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A Reason to Respond: Finding Agency Through the Arts

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Abstract

The arts have long been known as a central medium for nurturing artistic expression and aesthetic responses. Notions of arts-based teaching are combined with concepts

¹ Debra McLauchlan (1951-2016) was a Professor of Drama Education in the Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, Brock University. Debra contributed her editorial skills to this manuscript and unfortunately, her sudden, untimely death in October, 2016 did not allow her to see this piece to completion. We celebrate her contributions to the Community Arts Zone (CAZ) research project and we honour her memory here through our collaborative scholarship.

of literacy and composition, focusing on the fact that these separate fields have the potential for relational meaning making. In this article, three arts-based, qualitative research inquiries are featured within a larger, one-year *Community Arts Zone* (CAZ) research project involving eight projects across four international sites. Findings from the three inquiries in music, visual arts, and drama highlight that responsive meaning making foregrounds aesthetics to create agentic learning environments. By providing students agency in their artistic expressions, there is the hopeful prospect of working in and across various modes to cultivate meaningful learning experiences.

A reason to respond: Finding agency through the arts

I treat my classroom like it's a studio, so it's a place for them to work, so I give them the power...that they are the artists coming into this space, using this as a space, as an opportunity for them to create, and the time to create, and to dialogue with their peers about what they enjoy, and you know, be up to their necks in the creative process without any other distractions and I think that's really important for them to grow...creating that environment for them. And I think they're receptive to that, and they feel that vibe when they're in the classroom 'cause it's not just me talking down to them, we're just a bunch of people in a room making Art. (CAZ visual arts teacher participant, December, 2013)

The opening quotation comes from an interview with a visual arts teacher who took part in a pilot study for a research study that we feature in this article that combines arts-based teaching with concepts of literacy and composition. The above quote from reflects a key finding; the arts give students the freedom and space to experiment with modes that invite their own agency to flourish.

When we speak of agency, we situate this term in the writings of Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999), Craft, Cremin, Hey, and Clack (2014), and Corsaro (2015) who all speak of the importance of providing learning environments that offer contexts for exploration, ownership, and control of learning through the co-construction of knowledge. It is in such places that creative and critical thinking may thrive. The arts, thus, are integral to children's desire for agency in their learning within school contexts and beyond (Rowell & Vietgen, 2017; Rowell & McQueen-Fuentes, 2017). The arts have long been known as a central vehicle for nurturing artistic expression and aesthetic responses. Through agency, choice, and opportunity, students have the hopeful prospect of working in and across various modes to cultivate meaningful learning experiences.

Funded by the Canadian government through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research

Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant, the *Community Arts Zone* (CAZ) research project featured in this article involves eight different projects that are situated across four international sites. Data collection took place over one year in the Niagara region in Canada, in Boulder, Colorado, and Rochester, New York, in the United States, and in Rotherham in the United Kingdom². What these disparate locations share is a commitment to community regeneration, social inclusion, and a desire to broaden notions of literacy and communication. This article highlights three of five CAZ projects (Griffin, 2017; McLauchlan, 2017; Rowsell & McQueen-Fuentes, 2017, Rowsell & Vietgen, 2017; Winters & Code, 2017) that took place in one of the research sites to illustrate the power of combining the arts and multimodality to offer more agency for learners to think about ideas and conceptions of literacy and composition.

In the CAZ research, there are strong undercurrents with responsivity and writing studies. Sheridan (2014) defines responsivity as “being present with others as we figure out how to contribute to projects that matter” (p. 14). Sheridan identifies “architectures of participation” (Sheridan, 2014; Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010) as structures that can be put in place to foster responsivity from communities and individuals. To be responsive, in our view, an individual needs a reason to respond and mechanisms in place to respond.

In the CAZ project, we were curious to explore if the arts would offer students agency and occasions for multimodal meaning making—giving them opportunities for both artistic expression and aesthetic responses. By ‘aesthetic responses’, we are referring to how young people think and communicate through art and, importantly, how they socially engage with art and artistic modalities. Two central questions that guide our thinking in this article are: 1) What is the role of learner agency in arts education? 2) If learner agency is significant, how do the arts and multiple modes of meaning making foster students’ artistic expression and aesthetic responses?

