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THEATRE AS A MULTILITERACY IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

SHANNON WALKER  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Allison S. Henward  
Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education  
Thesis Supervisor

Amy C. Crosson  
Assistant Professor, College of Education  
Honors Adviser

Samuel J. Tanner  
Assistant Professor of Literacy Education  
Faculty Reader

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

This inquiry aims to better understand how theatre, when brought into the classroom, can impact students' learning and offer new ways of teaching that create more inclusive environments, specifically for literacy. I discuss my observations and findings in light of a multiliteracy pedagogical framework to imagine the possibilities for including arts based approaches in traditional literacy curriculum. The multiliteracies framework is an expanded approach to literacy that supports diverse expressions of knowledge and considers the impact of linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and behavioral communication. Multiliteracies in early childhood education embraces new tools like media, art, and technologies to enrich traditional understandings of reading, writing, and speech. This study is relevant for early childhood practitioners and administrators seeking innovative practices for fostering equitable learning environments for students.

While student teaching in first grade, I integrated theatre during instruction and assessment. I collected my findings using teacher field notes, video recordings of classroom lessons, and student work. I describe my students' interactions with theatre and reflect on the possibilities of reaching multiliteracies through our work. Theatre as a multiliteracy drew on my students' understanding of behavioral and socio-cultural communication, positioned them as designers of new social possibilities, and tapped into the skills demanded of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy. Theatre also created a learning space where students could connect with the material, themselves, and one another more deeply.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

I began performing in the first grade, at least that is as far back as I can clearly pinpoint and place myself back on stage. Our first grade class performed *A Rumpus in the Rainforest*. It was a tradition that many elementary schools in my district adopted and carried out each year. As a kindergartener, I watched the first graders perform as the animal characters of a play that told the story of the rainforest. I admired them, and I could not wait for it to be my turn on the stage. When my first grade teacher introduced the performance to my class, she offered us the chance to sign-up for roles. I was too shy to pick one of the lead roles, so I settled on a comfortable character – the Boa Constrictor. For the performance, I stood on one of the back bleachers, dressed in a hot black jumpsuit with a red tongue protruding off of my hoodie. I waited for my chance to sing with the other Boa Constrictors. I was far from being the star of the show, but the experience was thrilling. I caught the theatre bug, and it has not left me since.

I share this story because theatre has had a profound impact on my life. Theatre has given me the confidence to share my voice. It has taught me empathy and communication. It has given me the space and freedom to grow in nontraditional contexts. Theatre has also guided me to view the world through an artistic lens; I look for ways that individuals can express, relate to, and better understand one another through song, dance, and performed texts. My identity has been shaped by the powerful learning experiences to which theatre has offered me access. As an educator, I seek ways to bring creative, artistic experiences into the classroom to better my

students' learning and support their social-emotional development as much as their academic growth, just as I have experienced.

This study is a case study that follows a teacher inquiry method. I chart my own experience as a student teacher/ theatre director in a first grade classroom to illustrate the possible benefits of integrating theatre in the classroom. My aim with this inquiry is to better understand how theatre, when brought into the classroom, can impact students' learning and offer new ways of teaching that create more inclusive learning environments, specifically for literacy. I discuss this in light of a multiliteracy pedagogical framework to imagine the possibilities for including arts based approaches to traditional literacy curriculum. First however, I begin with an explanation of why I am so passionate about bringing theatre to students.

### **Project Rationale**

My own experience as an actor has helped me express myself and relate to others. It has also given me a context where I can use a unique voice that goes beyond speech to include physical gestures and interactions with other actors. I have learned how to make meaning of theatrical texts using my own body as well as the cues given by the social and cultural context and physical environment of the play. Aside from my own passion and involvement with theatre in nonacademic contexts, my most powerful learning experiences have truly come from those where I use my entire body (mind, voice, arms, legs) to help me understand information. Thus, I wonder how I can bring this type of learning into the classroom to elevate my students' unique understandings.

As an educator, I know that my students can show their thinking in diverse ways. Indeed, constructivist approaches such as Reggio Emilia argue that children have over a 100 languages

and ways of communicating and showing capabilities. They lie in contrast to traditional practices, such as direct instruction or ability-based small-group learning which may not always represent and capture the full range of students' capabilities. Students have unique, and sometimes hidden, ways of understanding and expressing their knowledge that nontraditional practices have the potential to unlock. One "nontraditional" practice that many teachers value but are hesitant to try is arts based pedagogy, such as theatre or drama. This hesitancy may stem from a lack of explicit preparation for teaching with the arts, skepticism of one's own creative abilities in crafting art-infused lessons, differences in one's personal history or experience with the arts, and/or perception of exterior limitations surrounding integration (Lee & Cawthon, 2015). In my experience as a pre-service teacher, theatre was only discussed as a possibility for teaching material through art and integrating playful learning experiences for children; we did not have specific courses or units devoted to studying, planning, and practicing for theatre pedagogy. In what follows, I share a brief overview of what can be gained when the arts are integrated in the classroom. I also share insight into current gaps in research. The next chapter will delve more deeply into the histories of the topics which ground my inquiry.

### ***Benefits of Arts in Schools***

Theatre helps students develop critical emotional and social skills personally and in collaboration with others. Theatre encourages those involved to practice acceptance and empathy as characters children may role-play or interact with during performance represent different identities and perspectives. Art and storytelling allows the creator to become sensitive to not only their own needs, but the needs of others, thus contributing to better problem solving (McAllister, 2015; Bruton, 2009; Kuban, 2015; Stephen, 1995; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2002; Wendler,



2019). Furthermore, theatre and other forms of art might accommodate diverse learners who access content and express their knowledge through nontraditional forms (Barnum, 2019; Stroupe & Kramer, 2014). Despite these benefits, arts programming is being cut and reduced in many schools, often seen as non-essential, disposable and lower in importance, particularly in the age of accountability (Ravitch, 2010).

Arts integration into the general education classroom is an issue of equity. I believe that all students should have the opportunity to learn through effective, student-centered approaches such as the arts. When a teacher can lead the integration of theatre in classroom activities, students can still have access to these benefits without the need for additional funding or approval of a grant program that brings in theatre professionals to work with students and teachers. Disproportionate access to the arts, for both teachers and students, makes arts and theatre integration an equity issue. More research is needed on how theatre can best support classroom instruction with limited resources and the lead classroom teacher's facilitation. This is needed because it is not feasible for all schools to have an arts teacher or collaboration with an arts organization specialized in mentoring teachers in arts integration, especially considering budget cuts for arts programming. Students benefit academically and personally from the arts, so all students should have exposure to diverse teaching strategies regardless of a school's funding or teacher's training. Considering the potential theatre has to contribute to literacy development, multidisciplinary content knowledge, and social-emotional learning, more research is needed on how theatre can operate as an emerging practice for multiliteracies to support equitable teaching practices.

## Research Questions

Initially, my inquiry focused broadly on how creative art practices, specifically theatre, can be integrated at the early elementary level. I was curious as to how theatre could be used in different subject areas to create multidisciplinary learning experiences. This approach to teaching not only bridges various content areas in a real-world context, but it can better serve the diverse needs and skill sets of students, especially those who may struggle with traditional academic practices and/or those who attend schools with limited access to arts education programming. I was also interested in how theatre could be integrated by the classroom teacher, since many educators are not trained specifically in theatre, have access to a theatre professional on their teaching team, or hold a background in theatre.

As I got to know my students' needs as learners, my research question shifted and narrowed towards literacy. I moved from questioning the impact of theatre on multidisciplinary learning to multiliteracies. My central question became: How can theatre work as a multiliteracy in first grade curriculum?

