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Composing childhood cultures

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A small boy, with memories of a happy preschool experience, grins as he walks down the hall with his father toward his kindergarten classroom in a new school. Despite that grin, the stiffness in his gait suggests his nervousness, as does his joy at seeing me, his quiet, adult (and quite senior) “friend from preschool!”

Among this child’s first productions in his kindergarten composing journal was the self-portrait seen in Figure 6.1. As you, dear readers, examine this figure, your gaze may homogenize it, that is, interpret it as a “typical” self-portrait of a just-turned-5 child, all circles and lines. And you, dear readers, would be missing the child’s point.

A product is just the “sclerotic deposits of an intentional process” unfolding in a particular moment in time and space (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292). And Ta’Von’s, this child’s, dynamic, situated moment was a dialogic response to an ideological tension in the peer world. To understand that production as an intentional social process entails, not the analysis of a lonely product, but a particular kind of ethnographic stance, a stance that aims to examine children’s intentions and relations from inside the children’s world. In that way, children’s productions become the embodiment of their way of answering the world (Bakhtin, 1981).

In this chapter, I focus on the whys and hows of this methodological stance toward children’s worlds. The illustrative vignettes are drawn mainly from a recent study focusing on the process of negotiating a sense of belonging in unofficial or child-controlled school worlds and the role of composing in that negotiation (Dyson, in press). The child star is Ta’Von, the young boy who has already entered this chapter.

Herein, composing is viewed as participation in deliberate and valued cultural practices of symbolic production (Street, 1984). Moreover, composing is not an isolated act – it is a dialogic response to others’ voices (Bakhtin, 1981). This consideration of contextualized, meaning-making children begins with a discussion of the nature of an ethnographic stance toward children’s worlds, the sort of inquiry it mediates, and the kind of critical response it allows the
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researcher, or at least this researcher, to articulate. As the discussion unfolds, the story, just begun, of Ta’Von will both deepen and stretch itself out.

**Turning ethnographies upside down: privileging children’s worlds**

Ethnographies have as a goal studying a local cultural world as experienced by its members, that is, its participants – or those who aspire to be participants. In the traditions of both interpretive anthropology (Geertz, 1983) and sociology’s symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986), all of us
live in an interpreted, socially constructed world. Our constructions of “what’s happening here” are continually negotiated with others. Moreover, contemporary practice theory (Ortner, 2006) underscores that these social worlds are situated within, and constitutive of, the power structures of our societies, including those intersecting social forces of race, class, and gender.

When children are included in the ethnographic lens, they are often viewed through the cultural, or meaning-making, worlds of adults, especially parents or teachers. Children are members in training, apprentices to the practices on offer (e.g., Barton & Papen, 2012; Heath, 1983). In schools, this means that children are seen solely within the practices, and the expectations, of official school culture.

In the U.S., there are highly regulated, test-monitored curricula that include assumptions about what is “basic” for individual children to know and to do as literacy learners, the normative pace of skill mastery, and the ethics of responsible writers, who neither copy (i.e., who keep their eyes on their own paper) or lie (which might otherwise be known as storytelling) (Dyson, 2013). Children who do not fit comfortably within official school practices are problematic; their discomfort reinforces official labels like “at risk” and “struggling,” potentially leading researchers to aim to understand children as “problems” (see discussion in McDermott & Varenne, 2010).

In such work, officially problematic children are disproportionately minoritized children (Potter, 2016; Valant & Newark, 2017). Their “differences” from the assumed “mainstream” may become “lacks”; their actions as agents, and their repertoire of experiences and resources, may be disappeared. To gain access to that repertoire and those resources, we might adopt an upside-down ethnographic vantage point and view children, “not for who they are becoming, but for who they are in life spaces shared with other children” (Dyson, 2013, p. 404; Wells, 2009). In so doing, we view school from the vantage point of children.