Relational Meaning Making: Literacy and the Arts

To respond to shifts in communication that are more multimodal (Kress, 1997; Selfe, 2009) in their orientation, the CAZ research team conducted a series of arts-based projects in local, community hubs such as schools and museums, focusing on particular modes of expression and representation with students aged 6 to 18. Premised on a belief that contemporary meaning making rests on not only communicating through words, but also through visuals, music, moving images, and digital spaces, the literacy dimension of the research pushes for

² The Boulder, Rochester, and Rotherham projects are conducted by Drs. Kris Gutierrez, Joanne Larson, and Kate Pahl (with researchers Dr. Abigail Hackett and Steve Pool) respectively.

broadened definitions of concepts like writing and reading (Kress, 1997). Like Selfe (2009), we were cognizant that there is a history of privileging print and we wanted research participants to engage in and across various modes. Selfe (2009) explains that there is a need to,

...encourage students to deploy *multiple* modalities in skillful ways—written, aural, visual—and that they model a respect for and understanding of the various roles each modality can play in human expression, the formation of individual and group identity, and meaning making. (p. 626)

Literacy researchers, including Selfe and others (Kress, 1997; Stein, 2008), have shown how the affordances of multiple modes allow for more agency in meaning making. These ideas have also been stated by scholars of arts education. For example, Eisner (2002),

The arts have distinctive contributions to make. I count among them the development of the thinking skills in the context of an art form, the expression and communication of distinctive forms of meaning, meaning that can only artistically crafted forms can convey, and the ability to undergo forms of experience that are at once moving and touching, experiences of a consummatory nature, experiences that are treasured for their intrinsic value. These are experiences that can be secured when one attends to the world with an aesthetic frame of reference and interacts with forms that make such experience possible. (p. xii)

Sheridan and Rowsell (2010) and Rowsell's (2013) research, focused on interviewing professionals across creative and business sectors, illustrates that people who do creative work out in the world naturally draw on the strengths and limitations of different modes. Linda Flower (2003) interprets "speaking across differences," which is about negotiating competing agendas and wrestling with terminology while talking across differences. In this process, Flower describes how understanding is transformed through embracing difference, which sometimes involves conflict and contradictions. Certainly, we found as a research team that we did not consistently agree on terms like multimodality, affordances, composition, and artistry, but through discussion and debate, we came to resolutions. These conversations play a role in our argument because, like Flower, we believe that speaking across difference and separate fields (the arts and literacy) transforms understandings, offering potential for relational meaning making. For instance, transforming our understandings allowed us to look horizontally across projects, as well as vertically inside each of the five research inquiries that took place in one of the research sites.

Theoretical Tensions: Artistic Expression and Aesthetic Response

Enfolding literacy studies within the arts has not necessarily been an easy fit and there have been moments of contrast, tension, and contestations about terminology, practices, and epistemologies across the research team. One of these notions to tease out is the long-standing discourse around artistic expression, aesthetic response, and its relationship to the arts. The arts are powerful as they create a unique platform for creativity and interaction, allowing responses to flourish in ways that are unique from other forms of human expression and experience. For example, in looking at one of the art forms, music is frequently described as, or thought of, as a “language.” Winters (2010) acknowledges that each system of communication (language or music) provides affordances or semiotic potential. Montgomery (2002) also has written about the parallels that music and language share with phonemes, syntax, and semantics. Yet, in other writing, two of the CAZ researchers (Winters & Griffin, 2014) draw our awareness to the necessity of acknowledging the distinctions between language and music and how aesthetic response is *not* the same between these two forms of communication. More specifically, well-known music education philosopher, Bennett Reimer (2003) has devoted much scholarly effort to helping us better understand the distinctions between music and language. Reimer (2003) clearly contrasts the processes of music and language,