I continue to wonder what role teachers play in the integration of theatre and how this might impact the possibilities for the classroom. I am a social-justice minded educator, so I wonder how this practice can address equity issues related to literacy. Other questions I will explore are:

- What can we learn when the elementary classroom teacher is the one leading the integration of theatre in the classroom?
- How might theatre and multiliteracy practices impact anti-bias and social justice oriented teaching and learning?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Arts programming is at risk in many public schools, especially those in high poverty contexts. With a focus on high stakes standardized tests, there is little funding and time left to devote to the arts (Caughlan, 2008). Rather than pay for teachers in the art disciplines, schools invest in curriculums and specialists that use traditional practices to improve reading and math test scores. While direct instruction and interventions are effective ways to improve students' skills, the arts have also been linked to an increase in academic achievement.

The arts, specifically theatre, positively impact students' literacy performance. Theatre encourages practice in skills related to critical thinking, perspective-taking, and expressive language, each components of literacy (Mages, 2018). When students perform, they demonstrate text comprehension and build reading fluency by using their own bodies and voices to represent characters in the story, the order of events, and essential plot points. Theatre is a tool that can help students grow as readers because they are active in storytelling (Husband, 2014). In addition to the positive impact theatre and the arts have on reading, a recent study conducted in Houston elementary and middle schools found that arts education also influenced an increase in test scores for writing (Barnum, 2019). Beyond academics, the arts, especially theatre, engage students with critical social emotional skills, such as understanding the expression of different emotions and perspectives. Caughlan (2008) goes as far to argue that these learning experiences are a basic educational right for students.

In this chapter, I will review literature of how the arts is currently practiced in schools, looking specifically at how theatre is used in the classroom. I will then present and review the

multiliteracies framework. I will use the multiliteracies framework as a springboard for analyzing and discussing the new possibilities that theatre can offer for literacy in elementary classrooms.

### **Arts in Schools**

There are various studies that show how the arts are being integrated in schools. These studies contribute to the literature advocating to keep arts programs amidst budget cuts. When students develop skills in visual, musical, and dramatic arts, they also learn to work collaboratively, provide productive criticism, develop complex projects, and build self-confidence (Caughlan, 2008, Kramer, 2014). Schools that promote arts educational programs have seen lower disciplinary rates for students, particularly among middle school African American boys and higher-poverty students (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Barnum 2019). Previous research has also demonstrated an increase in positive school engagement, college aspirations, compassion between students, and transfer of skills learned through the arts (Bowen & Kisida, 2019).

Arts are disproportionately concentrated in well-funded schools. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to be exposed to arts experiences inside and outside of school (Barnum, 2018). Rural school districts have also seen recent arts programming cuts; this leaves many students without access to the arts like their counterparts who live in cities with close access to theatres, museums, and concert-halls that may have free entry and/or educational programs for schools. A study from the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) showed that schools with low socioeconomic economic status that had rich arts experiences performed

better on math and reading tests than schools with similar populations and resources that did not have arts rich experiences for students (Caughlan, 2008). Because of limited funding and geographical issues, many children are missing out on the academically and socially enriching benefits the arts offer.

Schools that are able to incorporate the arts (visual, musical, dramatic) do it in different ways. Some separate it from the classroom as a ‘special’ (an individual class that students are either required to take or can opt for as an elective) or as an extracurricular program usually offered to students after school hours. Other schools actively integrate art into the classroom through project learning approaches, where students create illustrations, short skits, or songs of their own. My inquiry is concerned with how *theatre* can support daily classroom curriculum and instruction. The next section will review how theatre has been used in the classroom by teachers and artists.

### **Theatre in the Classroom**

Educational theorist John Dewey theorized that people “learn as they do” (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007). Lev Vygotsky emphasized the importance of *social* interaction for learning. Viktor Lowenfeld, a renowned artist, psychologist, scholar, educator, and professor of art education at Penn State University believed that children possess a pure, creative intelligence that allows them to make sense of the world through art, specifically visual art, in a way that considers both rational thought and their personal relationship to subjects (Bruton, 2009). Like Lowenfeld and his work, much of the discussion around arts in education for young children is centered on the visual and musical arts (Brown, et. al., 2017; Trehub & Cirelli, 2018; Lowenfeld,

1956; Sunday, 2018). However, theatre is emerging as its own art in relation to early childhood art and education. It is an area of the arts that needs more research on how it can transform learning as a constructivist method such as those envisioned by Dewey and Vygotsky.

Reader's Theatre is one approach to teaching reading using theatre. Students act as the characters in adapted scripts, typically adapted from known texts or contexts. Reader's Theatre focuses on building reading fluency through repeated readings (Johnson, 2011). First, students read the adapted script as a class. Then, they analyze how the script has been adapted and how they can perform it, supporting comprehension and fluency skills. Finally, the students perform the script orally and as a group for an audience.

Reader's Theatre develops students' capacity for automaticity (decoding texts with near automatic speed that opens up cognitive space while reading) and comprehension (Johnson, 2011). Reader's Theatre also serves as an integrative approach to literacy because it can involve reading, writing (especially if students write the adapted scripts themselves as they become familiar with the process), listening, and speaking. It can be easily adapted to the classroom because there is no need for sets, costumes, props, or makeup. Students rely on their expressions and gestures to convey the meaning of the text as opposed to relying on exterior supports, such as sets and costumes that are often used in traditional theatre (Cornwell, n.d.). Reader's Theatre can be powerful in the classroom because it has been shown to increase students' motivation to engage with content, confidence as readers, and understanding of the purpose of reading (Kinniburgh & Shaw, 2007; Cornwell, n.d.).

Reader's Theatre is different than drama pedagogy, another approach to using theatre for teaching and learning. Edmiston (2007) defines drama as: "the use of pretend play for curricular ends (Peter, 2003) that is shaped to create some dramatic form (O'Neill, 1995) where adults

actively engage alongside students, both to social imagine other spaces and worlds and to extend children's learning (Heathcote, 1972)" (pg. 338). This perspective of drama is closely related to dramatic play. Edmiston (2007) used drama in the classroom to create inclusive literacy experiences for students with visual impairments; he worked with Mr. Randolph and his second-grade class. Mr. Randolph's students crafted their own stories about astronauts using their imagination and dramatic practices. Mr. Randolph assisted students by acting as a character in their stories and asking what the students' characters might be thinking or doing. According to Edmiston (2007), "drama can productively disrupt the sense of classroom normality to create spaces where children can be viewed primarily as people using their strengths in learning literacy practices, rather than as children with or without disabilities" (p. 338). Theatre as drama opened up new possibilities for Mr. Randolph's students; they used their own resources, those culturally, socially, physically related, to construct imaginative identities. These identities were then communicated through specific language chosen to reflect the characters and situation, all while supported with Mr. Randolph's careful scaffolding (Edmiston, 2007).

In another study, Husband (2014) defines drama pedagogy as: "a method of teaching and learning wherein teachers and students explore specified themes and problems through the use of unscripted and improvised dramatic activities" (p. 19). The teacher will present the students with a particular problem and the students will work in small groups to act out a scenario, sometimes using props or dramatic strategies. Following the acting, the teacher and students engage in a discussion reflecting on the experience. From this framework, students must deeply understand the context of their stories before creating and performing them.

Theatre offers a tool to deepen comprehension skills, as well as practice language patterns and enact foundational story structures, such as sequencing, cause and effect, and plot

and character building. Furthermore, Wilhelm (2007) found that drama pedagogy can be powerful for readers that are viewed from a traditional perspective as “struggling readers” because of how their dramatic roles place them inside the story (Husband, 2014). When placed inside the story, children can get to know the characters, setting, and plot of a story by taking an active role within the text.

Theatre is also used as a tool to teach science. Stroupe and Kramer (2014) conducted a study where students learned through a type of theatrical pedagogy called embodied learning, using themselves to represent phenomenon in its phases. This practice showed benefits in creating a collaborative and inclusive learning environment because students took leadership in the project, and the activity required participation from the whole class. When students are the ones creating the theatre, they can share their nuanced knowledge in a novel and public way (Segarra, et. al, 2018; Kinniburgh & Shaw, 2007). This is a powerful benefit of using theatre as a teaching tool; students go beyond rote memorization and recall to making their own performances.