**Diversity and childhood cultures**

Children in institutional structures like schools are bundled together as “graded classes,” like “kindergarten.” Nonetheless, they are not simply participants in the official school world. Children, as children, respond to official practices and their underlying values, by forming unofficial or child-controlled practices (Corsaro, 2017; Dyson, 1989, 2013). That unofficial world touches on children’s deep desires to take control of their daily worlds, to share control with others, and to have relationships — to belong (Corsaro, 2017; Nelson, 2007; Pugh, 2009). Children can never be understood as lone actors. In classrooms, they articulate their “selves” as they respond to other child selves; in the process, pleasures and concerns are shared, common knowledge discovered (from popular media, folklore, or institutions like church), relationships formed, practices evolved, and an unofficial world takes form (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 2013).

However, that child culture in formation is not homogenous. Children are members to varied degrees of diverse cultures (e.g., family, ethnic, religious), and their participation in such cultures will inform the resources used as they negotiate entry into new social organizations for companionship and learning. Researchers interested in children’s agency in schooling situate themselves within the practices of child worlds. These unofficial worlds exist underneath, alongside of, or interwoven with official worlds. They have a materiality that matters (e.g., a way of organizing their interactions, particular official and unofficial tools and texts, and valued channels of communication).

Such everyday particularities are infused with structural dynamics (e.g., consumer marketing is visible in children’s valued or desired possessions, language ideologies are audible or inaudible given children’s ways of talking, and societal formations of race, class, and gender may yield
dynamic configurations of children [Thorne, 2005]). Consider, for example, the kindergarten experiences of Ta’Von.

I had originally planned to examine how children’s composing practices changed as they moved through the early years of schooling. But, from the first day of kindergarten, my data was dominated by Ta’Von’s encounters with peers that seemed to push him out of bounds; and certain of those encounters materialized the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class.

To understand this, Ta’Von must be seen both as informed by his recent history as a student and peer in preschool and by the local manifestations of the larger racial and class dynamics of his city. These dynamic frames help illuminate the challenges Ta’Von faced in negotiating the inclusiveness of his new educational place (Massey, 2005).

To begin with his recent history, on that very first day of kindergarten, Ta’Von entered a classroom distinctly different in time, place, and child agency than he had known in his beloved preschool (as he said, “I really really loved preschool”). In that old talk- and play-filled place, he had been one of the gang, since, like him, most children were of color and from low-income homes. Moreover, the space was organized by activities, among them, sections dedicated to: dress up and dramatic play; manipulatives for construction; puppet theater improvisations; paint easel productions; and picture book (re)reading, partially using memory of the teacher’s reading and, also, picture interpretation. Ta’Von and his peers could move across space within an open time period, choosing among activities for story making (i.e., multimodal composing); Ta’Von was drawn both by an activity and, also, by his desire to be with his best friend Salvia.

In contrast, his kindergarten was in a school serving mainly white children from a relatively affluent neighborhood. Ta’Von was one of a handful (4) of African American children that “desegregated” (but did not necessarily integrate relations in) his room. Every child had an assigned seat and each moved through classroom space (dominated by tables and chairs) as directed by the teacher, Ms. Norton. Official composing was defined as a set of benchmarked written language skills. Most minoritized children, coming from outside the neighborhood, like Ta’Von, scored relatively low on initial literacy assessments (e.g., the names and sounds of letters). This was in part because a network of neighborhood parents shared information on the testing awaiting their children. Composing, as a set of skills, initially problematized the kindergarten membership of out-of-network children.

As cultural geographer Edward Soja (2010) explains, there are consequences to how people are situated in a city, and these are related to racial and class fairness and dignity. An early example came from the events and, more particularly, the thematically related talk occurring before and during Ta’Von’s production of Figure 6.1; consider the initiating event:

Ta’Von is sitting at his desk, awaiting morning snacks and a turn to use the bathroom and get a drink. Vida, an Iranian immigrant with long black wavy locks, seems bothered by Ta’Von’s hair.

“You have girl hair,” she says accusingly, metaphorically pushing him outside the circle of appropriate boys.

“Yeah, you have girl hair,” agrees Adam, a white boy with a short blond hair cut.

“No,” answers Ta’Von calmly. “It’s boy hair.”

For the rest of the snack time, the usually smiling Ta’Von is quiet and somber.