In language, meanings are created and shared through the process of communication. In music, meanings are created and shared through the processes of artistic musical creation and aesthetic musical responsiveness. . . . Nothing about the process just described applies to the processes of musical creation and response. (pp. 136–137)

Thus, precise meaning making in language is viewed in sharp distinction from the potential for feelingful, aesthetic response in music. Further to this, Winters and Griffin (2014) articulated,

Reimer (2003) suggested that, “Musical creation is a process of *exploration and discovery*” (p. 137). Music is not just about encoding and decoding messages, but rather, it is about the “feelingful qualities of sound” (p. 137). Music has the capacity to go beyond words as the sonic interplays with the lexical. It is layered and has the capacity to have aesthetic nuances in this way. (pp. 4–5)

Yet, despite trying to conceptualize generic understandings of such complex and fundamental philosophical orientations and understandings in and across the arts, as a team, the CAZ researchers remained committed to the mission of the project that students learn best through the arts, that artistic expression and aesthetic responses are fundamental to multimodal

meaning making, and that the arts align more with the kinds of lived, everyday literacy practices that individuals experience on a daily basis.

A consistent strand noted in all projects was the notion of working alongside educators and artists to make meaning (Hackett, Pahl, & Pool, 2017). Each arts educator spent time in the field and took seriously the concept of collaborative and relational meaning making. In addition, all researchers noted the importance of attending to the technical and mechanical nuances required to create within the art forms; yet their focus remained on offering research participants choice and agency in their artistic expressions and aesthetic responses. In the sections to follow, we look more specifically at the details of each of these three projects in music, visual arts, and drama. These are contextualized through the voices of the researcher who led the project.

Music and CAZ

Shelley's Voice

The music inquiry nested within the CAZ project is grounded in the assumption that children live in worlds of embodied music experiences, both within formal and informal contexts. Building upon a line of work focusing on the interplay between elementary children's daily experiences of music, both in- and out-of-school, and the impact on elementary music education pedagogy and curriculum (Griffin, 2009, 2011a, 2011b), this inquiry is theoretically enveloped within children's musical culture (Campbell, 2010), experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938), and children's agency (Corsaro, 2015; Craft et al., 2014). The purpose of the research was to examine the interplay between elementary children's daily experiences of in- and out-of-school music and their impact on elementary music education curriculum. Subsequently, it was of interest to be attentive to how children engaged in music-making practices across the curriculum to acquire French vocabulary as a second language.

The research was situated in an urban, Grade 1 French Immersion classroom (14 girls, 8 boys). The elementary school in which the research took place offered programming in both English and French Immersion. The study drew upon the tools of ethnography (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kitchen, Ciuffetelli Parker, & Pushor, 2011). Over a period of six months (January-June, 2014), the study involved two phases. The first phase lasted the entire duration of the project, investigating the school musical culture of the Grade 1 classroom of children. Each week, I observed the daily occurrences in their regular classroom, their music classroom, and during regular school activities (e.g. recess, lunch). Data sources included observation, fieldnotes, photographs, video, informal conversations, student interviews, conversing with parents, ongoing communication with the teacher (e.g. conversation, emails, text messages), and CAZ

team talk (e.g., meetings and research blog). While phase one continued, the second phase of the research began during the fifth month of the project when I began to investigate how children experienced music out-of-school. Based on children's conversations with me in phase one, as well as noting their engagement in musical behaviours throughout the day, I selected a small number of students and investigated their experiences outside of school. Four boys and two girls were selected. I visited them in their homes to engage in family conversation to further study their musical lives. Each conversation with a family and the child was approximately one hour to one and a half hours in duration. All conversations were transcribed and member-checked with the families. In addition to my conversations with the children and parents, I had extensive conversations with the classroom teacher during the course of the data collection. At the conclusion of the project, I interviewed the classroom teacher regarding her overall engagement in the project.