As mentioned previously, some schools are able to bring professional artists into the classroom to carry out and facilitate dramatic instructional practices. The Walnut Street Theatre of Philadelphia (2019) sponsors the ‘Adopt a School Program.’ This program brings in theatre professionals to work with Philadelphia schools for students in grades K-8 based on grant approval. Each school works with the program on a three-year cycle with the intention that the teachers will learn how to integrate theatre on their own once the teaching artists leave. The program has been successful in creating performance projects by students based on their curricular content interests. This type of program cannot be brought to all schools because it relies on a relationship between a school and theatre; many schools do not have access to a local



theatre that offers this kind of programming. Thus, it becomes crucial to consider how teachers can be supported in other ways to integrate theatre, as well as how the acceptance and use of theatre as a teaching tool can be better supported by regular classroom curriculum. One way that theatre can be supported as an instructional practice that needs more research is approaching theatre through a multiliteracies lens. In the next section, I will review literature of the history and implementation of the multiliteracies framework.

### **Multiliteracies**

Multiliteracies is an expanded approach to literacy that supports diverse expressions of knowledge (Pugh, 1997; New London Group, 1996). It considers children's needs as social and cultural beings in addition to traditional expectations that literate students are able to read, write, and speak fluently. Multiliteracies move beyond print focused literacy by allowing students to make sense of texts in a variety of ways, including visual, audio, spatial, and behavioral modes (Everett, 2006). A multiliteracies approach in early childhood education aims to expand the definition of literacy from traditional understandings of reading, writing, and speech to those that embrace new tools like media, art, and technologies (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007; Everett, 2006). In doing so, multiliteracies challenge traditional literacy practices that give power to particular kinds of language and standardized assessments (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers 2007). It celebrates differences, beyond skills and knowledge (Drewry, Cumming-Potvin, & Maor, 2019). Multiliteracy embraces multiplicity and uncertainty and focuses on production and meaning (Henward & Dong, 2019). It suggests that students, mostly students in early elementary grades, approach literacy with a critical, social, and cultural lens (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007; Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; Everett, 2006). But a multiliteracies approach is not the same as

multimodal. Some of the current uses of technology in the classroom, such as using computers or iPads, may only be used to reinforce skills with educational apps or basic research, rather than further the possibilities of multiliteracies (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007). Multiliteracies intends to elevate children's experience with literacy by providing more relevant, encompassing experiences. This perspective is important because it prepares students with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills demanded of the current and future work place. It also considers students' needs and funds of knowledge as social, cultural, and active beings, thus creating more inclusive learning experiences that open rich educational opportunities for all students (Drewry, Cumming-Potvin, & Maor, 2019).

The New London Theatre Group first theorized a pedagogy of multiliteracies in response to narrow teachings of literacy. The New London Group is a team of ten researchers, each with different cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. Three researchers are from the United States, five researchers are from Australia, and two researchers are from Great Britain. The group was concerned with how to create inclusive learning environments that allow students to benefit from learning that reflects their strengths and differences. They were interested in the relationship between "immersive and explicit models of teaching," cultural and linguistic diversity, progressive modes of communication and technology, and the evolution of texts in the workplace (New London Group, 1996, p. 62). Their work has inspired new perspectives of multiliteracies and the potential the framework has to make literacy more accessible for students.

According to The New London Group (1996), multiliteracy "overcomes the limitations of traditional approaches by emphasizing how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of working, civic, and private lives of students" (p. 60). A pedagogy of multiliteracies challenges "mere literacy" concerned with

sound-letter relationships and printed text (1996, p. 64). It focuses on diverse representations of communication and literacy that go beyond language. This is critical for students who are typically excluded from rich academic experiences or seen as “struggling” readers in traditional contexts. Multiliteracies also position students and teachers as “active participants” and “active designers” who impact the future of social interactions (1996, p. 64). The teacher and student create experiences that reflect the students, are relevant to their lives, and push the perspective of literacy into new possibilities. While engaging with multiliteracies, students are thinking creatively and working together.

Previous research analyzes how multiliteracies operate in early childhood contexts. Crafton, Brennan, and Silvers (2007) conducted a study on the impact of multiliteracies on students’ critical inquiry in the first grade classroom. Using various modes and media of text, ranging from pictures to technology, the teacher facilitated discussions with the children about the privileging of certain voices and identities in stories read in class.

The primary focus story for the project was a newspaper article written about Grandma Ruth, an elderly woman who was going to be forced out of her home. From the pictures in the article, the children learned that each photograph had a story to tell just as much as the words of the text and that the photographs also carried messages related to power relationships. Following these discussions, the teacher expanded the class’ inquiry of power through role-playing. The students took roles of the characters in the article – Ruth, her neighbors, citizens, and the judge. According to Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers (2007), “as they [the students] put language to these perspectives, Mary [the teacher] pointed out how the balance of power shifted with specific words, volume, and even time allowed on ‘stage’” (p. 514). Through role-playing, a fundament of theatre, the students were using their bodies and voices to explore different perspectives of the

news story, and that the story was “more than just saving an elderly woman’s home; it was also a story of power and justice” (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007, p. 514). Later in the project, the students used technology and other multiliteracies to respond to the news story; they wrote emails, drew pictures, and crafted a class letter. Each modality used, particularly those related to technology, was simply introduced to the students, allowing them to problem solve together how to develop and navigate their responses. Thus, multiliteracies not only allow children to engage with diverse modes of communication, but they also allow children to learn from one another.

Crafton, Brennan, and Silvers’ study found multiliteracies as a way for young children to be both critical and active in their learning, responding to news stories from a socio-cultural lens. Their experiences with literacy became more authentic and representative of who they are as learners. Crafton, Brennan, and Silvers (2007) state:

Language is not just a means of communicating content; it is a student’s most likely means of accumulating knowledge and sharing it or combining it with personal experiences to formulate a personal word view... We have learned that when primary classrooms open up social learning space and encourage collective use of the available multimodal tools for the classroom culture, children and teachers transform and, in the process transform the very culture of the classroom itself” (p. 517).

Multiliteracies allows learning to become personal and transformative for students and teachers by pushing the boundaries of language.

Other studies have gathered similar findings about the power of multiliteracies to make literacy more accessible rather than exclusionary. Drewry, Cumming-Potvin, & Maor (2019) found that multiliteracies reject labels that can limit students’ learning and marginalize particular students in the classroom. They also found that students were more likely to engage with reading

and writing through multimodal means, such as an iPad, as opposed to traditional classroom practices (perhaps handwritten journaling). One student, once seen as a “struggling reader” compared to her peers, was able to advance from “surface reading” to reading from a critical perspective as she progressed with the multiliteracy practices (Drewry, Cumming-Potvin, & Maor, 2019, pg. 69). She was also able to collaborate and learn from her peers through the technology made available to support her learning.

Technology and visual art are major focuses for current research in multiliteracies. There is minimal research that links theatre to multiliteracies. My inquiry explores how dramatic pedagogy and Reader’s Theatre can operate as practices for multiliteracy. I will analyze how both approaches were used in my own teaching to interpret new possibilities for literacy. In the next chapter, I will present the context of my research, data collection methods, a brief discussion of how theatre was integrated, as well as the students who might be most positively impacted by a theatre integrated approach to multiliteracies.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

#### Context

This study took place during my student teaching practicum. I taught in a first grade classroom within a rural, Title I elementary school in central Pennsylvania. This demographic of school is one of the most at risk areas for budget cuts and low funding for the arts (Wendler, 2019). For the purposes of this study, I am going to refer to our school as Sugar Hill Elementary.

Sugar Hill is set off a beautiful mountain, in the countryside. You pass scenic farm land, ranch and farm style houses, a trailer sales park and a delicious barbeque style restaurant as you drive to school. Just after passing an old farmer's market stand and a Baptist church, you drive down a quaint road lined with houses until you reach Sugar Hill Elementary at the end. The school is one level, with a small parking lot out front and an old football field across the street.