(Dyson, in press)

In Ta’Von’s preschool, Ta’Von’s braided hairstyle was not rare, as both African American boys and fathers had variations of Ta’Von’s hairstyle. But that hairstyle was found only on his head in his new school, with its new populace. Thus, in the above vignette, he was judged
out of place – a boy with “girl hair.” However, Ta’Von, just a small child, stood by his own personhood and refused to be so shoved. In response to that encounter, Ta’Von began consistently adding braids to his self-portraits, as in the first such product (Figure 6.1); if crayons were available, he made his face dark brown, saying as he did so, “I’m Black.” Ta’Von thus linked his intersecting racial and gender identity with hair. He used composing to declare himself as a racialized young boy.

After other such instances, I wondered what challenges Ta’Von experienced to his classroom belonging; and though composing “skills” also challenged his classroom belonging, the act of composing could clearly play a role in negotiating these challenges. I wondered what the range of roles could be (for a complete ethnographic analysis of Ta’Von’s belonging issues, see Dyson, in press).

### On the vital importance of upside down ethnographies

In this first major section of the chapter, I have aimed to illustrate that understanding children’s perspectives on schooling requires understanding as well the larger sociopolitical context of schooling, the official worlds of daily practices and, woven within those, the unofficial worlds of children. There can be no homogenizing assumptions about children's worlds . . . hence the plurality in childhoods and worlds. Locally and globally experienced childhoods vary in breathtaking ways. Socioeconomic matters influence access to technologies of play, composing, and learning, as does geography (e.g., rural vs. urban), political unrest, and culturally gendered roles (Gutnick et al., 2010; Sahni, 2016).

Part of being a critical ethnographer is being alert to how assumptions about contemporary childhoods, and resources for school learning, push categories of children to the academic margins, surfacing primarily as the “different” or “problem” children (cf. Madison, 2012). If researchers are to offer an alternative view, and gain access to children’s agentive actions, they must include ethnographies done upside down, situated within the children’s world.

How does one do such ethnographies of situated children’s worlds? This is an especially poignant question, given the different social positions and agentive power of adults and children. It is to matters of methods I now turn.

### Entering and documenting childhood worlds

I miss having a peep hole to monitor those wanting access to my home place. Now I have to take a sideways peek through the blinds. Among my personal rules are: if you see a suited young man carrying a religious pamphlet, make yourself very still and breathe quietly; if you spy a brown-shirted delivery person, open the door quickly with a hopeful grin.

Finding a way to enter, and become a familiar presence in, children’s worlds takes some time, especially in schools, since the lines between “children” and “adults” are sharply drawn. A hierarchy of age exists, as it is central to the organization of materials, people, space, and, of course, authority. Children can peer around the corner of their interactionally constructed worlds and decide, “Oh-oh, an adult! Don’t let that person in (i.e., don’t talk about this or that). Maybe ask how to spell a word or two.”

It matters, then, that ethnographers of childhoods are clear about their goals and their positionality, as they seek a place in children’s worlds (Corsaro, 2017; Ferguson, 2001; Thorne, 1993). Our positioning influences what we see and hear and thus, ultimately, the stories we have to tell. Next, I discuss the process of gaining children’s trust so that they don’t shut the door to their unofficial worlds. In doing so, I include some personal rules for doing so.
The complexities of gaining entry

Among the relational hurdles to gaining children’s comfort with one’s presence include those constructed because of identity factors, including not just age but also race and language, for example. In my own experience with young children, gender has not been an experienced relational challenge, nor has age (although after 40 years, it has become a physical one; for example, rising up after sitting down on a rug involves muffled groans, hearing high-pitched child voices now requires technical assistance, as does seeing their printed words).

More significantly, I have studied young children of color, at times in community contexts of heightened racial tensions. As a white woman, I work against any assumptions of being clueless, as it were. For example, I deliberately learn about children’s referenced worlds – the radio stations some listen to in the morning, the movies they have seen, or want to, the stores they frequent, the streets or public parks they play in, even the sports teams some support, usually a basketball or football team.