As I reflect upon moments during the inquiry that have highlighted aesthetic response and agency, I am drawn to share my observations regarding preparations that the Grade 1 children made for the local school district music festival. I witnessed the children working across modes while negotiating technical skills as they moved toward performance preparation. The classroom teacher and children co-developed a 10-minute performance using various modes including song, movement, body percussion, choral speech, classroom Orff instruments (both pitched and non-pitched), and narration, based around the theme of community in order to acquire French vocabulary.



Figure 1. Performance Preparation



Figure 2. Movement

During this process, the classroom teacher provided opportunities for exploration so that the agentic learning environment focused upon aesthetic response and meaning making. It

became apparent that the children did engage in multiple modalities in skillful ways (Selfe, 2009). Specifically, during the preparation of the performance entitled, *Ma Communauté*, children demonstrated agency by making decisions regarding movement transitions, instruments to be utilized, the blocking of the performance space, the mapping of the local community, and the vocabulary choices that reflected community.



Figures 3 & 4. Mapping out the community

These children's choices affirmed the power of the arts as an entry point into various other curricular areas such as Literacy and Social Studies. It also highlighted the children's artistic expressions about, and aesthetic responses to, community-building. As a researcher, my observational goal during the inquiry was not so much to be focused on musical performance, but rather about attending to the ordinary musical moments that ebbed and flowed during the school day. The expressions of the children about this topic reflected the everyday moments that are integral to community-building. Ironically, while they were negotiating their performance through music-making (demonstrating agency), they were also building their own community within the classroom context by expressing their creativity and artistic responses.

The classroom teacher invited musical engagement so frequently during the day with rhythmic activities and frequent song, the children often spontaneously engaged in music-making without her direction. Again, they had agency in their decision-making process, voicing their ideas, while responding to the needs of the teacher. As an observer in the classroom, what was so apparent to me was how naturalized this experience was for the children. The students exuded confidence as they used their bodies to respond to the music—

aply twisting and turning without any adult guidance.

Overall, the findings of the music inquiry highlight: 1) when given opportunities for spontaneous music-making, children frequently demonstrate agency in their daily music experiences, 2) the nature of how music and sound function fluidly in a variety of contexts is integral to children's experience, offering spaces for creativity and artful meaning making, and 3) musical behaviours assist young children in acquiring French vocabulary and literacy skills. Arising out of the research are important considerations for teacher education including: the necessity of creating space in elementary curriculum to engage children in music-making, integrating and infusing the arts fluidly across the curriculum, and encouraging children's autonomy and agency in their musical engagement.

Visual Art and CAZ

Peter's Voice

Linda Flower (2002) claims that "transformative understanding is an activity, not a statement" (p. 186) and the CAZ photography project clearly illustrates this point. Tasked with representing an archetype, symbol, to mediate self, high school students took photos in the style of contemporary American conceptual photographer, Cindy Sherman. By "mediating self," we are referring to ways that young people visually improvise on aspects of their identity when they take photographs. Connecting with Flower's (2002) work, students engaged in knowledge-making "that names problems in the world" (p. 186) by visually depicting them. Exploring difficult topics like bulimia, alcoholism and homophobia, the teenagers in the project embraced the opportunity to show agency and mediate their own identities or topics that they felt passionately about within photographs.

Two classes of secondary students from two different high schools were selected to express their thoughts and ideas around self-identity and role-play when they created their photographs and they paired each photograph with written artist statements. For instance, one student depicted "madness" and "anxiety" in her conceptual photograph by writing letters and graphics over a white canvas and wearing a hospital gown with lighting that produced a shadow as a silhouette of the young woman. Both classes came from high schools located in two different cities with a population of approximately 85,000 (Class A) and 132,000 (Class B) inhabitants. Class A was a Grade 12 visual arts class of 22 students with a fairly high level of academic standing. Class B was a smaller group of only 10 teenagers at an inner-city high school that were enrolled in a particular "School to Community" program taught by a different teacher. This class was being taught by a visual arts specialist and was made up of a group of students with a variety of physical and cognitive special needs. Class B took on more of a "life skills" approach while being tied to a visual arts curriculum.