Sugar Hill is a small school with about 215 students across four grade levels: K-3. Schoolwide, more than 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. This is significant in comparison to more affluent school districts in central Pennsylvania, like the State College Area School District where only 17% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. About 96% of the students at Sugar Hill Elementary are white (Niche). Students come from working class families, with some parents working late nights when the kids are home from school and others serving the community as farmers. Students live with and are raised by two parents, one parent, grandparents, extended family members and/or non-relative caregivers. Many of the children will be first generation college students if they choose to pursue college post high school.

I taught in a first grade, inclusive classroom with 23 students. The school received Title I services for reading and math. More than half of my students were pulled out each day to receive either or both of these services. Like any other classroom, each of my students had a wide array of skills upon arriving to first grade. Some students were fluent readers, while others were still working on mastering letters and sounds or developing strategies for decoding texts independently.

One of the biggest factors impacting Sugar Hill that year was a sudden, summer redistricting. The students who were redistricted came from Grange Elementary (another pseudonym), where 100% of students received free and reduced lunch services. Grange Elementary is also a K-3 school, but its size and demographics vary from Sugar Hill's with 548 students enrolled and 83% of students identified as white (Niche). The redistricting influenced our large class size (previous classes were made of 16-19 students), as well as students' familiarity and previous relationships with one another.

Sugar Hill does not have a separate curriculum for theatre, nor any after-school opportunities to get involved with theatre instruction and/or performance. There are also limited opportunities to get involved with theatre in the local community. The school does integrate Reader's Theatre through its *Benchmark Literacy New Standards* curriculum. It also offers the Second Step Program, a social-emotional learning curriculum which involves role-playing. Children's exposure to multimodal learning revolves around practicing foundational reading skills using apps like Freckle and Epic! on the classroom iPads during reading centers.

Sugar Hill, like many other schools, is focused on increasing students' literacy scores. Most of the literacy practices implemented in the school are focused on traditional approaches. Students are divided into guided reading groups based on beginning of the year reading

assessments and leveled readers. Whole group instruction is taught using a research-based approach to literacy that follows a sequenced curriculum. Typical reading instruction for our class at Sugar Hill drew on modeling explicit reading strategies, such as sequencing events, describing character traits, and identifying the main idea. Children transition between read alouds and mini-discussions at the carpet to practicing the strategies modeled using worksheets and graphic organizers at their table group. At the end of each unit, the students take a test provided by the district's prescribed curriculum.

***What is a need?***

As the beginning of the year progressed, I realized that my students needed teaching focused on literacy more than I had anticipated. Based on traditional testing, many of my students were identified as "struggling readers." My practice is driven by creating environments that allow each of my learners to grow and showcase their unique skills. I wondered how I could transform our literacy instruction to open up new outlets for students to express and develop their literacy skills. I also wondered: Are these traditional approaches limiting? What might my students be able to understand about reading, writing, and communicating that leveled readers and strategy teaching cannot reach? Direct instruction is a strategy proven to improve performance, however, I wanted to create a comprehensive, authentic, and deepened approach to literacy.

Another need in the classroom, especially at the beginning of the year for first grade, was to instill a sense of responsibility in students and to build community. This became even more important for my students considering the merging of their two schools. Not only were our students expected to engage in critical thinking at the first grade level, about half of our



classroom was transitioning to a completely new environment. They missed their old school and teachers, and their families were skeptical of a new place. I wondered how I could integrate collaborative learning through literacy and multidisciplinary instruction to build relationships between our children. Theatre framed from a multiliteracies perspective offered the potential to meet these needs.

### **Teacher Action-Research**

Action research was used for the purposes of this study. Strickland (1988) defines action research as “research undertaken at the action level to improve practices.” Action research stems from a need by the practicing teacher. This need is intended to improve practice through research, rather than stumble upon improved practice as a circumstantial result. As a student teacher curious about the ways that students learn best and how I can best leverage their unique intelligences, action research allowed me to explore the wonderings identified by my students’ needs while also fulfilling my responsibilities as a classroom teacher. Additionally, action research allowed me the unique perspective as both teacher and researcher. I spend every day with my students. I bring what I already know about them to the study and the development of lessons. I also learned more about my students’ strengths and needs through the research. I could consistently reshape the project based on my students’ needs because of regular, formative assessment measures. The action research model supported me in bettering my practice.

The action research model also ensured that my students were at the focus throughout my study. As a teacher, I understand and am committed to putting my students’ needs first. The research would not impede their privacy, safety, and growth. I was willing to sacrifice research

in order to provide the instruction my students' needed at particular times. Because of this, the project students participated in transformed from my beginning intentions for the research. I had planned for the students to develop their own play based on stories read and analyzed in class, an issue impacting the local community, or content my students were most interested in/had many wonderings about. After becoming more familiar with state standards for first grade, our school curriculum, and my students' needs, it was not feasible to fit the scale of that particular project in the time allowed during my practicum. This also informed my research and practice for the purpose of finding how best to integrate theatre with day-to-day content.

Through action research, I offer my teacher perspective of my students to interpret their engagement and understanding with the theatre practices implemented. As a teacher researcher, I draw from Deborah Hicks' research framework and style of narrative writing to better capture our classroom (Hicks, 2002). According to Hicks (2002):

...feeling can guide teachers and researchers to knowing in ways that are more fully responsive to the particulars of how working-class students engage with middle-class literacy practices. Students' engagements with school and institutional literacies are caught up with their searches for love and social belonging. Should not relations of feeling and valuing therefore be included in the ways in which literacy educators shape their practices and theories? (p. 2).

I acknowledge that as the primary researcher, I may be biased in how I interpret the findings. However, my role as a teacher action researcher allows me to draw on my knowledge of students as people, full of feelings, relationships, and experiences, to see how the theatre impacted them.

## **Data Collection**

Data was gathered primarily through video recordings and teacher observation. The videos were effective in allowing me to focus on my role as a teacher during class time. I analyzed the videos afterwards, paying close attention to how students were engaging with the material and one another. Multiple videos allowed me to document growth over time.

Following activities related to the project, I jotted short-hand field notes. Often, these notes were jotted on lesson plans. My recorded notes assisted me in developing more effective lessons in the future. I also collected students' self-assessments following their Reader's Theatre performances. These offered me a more comprehensive understanding of their engagement with literacy.

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board as an exempt study. Individuals in the study received and signed off on consent forms. The children provided consent by their parents' signatures and their own verbal approval. The data collected and shared in the findings are from students who I received documented consent.

## **Traditional Reader's Theatre versus Integrating Theatre**

Throughout the project, I had planned and integrated various theatrical experiences for students. Theatre became a tool for teaching the subjects, specifically reading, writing, and social studies. Theatre was also integrated as a transition strategy to increase engagement of students, break up lengthy content, and reinforce reading concepts being taught. To offer a 'brain break' between a read aloud before moving into instruction for analyzing characters, students would move as the characters they were studying. They galloped like the Billy Goats and hunched like

the troll in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Both my students and mentor seemed to enjoy these small moments of theatre.

Two approaches provided the best opportunities to reach multiliteracies through theatre within the particular confines of our classroom and my positioning. These strategies were the practices of Reader's Theatre and drama pedagogy. At the beginning of the project, I created an assessment for a social studies unit on citizenship that relied on students' improvisation and role-playing. Literacy was integrated in this project through the students' reading and analysis of scenario cards accompanied by illustrations, as well as how they chose to communicate their solutions. In order to gather information about the problem being presented, the students would need to draw clues from the words and pictures. The students pulled on their social and cultural knowledge by using their voices and bodies to act out how they would solve the problems. Each of the problems were ones they had encountered in the classroom thus far, allowing them to pull on their unique funds of knowledge.

Later in the project, students were introduced to the Reader's Theatre model. This instructional strategy was integrated through the school's prescribed reading curriculum, *Benchmark Literacy New Standards*. In addition to reinforcing the skills taught within each unit's overall focus, such as Determining Main Idea and Analyzing Characters, I facilitated conversations and focused practice on how the students would act like the characters in the scripts based on what the text and illustrations were communicating. We discussed how the characters would stand, move, and speak. The students performed their Reader's Theatre scripts in front of one another, two groups at a time, to support one another's participation as well as highlight the differences in how they can perform their roles.