Positionality

I aim to position myself as a trusted adult friend. As a former poor kid myself, I have respect and empathy for the children, who in my projects, are generally minoritized urban children from economically constrained neighborhoods. However, decades ago, I had to consciously resist my teacher identity, as that kept me seeing the children through an official lens only. Thus, I have developed ways of positioning myself among the children as one who has to do “my work”; I have to write down what is happening, so I can remember it. Children accept this, perhaps because I say it with resignation and a heavy sigh. In this way too, I avoid becoming central to the goings on, by, for example, becoming a living dictionary or a local spelling master.

In the interest of maintaining my position, I do not speak with teachers in front of children. Being perceived as a peeping spy, as someone who might tell on children, could render me out of bounds in their social worlds. I do discuss my role in the classroom with the teacher, so that my lack of helping or disciplining does not become a point of contention.

If I am successful in assuming such a role, children will carry on their social agendas with each other as I do my work, even if they stop when a teacher comes near. As I get to know the children, I choose focal children – children with whom to anchor my studies – who seem comfortable with me but not overly enamored. That is how I came to choose Ta’Von when he was in preschool. He attended school regularly; he carried on when I sat down by him; and he paid me no particular attention. In many studies, if I choose children who have a circle of friends, I become accepted over time by that circle. By choosing children from diverse friendship circles, I can become accepted by the children generally.

Relationships with children, though, are always constrained or furthered by contexts. For example, finding one’s way into children’s worlds is easier if peer talk and collaboration are officially sanctioned; it is much harder when such actions are interpreted as misbehaving. Children will always talk, but soft whispers are hard to hear; I rely on a small but powerful microphone positioned close to a focal child.

Further, relationships do change over time, especially in longitudinal projects. For example, in kindergarten, Ta’Von’s pleasure at seeing me, a familiar other, led him to take me into his confidence, making sideways remarks to me about the goings on. In second grade, when blues music became important to him, he performed his pieces for me, a reliable, attentive audience.

In sum, in ethnographic work, the quality of one’s relationships with participants influences the quality of the data one gathers. Most productive in an ethnography in the children’s worlds...
may be a relationship born in being an attentive adult friend. To gain access to the dynamic child negotiations that occur in such worlds, I work toward an unobtrusive role – I make no attempt to be anything other than a friendly adult; still, in time, I am the recipient of child commentary. Next, I consider collecting data in an upside-down ethnography.

Gathering data inside children’s worlds

In gathering data, my basic tools are those of linguistic anthropology (Ahearn, 2017; Blommaert, 2005; Hymes, 1974). That is, I conceive of the school day as an unfolding of enacted practices, both in the official and unofficial world. Practices are recurrent, purposeful, and value-laden activities; they mediate personal intentions, multimodal choices (e.g., oral or written word, image, sound, movement), social interactions, and contextual conditions, including time and space. This notion of practice implicates us all as human agents in the construction, and interruption, of inequality – in, for example, the status quo and power of whiteness as displayed in humble, everyday judgments of “good hair” (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Practices are enacted as events within society’s institutions, including schools (Ortner, 1997; Street, 1984). As articulated by ethnographers of language (Hymes, 1974; Ahearn, 2017), each enacted, purposeful event involves named participants, uses certain symbolic tools, and proceeds through interactions, themselves consisting of verbal turn functions, for example, interactional (e.g., greeting or inquiring as to center choice), narrational (i.e., representing or dramatizing a role or an event), directive of self and/or other (e.g., stating plans, monitoring [saying each letter while writing one’s name]), and heuristic (i.e., seeking information).

In schools, the notion of unofficial child practices complicates the common division of “in” and “out of school” practices (Hull & Schultz, 2001). The interest herein is in the unofficial lives of children, particularly their composing lives, as unfolding in school. As data gatherer, I am not a neutral observer; I am aiming to understand how children’s unofficial relations, resources, and interests become intertwined with, or separated from, the official world.

To examine this dynamic, I begin with the landscape of official practices, particularly but not exclusively those involving written language. Knowing the official practices, and the adult expectations they entail, provides an essential backdrop to the children’s worlds, which form around, within, and underneath those worlds. Still, becoming accustomed to the ebb and flow of official classroom life takes time. So, as the children become used to me – and my pen and recorder – I become used to the configuration of practices that organize their school life.