To begin the project, students from both Class A and Class B researched and deconstructed the photographs of Cindy Sherman. The participating students were asked to create their own photographic images exploring the themes of teenage self-identity and role-play. Working in pairs, students were given disposable cameras to use as a tool to capture images of each other in various forms of role-play.



Figure 5. Student Participant (Role-Play)

A celebration of the completed works resulted in a public exhibition at a local art gallery. The exhibition consisted of one photograph selected by each participating student, along with an accompanying written text. Students were invited to take part in the curating and hanging of the exhibition.



Figure 6. Installing the Student Photography Exhibition (with Gallery Director)



Figure 7. Exhibition Opening

In addition to the photographs and journals, structured interviews took place before and after the project. Three students from each of the two classes, as well as the two art teachers, were interviewed for the study.

Both classes and their respective teachers thoroughly enjoyed participating in the photography project for various reasons. Reflections from the teachers provided insight toward aesthetic responsiveness in visual arts. When considering the link between literacy development and visual arts, both teachers understood the importance of students being able to deconstruct visual imagery and to create meaning through the use of the elements and principles of design, the language of the visual arts curriculum. When asked directly how this project reflected this philosophy of understanding, one teacher's response was the following,

This project provides an excellent vehicle for developing visual literacy at all ages and arts experience. Participants are required to critically think about how meaning is derived from visual formats and visual experiences from film and photography, to advertisements, to day to day experiences of reading body language and physical spaces and visual dynamics, etc.

Using costumes, artifacts, and visual effects, photography offered students a platform to explore how they felt about topics that were central to their lives. Photography gave them an aesthetic form to respond to their emotions and feel connections with topics. Observing students at work, researching Cindy Sherman, planning shots, working with peers, it became clear that they were not only engrossed in the activity, but also, that they were gaining agency

and place in the learning environment. Kress (1999) maintains that this kind of control over communication and representation gives power, “Control over communication and over the means of representation is, as always, a field in which power is exercised” (p. 67).

Reflecting back on the project, it is evident that meaning making and the understanding of the deconstruction of imagery through the Art form of photography offers students agency. Students were able to make artistic choices about challenging topics while expressing themselves through the framing of the photographic shot, the position of the subject, and the composition and lighting of the image. The direct involvement of the planning and execution of image production using disposable cameras, followed by the development of accompanying written texts, enabled the participating students to experience freedom and empowerment in their learning. Not only did students enact agency through their planning and their orchestration of photographs, but also through their reflections on the process in their artist statements. Findings illustrate the power of the visual image, the need for student agency in visual literacy, and the necessity of incorporating visual literacy into our school curriculum.

Drama and CAZ

Kari-Lynn’s Voice

Drama and literacy are cut from the same cloth, both are about meaning making, expression, and communication. They occur actively in real, three-dimensional spaces and are influenced by the physical and situated contexts in which they occur—including the ways that participants relate to and position one another. Moreover, both evoke creativity and embodied responses. However, there are differences in the ways the processes are showcased. In drama (and in any of the arts), the spotlight is centered on the sensory, the embodied, and the vocal aesthetic, the synergy and energy of the ensemble (including the audience), and the emotional resonance of the experience. These characteristics are often difficult to capture because they are intangible and fleeting. Literacy’s more recent multimodal focus (Kress, 2009), on the other hand, has often revolved around the mode that is used, the meaning that is constructed, the affordances these modes provide, and the ways information is socially and critically contextualized within and across spaces (Rowell, 2013; Winters, 2010).

Exploring the body’s role in education is particularly important in this study with 21st Century learners because: 1) media literacy has been highlighted in school curricula in Ontario (e.g., in advertisements, the ways bodies are represented, glorified, sexualized, stereotyped, and shamed), 2) increased governmental funding has been put in place regarding physical wellness and awareness programs (e.g., ParticipACTION, 2016), and 3) recent scholarly studies in embodied pedagogies (Enriquez, Johnson, Kontovourki, & Mallozzi, 2016; Perry & Medina, 2015), have been foregrounded in the field of multimodal literacies.