## Focus Students

The names used are pseudonyms for my students' real names. Each of these students has had an experience where they have been pushed out by traditional literacy practices. This project illuminated how theatre, when used as a multiliteracy, can leverage their unique skills as readers and communicators. In the lessons described through my findings, I witnessed new ways that the students could learn to feel more connected to the content, themselves, and their peers.

Max is a shy kiddo. He is hesitant to volunteer on his own during class discussions. When placed in traditional reading contexts, he works with a middle reading group. At the time of the study, he is reading at a "B" level in his guided reading group. Guided reading groups in the classroom are determined based on students' demonstrated reading skills; this data is gathered from assessments and observation. The specific levels associated with the reading groups are related to the district's reading curriculum; they are drawn from beginning of the year reading assessments which assess phonological skills, word accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Levels range from A-Z, categorizing students as emergent to advanced fluent readers. First graders are expected to begin the year around a level D and end the year around a level I (Benchmark Education). Students can move from their beginning level based on their demonstrated reading progress in their reading group and other instructional areas; decisions are made based on data collected from periodic running records and teachers' best professional judgement. From a traditional and middle to upper class reading perspective, Max would be reading "below grade level" and would be categorized as an "emergent" reader (Benchmark Education).

Max also gets pulled from class for reading interventions with one of the school's Title I reading teachers; the teacher is most concerned with his sight word recognition. As a reader, he

is timid, quiet, and is working on sharing characters' expressions through his voice. It is difficult for me to get him to share his thinking during whole-group and small-group work. He often closes himself off from his peers, keeping to himself at his desk and on the carpet.

Joel is eager to learn and is a loyal friend. No matter the day, he is smiling. He is quiet during class discussions, but he listens carefully. In traditional literacy literature, Joel would be identified as the "lowest" reader in the class. At the time of the study, he is reading at an "AA" level. According to Benchmark Education's literacy conversion chart, this would be below the expected entry level for kindergarten. He began the school year with the "A" level guided reading group, but as the other students in his group progressed, Joel was separated into his own reading group. I worked with him one-on-one to learn letters, sounds, and basic sight words. He also received focused reading intervention with the school's Title I reading teacher. This is different from most students being pulled to work with the Title I reading teachers; they work in small groups with students needing similar instruction rather than being separated on their own. Before I finished student teaching, Joel could identify three sight words during our one-on-one guided reading time. He had difficulty writing full sentences, so he shared his stories by illustrating and describing his pictures.

Jackson is a ball of energy. During whole-group lessons at our classroom's carpet, Jackson often busies himself with tying his shoelaces. From a traditional literacy approach, he is a student in the "A" level reading group. This would mean he is reading below what is expected for his grade level and can be identified as an "emergent" reader (Benchmark Education). He writes best when he is able to have a teacher talk through his ideas with him first before putting words down to paper. During our class's personal narrative writing unit, I assisted Jackson by asking him to tell me what happened in a three-step order: beginning, middle, and end. He then

repeated the words one by one while writing them on the page. Jackson is one of the students in our classroom who moved to Sugar Hill Elementary from Grange Elementary. He and his twin brother drew a lot of attention among the school for their behavior.

My focus students were not chosen intentionally, rather, my attention to these three boys emerged from the observations and data collected. I realize that focusing on boys does not fully represent the range of experiences and identities in our classroom. However, Max, Joel, and Jackson's experiences with theatre and literacy present an interesting perspective as theatre and literacy can be gendered. Socialized cues for how boys "should behave" or what they should "like" can distance them from arts based activities or feminized school practices that include literature more appealing to girls (Telford, 1999; Scholes, 2019; Lumen Learning, n.d.).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Theatre in the Classroom: Drama Pedagogy and Reader's Theatre**

I worked to integrate theatre in a variety of ways during my student teaching practicum, but there are two lessons in particular that I will describe. These highlight the most impactful ways that theatre was integrated, as well as compare an approach to dramatic pedagogy (role-playing) against Reader's Theatre. I will focus on Max, Joel, and Jackson when describing the data collected, but I will also discuss what other students are doing during the lessons. This will offer insight to what the classroom looks like and how different students can benefit from the experience. For the first lesson, "Role-playing Classroom Citizenship" I will focus on Max. For the second lesson, "Reader's Theatre: Mother Hubbard" I will focus on Joel and Jackson. Throughout the lessons, my students are engaging with multiliteracies, connecting with material more deeply, developing positive reader identities, and finding a sense of belonging in the classroom. I will discuss these four points in greater depth in the next chapter.

#### **Role-playing Classroom Citizenship: Part I**

It is mid-September. The leaves have not begun to change colors yet, and despite me wearing extra layers, the children are holding onto wearing their shorts and t-shirts for the remaining days of just warm enough weather. We still have beginning of the year butterflies, but the children are beginning to fall into their routines with one another in class. We are just a few days from reaching the first month in First Grade mark. It is nearing the end of the day as we start our first drama infused lesson.



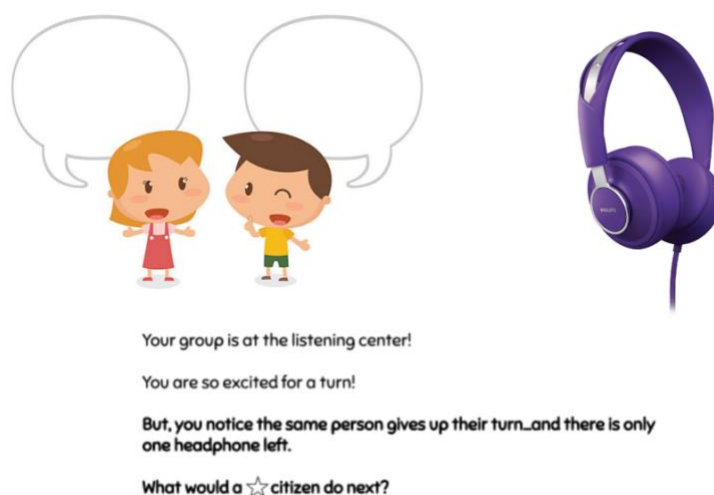
The lesson is carefully crafted to address students' understanding of school citizenship through embodied literacy. Theatre will serve as an assessment tool, but also as a way for children to practice different modes of reading and communicating with one another. Lessons prior introduced students to the qualities and behaviors valued in school, as defined by Pennsylvania standards and Sugar Hill Elementary's social studies curriculum guide book. The goal of the lesson is for students to be able to work together to identify and solve problems in our classroom community. In doing this, they demonstrate what it looks like and sounds like to be a responsible school citizen. Literacy is integrated in the way children read their scenario cards, plan their problem solving, and communicate their solutions.

After returning from special, the children meet me at our monster carpet in the front of the classroom. I jumpstart our lesson by asking whether the students have ever seen a play before. I see a mix of wide eyes and confused faces. About half of the class waves their hands in the air excitedly to show they have seen a play. I remind the students about their field trip to see the high school's musical the previous year. Immediately following my remark, more students shoot their hands into the air to wave at me.

Max is one of these students. I share with the class that today it is their turn to be performers. Eyes brighten, smiles gleam, and a few eyebrows raise. Max's mouth drops open. This reaction catches my eye. He is not usually one to react strongly; he has been rather neutral and quiet in response to our class activities thus far. I point out how excited Max is to the rest of the class. I have never seen him react with so much expression. His positive, unexpected response excites me as his teacher; this activity might bring him out of his shell.

After explaining the performance task, I invite four students to the front of the classroom to help model a scenario the students might find on their cards. I developed this scenario based

on a problem I saw recurring at our classroom's listening center: four headphones for more than four students in some reading groups. Three students act out using the headphones to start; they hold pretend headphones and bob their heads back and forth, showing they are listening to the audio book being played. I join the play with the students. I voice that I am a student who always gets to use the headphones, and I notice that one of my group members rarely does. I read the scenario card [Figure 1] to help me and the students set-up our scene.