In the classroom, I rely on participant observation; as an attentive friend, I am curious but never interrupt a child in interaction with others. I rarely conduct formal interviews; my role as adult friend does not include in any way taking a conversational lead. Rather, as classroom life unfolds, I write sketch notes – fast minimal notes, taken without looking at my paper, which impresses children; those sketchy notes are later transformed into narrative field notes, with the help of my trusty audio recorder, any artifacts gathered, and my memory.

Eventually, the early observational data will be categorized into named official practices. Of course, I am also jotting down overheard comments that point the way to children’s worlds (e.g., bits of arguments, stories told, popular entertainments referenced, bits of quiet singing, and on and on). Among the most telling early signs of child culture are choreographed child texts in a room with an official expectation of individual text authorship (see Dyson, 2013). Some sort of group interaction accounts for the textual choreography.

As I am focusing on the configuration of official practices, I am also paying attention to the configuration of child bodies in space, both as the teacher arranges them and as they arrange themselves (including on the playground, assuming they get recess). Is there, for instance, a time
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when the designated “bright” children move across the room, in front of seated others, to sit at the kidney-shaped table for a reading lesson? Is there a time when the low-scoring children move to the table? When, if ever, do children choose whom to associate with? In both official and unofficial groupings, are patterns of gender, race, language, or some other societal category rendered visible?

As the project develops, I begin to follow children’s interactions inside the official practices, audiotape swirling, pencil scratching, eyes glued to the goings on. I rely on focal children. They are my guides into children’s interactionally constructed worlds.

Initially, I am not sure what will ultimately matter, so I transform sketch notes and audiotapes into detailed accounts of child-enacted official practices (each enactment labeled an “event”); in time peer expectations, relations, and transformations of official practices into unofficial ones take form. But detailing expectations, relations, and the unofficial practices informing child worlds does not simply “emerge” from data. Once one has turned the ethnographic view upside down and is observing school routines and expectations from inside the children’s world, a period of intense data analysis ensues.

In sum, during data collection I learn by paying careful attention to child expectations and practices that evolve in response to, within, or even in metaphoric curricular “side roads” that never intersect with, official expectations (Dyson, 1993). These phenomena are constructed through collected data: field notes and accompanying audiotapes and student artifacts, along with notes on required textbooks and testing, and accumulating news clippings and website reports on local school issues and publically available statistics on school and city demographics. Further in this chapter, projects featuring first grader Tionna, a child from an earlier project, and kindergartener Ta’Von will illustrate possible analytic paths through data.

**Studying situated childhoods in action: data analysis with a critical edge**

Qualitative data analysis involves studying those data so painstakingly collected. The focus is on how participants interpret and enact their social worlds and, more particularly, how they experience some phenomenon of interest (i.e., negotiating belonging in Ta’Von’s case) in some contextualized place and time. The immediate goal of the inductive analysis of collected data is to develop ways of naming or categorizing (i.e., coding) key dimensions of that experience so that an analytic narrative can be composed for others.

In analyzing children’s worlds, I aim both to render in detail children’s experienced worlds and, at the same time, to keep the focus on the phenomena of interest. Children can be trivialized; often their described actions can be judged “cute” or “pitiable,” neither of which is helpful. So a careful, systematic analysis is critically important. To this end, I begin by using an interactional unit of time and space, so that the analysis can be focused on the dynamic processes of everyday life. To illustrate what I mean, I enlist the support of Tionna and Ta’Von. For each, I comment as well on the critical dimension of the work, that is, on the way it works against the assumed status quo in schooling in the U.S. and elsewhere.

**Analyzing the dynamics of the “basics”: Tionna**

Tionna, a textual child now, was a lively, talkative 6-year-old; she usually spoke a variant of African American Language. She attended an urban school that served primarily low-income children, including African American children, like Tionna (a focal child), as well as Latinx and white children. As a group, the children, who shared a neighborhood, also had a widely shared understanding of the local peer culture, and this included transformations of official writing...
tasks. The children looked forward to the daily sharing time, when they read their writing to their peers.