The subject for this portion of the CAZ project was body awareness, including the ways that stories are often embodied, socio-critical, and affective. The body awareness study was conceptualized in three phases. In the first phase, I invited various community organizations (e.g., fitness clubs, weight management groups) along with postsecondary students, and published authors and illustrators to submit stories regarding body image and embodied learning. These stories came to me in various forms (e.g., handwritten letters, emails, films, labelled photos). This invitation allowed participants agency in the sharing of their experiences related to the research topic. The participants were free to submit in whatever format they chose. Phase two consisted of bringing these gathered stories to a group of university undergraduate students, studying drama education and community theatre. Working with the instructor of the course, we planned, scripted, rehearsed, and produced a 45-minute play about body image over eight weeks, once a week for three hours each session. The play itself combined musical theatre, comedy sketches, soundscapes, digital collage, dance, voice montage, improvisation, and choral reading. The university students used the stories from phase one as resources for inspiration in order to compose the play, *I'm Perfect/Imperfect: Perceptions of the Body and Embodied Learning*. This play was then performed for eight elementary schools in the Niagara region (Grades 4–7).



Figure 8. Body Awareness Scene (Play)



Figure 9. Movement Scene (Play)

Students who viewed the play were placed in focus groups and were subsequently interviewed to share insights about the themes that emerged from the play. At this time, elementary teachers and administrators were also interviewed. Finally, in the third phase of the body awareness study, I returned (along with a research assistant) to the eight schools to engage students in drama education workshops related to the topic of the play. Throughout the entire study, qualitative data sources included stories from the local community, films and work samples, scene breakdown and blocking charts, director's notes, interviews with students and teachers/administrators, fieldnotes, videos, photography, and focus group transcripts. For this article, I highlight the third phase of the body awareness study, that used the Mantle of the Expert approach (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), storytelling, and playbuilding.

The Mantle of the Expert is a drama-in-education, inquiry-based approach to learning that encourages students to take on the roles of experts (e.g., architects, carpenters, etc.) in order to look closely into a subject of study. I first learned about the Mantle of the Expert approach from Dorothy Heathcote herself at a spring/summer institute at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in 2009. Heathcote stressed during this institute that it was possible, and even desirable, for students to take on roles of responsibility and agency in order to steer the learning in the ways that worked best for the group itself and also for the subject area being explored. In other words, the teacher is merely a facilitator of the role drama, not a director. In

this study, the students became expert mannequin designers, offering business-oriented advice to the CEOs of the mannequin company.

The data from this project showed that body image is a lot more prominent than we had anticipated. Though people have always written spatial texts with their bodies (e.g., the unconscious ways that people produce meanings even when doing everyday practices like walking, cooking, eating, and so forth), have interpreted the stories that bodies tell, and govern each other through power relations such as tactics and strategies (de Certeau, 1984), we noticed however, that with the ubiquity of technologies and social media, the body took centre stage and was more critiqued than ever before. In other words, our study demonstrated that body image and body shaming can be identified as a repressive aspect of school experiences, in the lives of both young adults and young children.

We observed throughout all phases of the research study that negative emotions about their bodies surfaced and were played out, acted, danced, discussed, and drawn. At one point in the drama workshop, we asked students to mark-up body maps with Xs and checkmarks, representing their perceptions of their own bodies. A simple content analysis of these body maps demonstrated that 93% of the students that participated had some issue/negative comment about their bodies. Though we did not encourage the study participants to write words, doodle, or colour the maps, they did. Many felt compelled to go above and beyond the expectations of the activity in order to express their feelings and responses in words. These students wrote such comments as, “People think I’m fat,” “I’m ugly,” or “I hate my body and the boys in my Grade 6 class are mean”