**Figure 1. Task used for whole-group modeling.**

Max is one of the students called to help demonstrate the scenario. He stands in front of the class, still quiet, as he is one of the students using the headphones and does not have any lines. Instead, he is using his body to show how he would hold the headphones. He bobs back and forth and a smile peaks through. In this scenario, Max is creating a story without having to be the one carrying the lines. His part is crucial to the story because he sets the stage for how the problem might occur and provides an embodied context for the other children watching his performance. Max and the other students already have headphones, and this leads to the problem

at hand. Max's participation highlights his insight to how his "character" would behave in the circumstance.

After Max and his peers have set the stage for the problem, I invite the rest of the class to share suggestions for how best to solve the problem. Several students are eager to help solve the problem, raising their hands quickly into the air almost immediately following my question. One student suggests that I say "thank you" to Kyle (the student in our scenario who does not have headphones). Another student suggests that I give the headphones to Kyle. We revisit the key detail in the scenario: that I know Kyle always gives up the headphones. I explain that had I said the "thank you" that was suggested instead of giving Kyle the headphones, I would not be the star citizen I hope to embody; Kyle would still be excluded from using the headphones. By crafting the story together in this way, we consider how different social and behavioral cues imply different meanings. The children are building their own dynamic literacy, being critical of underlying messages of our words and actions.

Following our collaborative story building, the students and I perform the scenario for the rest of the class. While students were focused on tying their shoes or were captivated by other posters in the room earlier in the lesson, they are now watching their classmates attentively. They are seeing literacy in action, listening and learning from behavioral choices rather than reading from a page and imagining the scenario in their own brains.

After watching the videos back, I notice how often my students are itching to move on the carpet, in this specific lesson and other lessons too. They often find themselves scooted into other children's space on the carpet. This led me to wonder: How can I create lessons that get students involved and moving to increase engagement and allow them to connect with their natural tendencies to move? The second part of the citizenship lesson and the students' final

Reader's Theatre performance would help address that, and this became a new sub-focus for my inquiry.

### **Role-playing Classroom Citizenship: Part II**

It is two days later when we revisit this lesson. We meet at our monster carpet again so I can share that today is the day that all of the students get the chance to be star performers! I remind the students to use their actions and words to help them perform. I describe how they can do this using theatre terms such as “props” and “lines.” Contextualizing their communication through these terms is a way to use theatre to create dynamic literacy experiences. The students would have a card with prompts and illustrations to help them develop their solutions; a concrete, multimodal text that the props and lines can be drawn from. I also encourage the students to use their imagination; they have the freedom to choose how they will communicate their problem solving skills. Before letting the students begin creating scenes, I emphasize that a key part of the exercise is that they work together to create their skits, and each student plays a role, however the group deems fit.

As the students begin working in their small groups, there is chatter and smiles. Some students are working at the monster carpet. Others are by the water fountain or at their desks. One group is at the fish pond carpet next to the classroom library. The children are building their stories in the real-life context of their scenario. They can access those “props” that bring a multidimensional aspect to their performance. I hear them working together to decide which objects they will use.

Mrs. Bell (pseudonym), my mentor teacher, and I travel around the classroom to meet with the students. Curious as to how the students have begun to understand their cards, I ask the

group at the monster carpet (Group One), “What is the problem?” This question helps us to reason with the scenario *first*. My students can hear what one another is thinking about the situation posed to help them draft their own story. While we are discussing, I see how focused my students are: their eyes are on the scenario card, thinking about how they might act it out. They eagerly wave their hands in the air to share the ideas that pop into their head.

During our brainstorm discussion, I hear that one of my students does not fully understand the context of the story. Their group has been tasked with showing how classmates should respond when another classmate is raising their hand to ask a question [Figure 2]. I can help him see that his partner is the character who is asking a question, even though she is not the boy in the picture. So, although he wants to talk and thinks the student asking the question should be a boy, his role can be something different. He then understands that it is his turn to be the listener in the story. Roles in theatre are like rules in a game; students act by what makes sense for their character in the play. This kind of practice within specific, yet realistic boundaries can help students transfer such skills to similar situations in the classroom.

While there may be boundaries for how characters might behave in the story, there are less boundaries for how many characters exist in theatre, especially experimental theatre or role-playing. This group of three students start with the two characters on their scenario cards: the student asking the question and the student modeling whole-body listening for their classmates. Then, one of them recognizes a need for a third character that she could play: the teacher. She would be the one responsible for calling on Morgan (playing the student asking the question) in order to get their skit started. When I leave them to visit another group, they jump off the carpet, beaming and giggling, as they start planning how they will act it out.



**Figure 2. Group One task.**

I head over to talk to Max and his partner, Cara who are working at the yellow table group (they are Group Two). Their scenario card [Figure 3] tells and illustrates that a child's pencil box is in another child's (their shoulder mate's) table space. I check in with them asking, "How are you showing how star citizens would act this out?" They already have a story plan in place. Cara explains that she is the one who is speaking in the skit, while Max, her partner listens. She shares her lines: "May...can you please move that, it's in my way." After sharing what they want to say, it takes Cara and Max some time to decide what their actions will be. Cara initiates moving the pencil boxes, saying, "Now you put your pencil box in front of mine and I will tell you something." Cara rehearses the lines she shared with me minutes before, and Max reacts by taking his pencil box back. After the exchange, Cara says "thank you" and Max responds to Cara, "you're welcome," adding another line to the story to give a natural response for his character.

In a traditional context, Cara is a strong reader. She loves to share her ideas during our classroom discussions, raising her hand often and sometimes getting so excited that she shouts out the answer or adds a comment just after I have finished asking a question. She reads in our

class's "second highest" guided reading group. Her group is reading at the expected grade level (Benchmark Education). Cara's confident, expressive personality encourages Max to open up while they are building their script. They discuss their skit and consider what is coming next. Once they finish rehearsing, they both are looking ahead to continuing the activity tomorrow, speculating that they will get another scenario to act out.



**Figure 3. Group Two task.**

After about seven minutes of practice time, I call the students back to the monster carpet for a performance. We have just enough time before the end of the school day for one group to share their skit. Cara and Max are eager to present their scenario for the rest of the class, raising their hands when I ask for volunteers. Cara frames their scenario for the class before the two of them perform their short skit, explaining clearly what she would say to Max. Max shows he is listening, waiting for Cara to give him the pencil box back. While they are acting, the rest of the class listens and watches their performance closely. We have a brief conversation as a class discussing what the students saw from the performance regarding star school citizenship.

Before we pack-up for the day, we give our performers a round of applause and Mrs. Bell shares excitedly how much fun she had with the activity. Our students respond with a loud, enthusiastic "Yeah!". Throughout the lesson, our room was lively with discussion and practice

while students created their own stories during the ‘workshop’ time. There was laughter, debate, and play all within an academically focused environment. The students were able to use their own words and gestures to communicate, working with one another to select and reflect on these choices, all components of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996). The students were also engaged in the lesson, immersing themselves as designers and characters in their scripts, and focusing their energies towards their role in their group’s skit more than towards what might be considered distracting behaviors. Their collaboration offered a way for the students to begin building relationships with one another that would ground our classroom community for the remainder of the school year.

### **Reader’s Theatre: Old Mother Hubbard**

It is a brisk, late October morning, just more than a month since our first theatre lesson. Over the past week, our class has been working hard to analyze and embody their characters from our second Reader’s Theatre script, *Old Mother Hubbard’s Hungry Family* from the *Benchmark Literacy New Standards* curriculum. Today the students will perform their roles in front of the class. Through their performance, they will practice reading with fluency and expression, learn by listening to one another, and reflect on their own progress as readers. Before today, the students worked with other students in the same roles as them to talk about and act out how they would sound, stand, and feel. We also focused on reading at a medium pace that both listeners and readers can understand, as well as how and why taking a short pause at commas adds inflection to increase text comprehension. Now, it is the students’ turn to show all that they have learned with and in front of one another.



