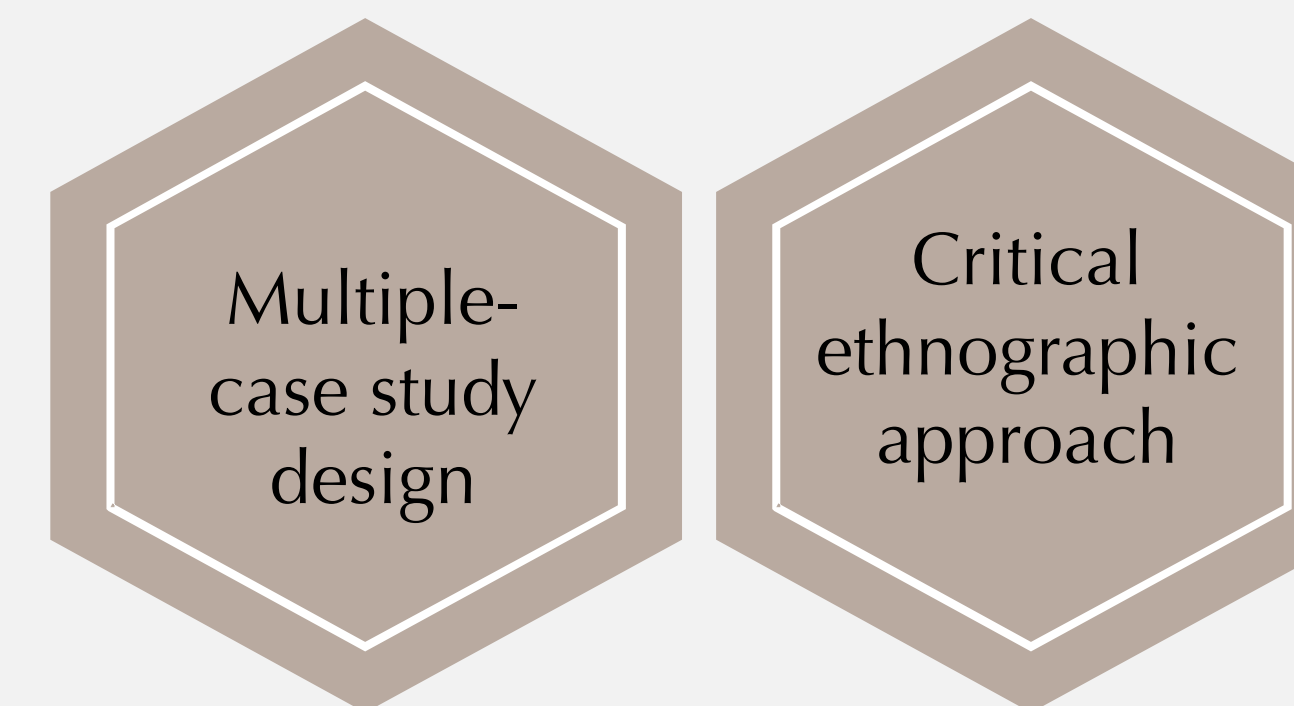


Research Questions

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



Methods of Inquiry



- One-on-one and small groups active interviews with children and teachers
- Field notes
- In-class artifacts



Findings

The story of Christopher:

Christopher, a Black boy, wove together stories from diverse media to adapt his personal narrative into a stop-motion animation video. His composing process and final product highlighted the possibilities of a compositional fluency to illuminate the sophisticated, intertextual tools made visible when children compose with diverse modes.

The stories of Nicki and Gem:

Both girls wrote texts for their legislators by using a variety of digital and analog tools. They demonstrated how a compositional fluency constructed possibilities for children to engage in critical literacies and civic action. As multilingual and multiethnic learners, Nicki, Gem, and their peers used sophisticated rhetorical strategies as they wrote letters to their legislative representatives about Trump's wall with Mexico and the #MuslimBan. Ultimately, they highlighted how a compositional fluency, *alongside* an understanding of what it means to be civically engaged, might foster and sustain children's identities.

The story of Elliot:

Elliot, a white monolingual boy, complicated my understanding and presumption that multimodality could equate to equity, civic action, and/or social justice in the ELA classroom. Moreover, he facilitated my reflection about how my personal background was also always getting in and out of the way. In turn, Elliot's dissent illuminated how daily conversations about justice are a necessary component of ELA.

This empirical multiple-case study critically explored how developing a compositional fluency informed how children came to know, to be, and to be known in two urban third-grade ELA classrooms. Specifically, I explored how children used analog and digital technologies in flexible curricular writing spaces and how, in doing so, they represented knowledge and ways of knowing that may have otherwise been overlooked.