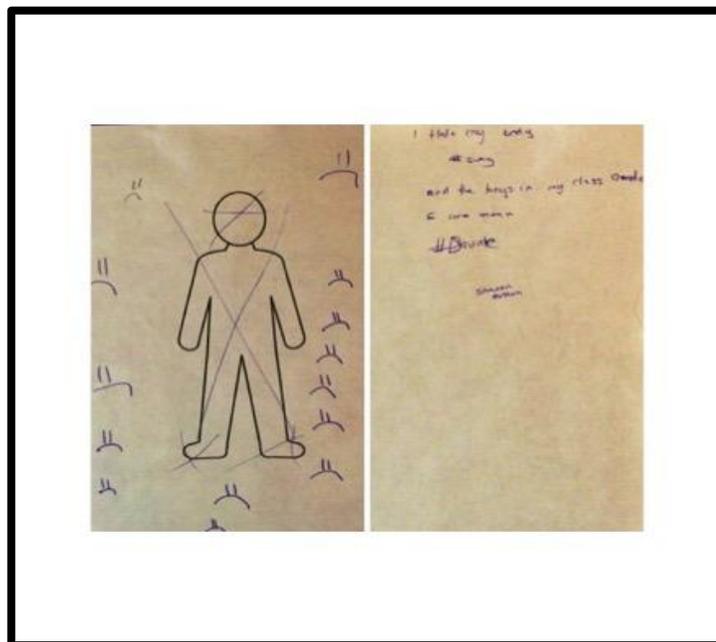


Figure 10. Sample Body Map

Many used textures and colours to further express themselves artistically. Looking back on this now, we noticed that children are relentlessly concerned about their bodies and how others perceive them. Engaging in the drama workshops allowed them to be more forthright about their feelings and gave them agency to voice their opinions and refute stereotypes regarding body image. For example, a student who wore braces and normally felt insecure about it, acted out a scene during our workshop, where she roleplayed a confident and poised mannequin designer. When her peers (other designers) looked her, she called them out, “Hey, stop looking at my pearly whites!”, and refuted the ways that they would have normally positioned her during regular, non-arts-based classroom activities.

Re-writing their bodily identities through artistic modes (through embodied, drawn, and vocal responses, for example) in the workshops became part of the practice of everyday life as there were more mechanisms for mediating body image.



Figure 11. Writing Bodily Identities (Workshop)

Often, children’s visualizing fixates on physical perfection: having the right filter, photo-shopping the flaws, staging the best setting, creating the most desirable avatar, and shooting

the most suitable selfie. In contrast, during the workshops, students reacted to and critiqued notions of perfection through drama. For instance, they discussed/demonstrated the colours of the mannequins, ultimately refuting commentaries they had heard about racial exclusion and they participated in critical and revised (and sometimes heated) discussions about skin colour. Additionally, they questioned why mannequins are typically “White” (Caucasian), suggesting that maybe retail companies should begin to use a variety of colours, including “all shades of skin colours”, but also purples, greens, and metallic golds and bronzes to sell their products. Affect too, which has always played a star role in drama and literacy, was spotlighted as participants continuously positioned each other and demonstrated/talked about their emotional connectedness to others within spaces. The spoken word piece below I created was an artistic expression and aesthetic response to the data and demonstrates these ideas.