Like any piece of theatre, our script varies in character personalities and length of lines. The students are in roles that reflect their strengths as readers, as well as their interests in how the characters are embodied. They are challenged in the way that they represent those characters for an audience. The context of our script is relevant to many of the students. This allows for a deepened literacy experience where the students can more easily draw on and share cultural and social insight related to the characters.

Before we start the performances, the students remind one another what it means to be both an actor and audience member. The students share that star performers “act like [the] person” they are portraying (i.e. their character) and “work together” with the other students in their group. They also share that respectful audience members are “listening” to the performance. These conversations are an important part of the students’ exposure to theatre. We do not have these same discussions when we are in our guided reading groups because the approach focuses on students reading the texts on their own, as opposed to presenting with one another as a group.

Our first group of performers take the stage, our monster carpet. They stand tall and look intently at their scripts, getting ready to begin. As the play starts and their peers are reading, they listen closely and follow along. They offer one another encouraging looks, smiling and watching each other as they take their turn to read. When it is their chance to read, the students speak loudly and their smiles reach from ear to ear.

At the start of his group’s performance, Joel is looking and following his group members. He seems hesitant. As he continues to perform, his confidence grows and he begins to lead his group members. He speaks his character’s lines loudly, not even looking at his script. He even adds vocal and body choices to show how his character would act. Other students stumble through their lines, but not Joel. It’s a small, but powerful moment for Joel. Typically, he is

separated during reading or does not offer to volunteer in whole-group readings and/or discussions, but here, it is the other students' turn to listen and hear him.

Then, as Jackson reads, he is standing tall, focusing on his script. I have rarely seen him this narrowed in on a task before. He is really thinking about how he can sound like his character. The performance allows him to move naturally while he is acting. If he were reading at the guided reading table, he might be reminded to calm his body down. But here, he is in a space that accepts, encourages, and is enhanced by his free movement. His energy is channeled to the task, rather than seen as a possible distraction for his or other students' learning.

The performers have finished and they take a bow for their audience. The students are beaming. We then take some time to reflect on their performance using a self-assessment guide. The students are moving beyond simply reading the text to thinking critically about themselves as performance readers. Jackson responds positively to his performance. He gives himself smiley faces, the highest rating, to focus skills such as: using his voice to show the characters' feelings, saying the lines like the character, using punctuation marks to know how to say the words, and listening to the other readers. He also identifies that he fixed his mistakes while reading. Joel responds differently. He is much more critical of his performance than I expect. He gives himself the highest ratings for his speech: saying the lines like the characters and reading with good speed. He identifies his areas of growth as using his voice to show the characters' feelings, using punctuation marks to say the words (I believe this reaction comes from his character not having commas like we focused on in class previously), and acting like the character.

I gather the students' self-assessment sheets, and we wrap up their performance day with a critical discussion about the purpose of Reader's Theatre. Mrs. Bell joins in, asking the students to think about something they did really well, as well as something they want to keep

practicing. Some students share they want to work on their emotions – being happy versus sad. Other students share they want to continue practicing reading at a good speed so that others can both hear and understand them. This discussion taps into the students' understanding of others' participation in their reading. Through theatre, literacy has become a shared, social event, and they see more clearly how their expression can create a more dynamic experience with reading.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

In this chapter, I will analyze my findings to consider new possibilities for literacy teaching and learning in the elementary school classroom using theatre and multiliteracies. I will revisit my primary inquiry question: How can theatre work as a multiliteracy in first grade curriculum? To do this, I will compare our class' uses of theatre through drama pedagogy and Reader's Theatre. I will also revisit my sub-inquiry questions: What can be gained when the elementary classroom teacher is the one leading the integration of theatre in the classroom? As well as, how might theatre and multiliteracy practices impact anti-bias and social justice oriented teaching and learning?

#### **New Possibilities for Literacy**

According to Deborah Hicks (2002), literacies are “instructional modes of talking, reading, and writing” (p. 1). This view of literacy is popular in traditional pedagogy. However, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century society, we cannot consider literacy in past contexts alone. We must define it in new terms in order to teach our students justly in an ever-changing, quickly evolving world. According to Alber (2013), a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner is expected to be a “problem solver, critical thinker, and effective collaborator and communicator.” Literacy skills tied to these new expectations include: “Develop relationships with others and confront and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally” and “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia

texts.” Today’s literacy involves collaboration and creativity, key aspects for both multiliteracies and theatre.

As discussed previously, multiliteracies extend beyond traditional literacy practices to include practices for engaging with multimodal texts (i.e. technologies, music, art) which consider the influence of students’ cultural and social interactions. Through multiliteracies, students are not just considering their own socio-cultural contributions, but those of their classmates’, as well as how they negotiate their understanding of literacy and communication together. Students’ interactions with one another through multiliteracies is crucial to developing as literate beings because students will be expected to communicate with others in a variety of ways in their future careers. Multiliteracies also create equitable learning environments because they welcome students’ diverse participation, interests, and natural tendencies, especially for students like Max, Joel, and Jackson who can be excluded from traditional literacy approaches.

### **Theatre as a Multiliteracy**

Considering the literature surrounding multiliteracies, theatre worked as a multiliteracy in our first grade classroom at Sugar Hill Elementary. Through theatre, students’ engaged with literacy beyond traditional literacy practices for first grade which focus on decoding print texts or sharing one’s voice primarily through writing. Theatre operated as a multiliteracy in the following ways: (1) drawing on students’ understanding of both verbal and physical modes of reading and communicating; (2) providing a space to think critically about socio-cultural and behavioral implications; and (3) encouraging students to collaborate as designers and participants of a new “social future” (New London Group, 1996). Theatre as a multiliteracy also tapped into the skills demanded of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy.

I will share brief examples of how each of these conclusions was reached. (1) Students used their actions in addition to their words to construct their script and characters. Students stood tall if they were the narrators of the Reader's Theatre text to communicate that their character had lines that demanded the audience's attention. Their actions also progressed their stories, such as when Max responded to Cara's lines by moving the pencil box prop; his gesture resolved the conflict in their script. (2) During our first lesson, students compared the impact of two different responses to a problem, reasoning with how two known social interactions for the scenario led to different results. For example, if they said "thank you" to the student not taking the headphones (Kyle in our model scenario), as they might have done before in the classroom, this would limit the possibilities of sharing materials by offering the student the headphones through a simple gesture. (3) The students and I could design a new "social future" by giving them the power to develop their own skit during our classroom citizenship lesson. Their creations included literacy skills for reading, speaking, and listening while breaking beyond traditional practices that pre-define students' roles and how they should communicate. Students met 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy skills in the following ways. They worked together to create scripts that solved a problem, and they also analyzed how they could represent their Reader's Theatre characters using varied tone of voice, actions, and vocal emphasis. The analysis below will offer additional, more detailed examples of how theatre worked as a multiliteracy in these ways during our classroom lessons.

### ***Drama Pedagogy: Our Citizenship Role-Playing***

Multiliteracies draw on various modes of meaning making, from linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and behavioral. Behavioral, or "gestural" ways of communicating draw on body

language (Robertson, 2011). Spatial refers to “environmental and architectural spaces” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 79-80). While role-playing, the students used their bodies as a way to communicate. Students also used other elements, or “props,” to aid in their storytelling. This embodied performance is a central point of the multiliteracies approach that allowed Max to use and move his body to enhance his group’s skit. Max used his arms to represent headphones for our class demonstration, but he also used a pencil box when working with Cara. These actions and props progressed the story further and relied on, as well as took into consideration, the physical space of the room they were working in and building their stories around. More importantly, the students were the ones who included these elements in their stories, making the choices that add meaning to their texts. In traditional contexts, students rely on the text as their primary means of making sense. With theatre, students can demonstrate their understanding of a text using a variety of resources, both personal and within the classroom context.

While the students were developing their scenes, Mrs. Bell and I asked questions about the context of their scene and the choices they were making. These questions were critical in helping the students be critical designers. We reasoned with scenarios to assist the students in considering which words and actions might be best. This also led to students’ considering which characters were still needed in the script that might not have been considered before, as Group One did when one of the group members realized she could fill a role to add an important layer to the scene; she would be the teacher that needed to call on the student raising their hand so that the other student could demonstrate whole-body listening. The improvisation allowed through this kind of drama pedagogy allowed students to tap into the critical thinking aspect of the multiliteracies framework (New London Group, 1996; Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007).