The year-long project in Tionna’s class compared the literacy “basics” as defined by the state’s common core skills, and the “basics” of writing in the children’s worlds (Dyson, 2013). My basic sociolinguistic unit of analysis was the communicative event, both official and unofficial; as earlier discussed, each event is an enactment of the more abstract notion of a practice, that is, it is a situated social happening (Street, 1984). Within official and unofficial events, I marked off episodes (topic-related interactions within events) involving corrections. Thus, I determined “basics” by comparing the teacher’s corrections of children’s writing (i.e., what did children need to improve?) and the children’s corrections of each other’s writing, which were spontaneous and conversational (see Dyson, 2013). I could, then, track focal children, like Tionna, across official and unofficial time-and-space, as well as over time as practices evolved and new ones appeared.

In this way, I identified an ideological difference between the view of language undergirding the official teacher-led practices and that undergirding many children’s, including Tionna’s. Official events were undergirded by a homogeneous and hierarchical notion of language. These “hierarchical fix-its” were related to skills tested on the year’s end achievement test and formally introduced in an “oral language” textbook with sets of error-plagued sentences to be orally corrected by the class. Hierarchical fix-its merited no rationale beyond an explanation of the rule itself. Rules included the use of mainstream American English.

But, as the school year progressed, most children, including Tionna, appropriated voices that linked both to the world outside the classroom and to particular peer relations (e.g., the goal of making one’s peers laugh or of marking peer affiliation by writing on the same topic). In this, the children’s work was illuminated by the Bakhtinian dialogic frame in which I had situated the project; Bakhtin (1981) views oral or written utterances as both enacting relations in the present and echoing experienced voices. In this project, I named the children’s ideology a relational one, since their corrections tended to be about the social appropriateness of another’s textual action, given relationships or particular practices.

To conserve textual time and space, I merely report that, in official vignettes, Tionna seldom understood her teacher’s corrections of her grammar. However, in her own talk and writing, she consistently displayed an ear for voices – not disembodied grammar, but voices. That sensitivity led to a communicative flexibility that did not exist in the official world.

To briefly illustrate, consider how Tionna uses African American Language in writing when reporting her interactions with her cousin, but the local mainstream American English when revoicing her teacher’s narrative. Following is Tionna’s text about a cousin who:

```
all ways copy cat me and I say aret [aren’t] you tier [tired] of copycating me she say
no am [I’m] not that is my favord [favorite] so plese stop ask ing [asking] me mame
[ma’am] I get tier of that[,] calling me mame so I will call her mame
[I bolded words that clearly contrast with Tionna’s choices in the next text.]
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The assertive back and forth of Tionna’s written dialogue, her explicit feelings and conversational present tense (“she say” and “I say”) contrast the more descriptive, syntactically formal prose of her texts based on her teacher’s talk. For example:

```
Yesterday Mrs. K wint to the doctor she had to leav for the rest of the after non because she said her son Kelly had a bump on his arm she said they had to remove it.
```
As Tionna’s communicative flexibility suggests, in this project, the social world of young children was more sophisticated in language use than was the official world. That official world attempted to erase minoritized children’s language strengths.

Analyzing the challenges of belonging: Ta’Von

Kindergartener Ta’Von has already entered this textual space; he was facing the challenges of finding a comfortable place in the children’s worlds. I focused on describing these potential challenges of school transition and, more particularly, of social integration, rather than mere desegregation; I had a particular interest in the roles child writing played in forming, as well as negotiating, these challenges.

I used a series of analyses to study the data (collected over the closing four months in the preschool and the opening five months of kindergarten; data set later added to with closing five months of second grade). As with the project in Tionna’s classroom, I began with a taxonomy of official and unofficial composing practices, first in preschool, then in kindergarten. I considered each practice as enacted through situated events.

As the analysis continued, I read data across events from both the preschool and the kindergarten, identifying recurrent themes. I was interested in comparing Ta’Von’s interactions during composing or story-making events in preschool (e.g., through the manipulation of Leggos or of small figurines) to those in kindergarten (almost exclusively involving written language). In this way, I documented the absence in the preschool, and the predominance in the kindergarten, of themes of gender, race, and social class, along with the integrative theme of belonging.

During this process, I read Massey (2005), who argues for a view of belongingness as a continually negotiating process and as the dynamic consequence of social encounters among a shifting populace (rather than a static possession of some mapped place). This concept freshened my vision of Ta’Von’s transition, particularly because Massey portrayed these encounters among people on different life trajectories as always involving power and political inequality. In my work, then, I borrowed Massey’s use of “encounters,” identifying episodes within events in which peer talk included the appropriateness of some aspect of Ta’Von’s self (i.e., physical, material, social, academic). The “girl hair” episode earlier shared is an example of a category of encounters that fronted the often intersecting societal categories of race, gender, and social class.

Through this analysis, I aimed to understand Ta’Von’s encounters with “others,” as those encounters illuminated challenges to his legitimacy as a child among children in a place called school, drenched in literacy skills. As I proceeded through the kindergarten data, I also described the roles composing played in Ta’Von’s negotiation of inclusive relational space (i.e., of social belonging) in the kindergarten.

One theme that integrated a kind of encounter with the contradictory roles of composing was that of helping. The kind of encounter relevant to this theme was identified as those that fronted unofficial judgments of “needing help.” In Ta’Von’s preschool experience, this theme did not arise – help was given and taken during reciprocal conversations with peers. The ideology of learning in the preschool marked difference in skill as normal, as was the expectation for improvement. “I did it!” or “You did it!” were common cheers.

In the kindergarten, needing help was a mark of neediness; the so-called “bright” children (who scored highly in tests) did not voice needing help. But, from the first day of school (even before testing began), a “bright” child offered to help Ta’Von with a puzzle. Ta’Von resented this – “I can do this myself!” There seemed, to me, no basis for the judgment that Ta’Von would...
need help other than assumptions based on race. However, Ta’Von was thankful for help when he felt he needed it. If Ta’Von offered help to the “bright” children, that help was rejected (even though his correction was usually accurate).

In order to experience himself as having some expertise in composing, he needed to be with children with whom he eventually established a reciprocal (i.e., a comfortable, give-and-take relationship); none of these children were, at that time, labeled in the teacher’s word of praise “bright,” and none were of the dominant group considered “white.” Consider, for example, the following exchange with Nia, considered “mixed”:

As a follow up to a “senses” unit activity, the children are to draw and label four objects they have “felt” on this day:

Ta’Von: (after drawing) There’s my white ball. Ball. (writes BuoL) . . .
Nia: I got a Spiderman ring!
Ta’Von: I got an apple.

As Ta’Von writes AL, Nia repeatedly and slowly says “I got a Spiderman, Spiderman,” her pencil poised but not moving. The rhythm of Ta’Von and Nia answering each other has been broken, and Ta’Von offers help:

Ta’Von: /s/
Nia: S (writes S)
Ta’Von: /i/
Nia: (writes I)
Ta’Von: /d/
Nia: (writes D)
Ta’Von: /m/
Nia: (writes M)
Ta’Von: Good job!

As illustrated, for Ta’Von, composing came to serve a role, not only as a marker of personal identity (e.g., in the hair episode) but also of valued expertise. Sometimes one needed help, sometimes one helped. There were no set roles among these reciprocal friends.

Through the analysis of Ta’Von’s data, as illustrated here, I demonstrated how desegregated schools, involving a small number of minoritized children, can pose distinct challenges to children, like Ta’Von, who want to belong to the class. Moreover, challenges linked to the intersection of race and perception of academic knowledge may limit the opportunities for minoritized children to experience all aspects of the social roles entailed in composing and, more broadly, in schooling. There is nothing fair about desegregating schools that is not accompanied by a thorough attempt at integrating children socially and academically.