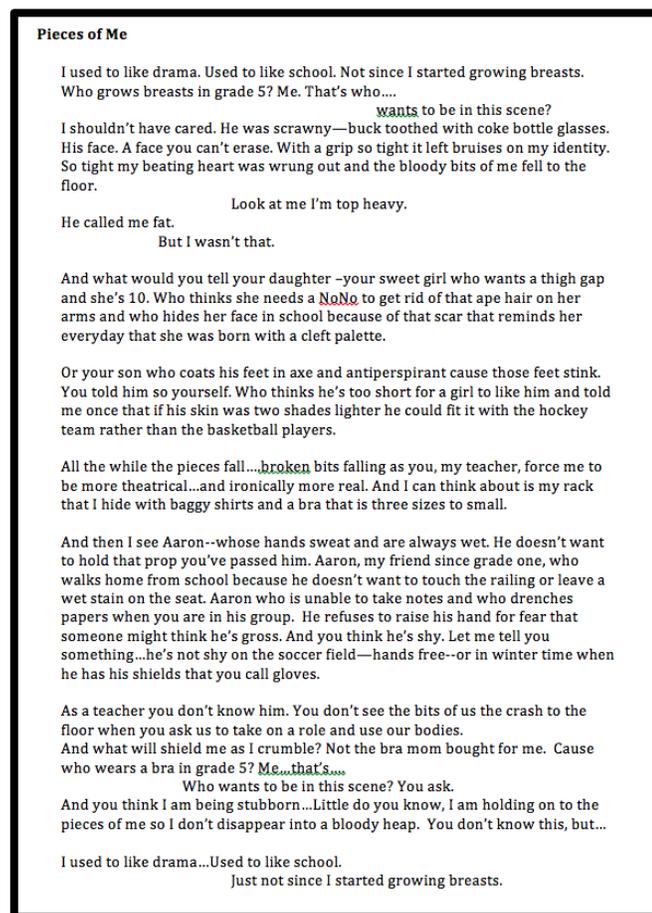


Figure 12. Pieces of Me

Findings show that children put a lot of pressure on themselves and they consistently use modal interactivity to write and read stories, and to shape their identities (Winters & Vratulis,

2013). Drama gives them agency and opportunities for creative expression and artistic response within a pretend (and often safer) environment.

Furthermore, embodiment, in school and beyond, is fundamental to meaning and identity making. Indeed, as individuals move within a situated environment, they are writing texts with their bodies that can be interpreted by others as invisible stories. This project powerfully illustrated the ways the body is constantly intertwined on a spiral trajectory with media and communication. With converged technologies, there are more ways than ever to learn about, showcase, discriminate against, and capture bodies—including notions of perceived perfection.

Many educators take for granted that students are comfortable with their bodies in schools, yet our data clearly shows that a lot of students are not comfortable with the ways they look or how their body is perceived by their peers. How will students perform an activity when there is something/nothing that they like about their body? Is it fair that this student will be held to the same performance standards as their more confident peers? Educators need to remember that the body is implicated in every subject in school (and beyond). Though not acknowledged, the body, affect, and critical positioning are omnipresent and are in conversation, informing each other, within drama and literacy. Some students struggle with their bodies, and thus will struggle with agency in their expression when performing multimodal tasks. Drama and literacy might provide the perfect stage for exploring expressions that are artistic and aesthetic, responsiveness, and provide critical insights in education.

Gazing Across CAZ

In light of data collection for the CAZ project, we have learned many lessons. As researchers, through dialogue and hours of fieldwork, we have a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the arts and literacy studies as separate fields that can and should be relational. Thinking across all of the projects, we learned more deeply about artful practices and modal learning (Rowse, 2013). Indeed, innovative and meaningful immersion in the arts can be a conduit for student agency. By extension, the affordances and constraints of these artistic modes (e.g., music, visual arts, drama) provided a needed platform for artistic expression and aesthetic responses beyond a sole focus on mechanical and technical skills. Through the process of writing this article, we learned to think horizontally and vertically. The writing process gave us a canvas to iron out some of our differences, to align projects, and to think jointly about the relational nature of the arts and literacy. Importantly, our collaboration demonstrated that through the arts, students can be creative and aesthetically aware—free to express ideas while critiquing their own work.

We spent considerable time in this article reflecting upon our research questions as we thought about how the arts foster artistic expression and aesthetic responses in and across modes. In our writing, we also explored how such negotiation encourages responsivity and meaning making when agentic learning environments are created and nurtured. As a research team, the projects moved beyond rhetoric about the efficacy of the arts in education to more of a firm conviction that the arts can: expose subjectivities and vulnerabilities, induce emotions and beliefs, ignite conflicts and resolutions, and finally, garner energy across disparate groups of individuals. On the whole, CAZ spotlighted projects from one of the research sites in this international project that has, for many years, remained in a cycle of poverty and underachievement. In this way, the projects respond to community's desire for change and for regeneration.

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