At this point, I have summarized and illustrated the challenges and potential critical insights of upside-down ethnographies that center themselves in children’s worlds. The meaning-making technology tied to child agency in these classrooms has been primarily pencil and paper, although computers were present in Ta’Von’s kindergarten and would be more prevalent as he progressed through second grade (the end of the formal project). However, computers in his school were unconnected typically to child agency. This is worthy of comment, which I offer next.
Composing childhood cultures

Comments on viewing technology upside-down

As already noted, there are striking differences locally and globally in the education available to children, including the technological tools. Moreover, even when digital media, like Chromebooks, are available in school, the push toward accountability through narrow skill testing may mean that the use of digital platforms is heavily structured; such devices thus allow limited space for children’s agency and their interests.

Most importantly, the so-called “digital divide,” focused on the income-related presence or absence of digital tools in homes, may leave us unappreciative of the power of collective child agency. Brittany Frieson, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois, provided a vivid example of such agency. In her neighborhood, most families were low-income. Nonetheless, as she wrote (personal communication, 2017), she and her neighborhood friends collaborated to get their Christmas present desires:

When we figured out what we wanted we would all meet together to negotiate whose parent was going to buy which gift, being very careful to not get duplicates as that was a waste of resources. . . . When we would decide on who would get what, we gave our requests to . . . whoever . . . purchased [our separate] Christmas gifts. . . . A[s] an example of this . . . Toby’s dad would buy the PlayStation, I would get a popular game like Grand Theft Auto, someone else would get extra controllers, and we would all share and take turns playing.

This home-grown example reminds me of the work of Nishant Shah and his colleagues in a rural village in India. In a presentation entitled “A Child’s Eye View of the World,” Shah reported on a network of children he and his colleagues uncovered during their ethnographic work (cited in Livingston et al., 2015). Women, he noted, enjoyed the daily soap operas, but their access to devices to view those soaps could be limited, in part because of gendered social constraints. However, children could borrow their father’s mobile phones, watch the shows, and then, later, theatrically enact key moments from new episodes to help the women keep up with the shows.

These examples, from different times and places, both speak to the agency and collaboration possible among young children. In order to see such activity though, and re-imagine private devices within collective needs, we would benefit from situating ourselves as humble, respectful participants in children’s worlds.

The joy – and challenges – of entering children’s worlds

This chapter has been about the hows and whys of turning the usual research approach upside down. Rather than view children through the official lens of school, I have discussed viewing school through the unofficial lens of children. Such an ethnographic view is dependent on a non-trivializing view of children and their desires for companionship and playful control in their everyday lives. Such upside-down ethnographies, like all ethnographies, do not yield findings that can be generalized to some broader population. Rather, as Geertz (1983) explains, such research allows us concrete material to think with and, thereby, gain new insights into the social dynamics, situational influences, and negotiation processes entailed in abstractions like belonging, agency, technological access and, above all, social equity in children’s lives. By comparing ethnographic insights, we as a profession build our understandings of children, child cultures, meaning-making, and social integration.
Among the key challenges to researchers aiming to enter children’s worlds are to adopt:

- answerable, often evolving questions that energize a respectful curiosity about unofficial worlds
- a positionality that allows a researcher a nonthreatening, up-close view of children in action
- a socio-historical view that (a) situates educational settings in the history and politics of the city and the school, and, within the setting, (b) allows practices, including unofficial ones, an evolving history and allows children agency energized by social intentions
- an attentiveness to the dynamics of official and unofficial practices; that is, documentation of official practices and children’s ways of participating in, transforming, or working alongside those practices
- systematic analysis of collected data, using units of analysis that will yield a vocabulary and themes with which to narrate responses to research questions; modeled herein were socio-linguistic units (i.e., events that enacted practices) and content ones (i.e., recurrent topics and events yielded themes and, undergirding those, ideologies)
- a consideration throughout about what the children are teaching pushes against dominant educational visions, for example, assumptions about “best practices,” “prepared learners,” or “necessary resources for learning.”

I have, in truth, left out qualities of this work that have kept me going over the years. Upside-down ethnographies in children’s worlds are exciting adventures – one never knows quite where the children will lead. Moreover, they are a joy. One meets the nicest people, like Ta’Von. At school entry, he was routinely, if not always deliberately, insulted. He never responded in kind. He was a centered person who did not abandon reaching out to others. In these troubling times, when mean-spiritedness seems to be in power in the U.S., I crawl into children’s worlds, meet lively and resilient people, and get all caught up in the adventure of it. Perhaps some of you, dear readers, will do so as well.

References