Theatre allowed Max to access literacy in a way he had not experienced before. By working with Cara, as co “designers,” he was able to move beyond practicing sight words or working through decoding a leveled text as we would normally do during his guided reading group (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007). In this context, he was able to reason through his *own* words and actions. Additionally, the skit created a place that complimented Max’s skills. He might not always be the student who is leading the conversation and reading, but he can show that he understands what is being read and communicated through his intentional movements. He and Cara made meaning through multimodal forms of communication, ranging from linguistics to gestural to spatial (Robertson, 2011).

### ***Reader’s Theatre***

The Reader’s Theatre used in our classroom provided a script for the students. These scripts were drawn from popular nursery rhymes. Other approaches using this model allow students to adapt the script themselves. If this approach is followed, the possibilities for multiliteracies is even greater. Giving students roles and lines requires the teacher to make an assumption of some level regarding students’ reading abilities. This has the potential to be a limiting practice that excludes particular readers, reflective of some techniques used in traditional literacy approaches. However, when carried out appropriately, theatre allows students the freedom to add movement to their expression, drawing on the behavioral, or gestural modes of communication allowed by multiliteracies.

During the lessons leading to our culminating performance described above, the students worked with one another to consider social and behavioral choices that accurately reflected their character. These included the tone of voice, speed of their voice, and character’s stance. They



collaborated with others playing the same character, and then we compared as a whole class how and why each character would be different. Additionally, the students' cultural and social understanding of rural farming added to their ability to construct characters in our first Reader's Theatre script, *Old Macdonald's Noisy Farm*. Students could think critically about these aspects in traditional literacy contexts, however, Reader's Theatre allowed them the opportunity to test these differences for themselves while acting out the characters. The New London Group (1996) would categorize this practice under the multiliteracies framework for "*Situated Practice: immersion in experience and the utilization of available discourses*" and "*Critical Framing: interpreting the social and cultural context of particular Designs of meaning*" (p. 88). The power of these practices is that students can recognize differences and prepare to "negotiate these differences" in their social futures (The New London Group, 1996, pg. 89).

The students expanded their critical thinking skills further by reflecting on their performance. They inquired about their own reading through theatre, answering the following questions: (1) Did my reading sound like talking? (2) Did I use my voice to show the character's feelings? (3) Did I say the lines like the character would say them? (4) Did I use the punctuation marks to help me know how to say the words? (5) Did I read with a good speed? (6) Did I fix mistakes when I read? (7) Did I act like the character? (8) Did I listen carefully to the other readers? Our discussion around these questions not only allowed students to look within themselves as readers and communicators, but it also provided them the opportunity to consider various factors that go into being a fluent reader and effective communicator. This also allowed students like Joel and Jackson the chance to work on "higher-level" skills that are often excluded from traditional literacy activities based on their reading scores. Typically, students like Joel and Jackson answer questions focused on "lower-level" skills in Bloom's taxonomy, such as

identifying and retelling. During Reader's Theatre, they can join the other students in thinking more deeply about the ways they, as actors, can make meaning through performance.

These theatre lessons afforded students the opportunity to make sense of literacy through their own leadership. By considering the socio-cultural influences of playing characters and developing language for a scene, my students were learning through social constructivism. In a social constructivist approach, students make meaning by collaborating with one another, or co-constructing knowledge (Berkeley, n.d., Robertson, 2011, Katsarou, 2009). According to Stone (1993), a researcher of social contexts' impact on children's learning, "the potential for learning within the zone of proximal development [is] not dependent on fixed attributes of the learner, but rather [varies] as a function of interpersonal relationships and interaction between participants" (Cumming-Potvin, 2008, pg. 488). Thus, students' most enriching literacy experiences come from working with other students to explore different ways of communicating that both reflect who the students are as well as what makes most sense for the context of the story being constructed.

### **What else?**

When theatre served as a multiliteracy, I saw my students as different readers. They surpassed expectations from a traditional perspective, making our theatrical experiences with literacy their own. I found that students were able to connect with material more deeply, develop positive reader identities, and find a sense of belonging in the classroom. These findings can be expressed in the following three categories related to engagement, reader identity, and belonging.

Each of these contributes to the possibility of creating more equitable literacy teaching and learning through theatre and multiliteracies.

### ***Engagement***

When students were developing their skits for our role-playing activity and performing for one another, they were noticeably more invested in the material. They were eager to share their ideas and they watched one another carefully. They were vocal about enjoying the activities. Carol Tomlinson, a leader in Differentiation, states, “Honoring students’ interests is also beneficial because it boosts students’ motivation to learn” (Wu, 2013, pg. 128). In first grade, content is important, but it is also important that children develop a positive attitude about school. Theatre can spark that initial excitement to learn that leads to deeper engagement with content.

That spark was seen in Max. As a child who typically does not volunteer on his own during whole-group read alouds, small-group guided reading discussions, and discussions in other subject areas, he raised his hand to participate in the demonstration skit and to perform his and Cara’s skit for the class. This opens up an opportunity for him to connect more deeply with the classroom and see how he can help others learn. His willingness to engage communicates an excitement for learning and a recognition that he feels welcomed in the learning space. When students are excited and connected, the possibilities for what they can achieve are that much greater.

### ***Reader Identity***

Students' increased engagement with literacy builds a positive sense of reader identity. Someone like Joel, who finds himself in his own reading group and who rarely shares during class discussions, is speaking confidently and leading his group during the Reader's Theatre performance. Theatre also complimented Joel's outgoing personality, allowing him to use his expression to create a more dynamic character while also working on his fluency as a reader. Before performing the Reader's Theatre script, we workshopped the students' performance by reading and listening to a digital, audio version of the text projected on the SMART Board screen, and discussing the characters in the play. Listening to the story and his peers' supported Joel's strengths in listening.

For Jackson, theatre complimented his natural tendencies to move. This became a strength while performing rather than a hindrance to his reading because he could use his body to express his character. Our theatre lessons also provided Jackson a space to be independent; he identifies that he is able to fix his own mistakes while reading and he initiates his participation. Theatre creates a space where students' strengths and unique skills are valued.

Highlighting students' strengths while learning affects their academic growth. These strengths are tied to a student's "learning profile" which considers how children approach learning (Wu, 2013, p. 128). Tomlinson states, "if a child does not process information orally very well, but a teacher teaches orally most of the time, then the student is not going to learn well" (Wu, 2013, p. 128). While theatre might not be the best way for every child to learn, its basic practices, especially when approached from a multiliteracies lens, can draw on the skills that help students learn best. This is especially important for children whose learning profiles do not align with traditional practices.

### ***Belonging***

Hicks (2002) adds an important consideration to teaching literacy, stating in regards to her own study on literacy learning for working class children: “Students searches for social belonging are as much a part of learning in school as anything that might be described as cognitive or even discursive” (p. 1). Collaboration does not guarantee belonging in the classroom community, but it works towards it. Furthermore, when the students are working on a script as a class or in small groups, outside of their leveled reading groups, they can see themselves as contributors to a shared goal. Students like Joel and Jackson were performing right alongside their peers who typically carry conversations in the classroom. The students were captivated by one another’s performances, really watching as they took their turns to act. The sheer ritual of applauding one another following a theatrical performance validates the students’ participation. It is yet another way that the students can communicate with one another, while also building positive relationships. These relationships create bonds that welcome children into the classroom and elevate possibilities for learning, especially for my students who were navigating a new school environment.

Theatre offered a new way of learning for my students. It challenged traditional curriculum that labels and essentially ranks students’ reading abilities by their test taking skills. By working on a performance together, each student played an essential role. Theatre is naturally differentiated, as it values unique interpretations by each actor. This creates inclusive spaces for all kinds of learners. Theatre can tap into anti-bias and social justice teaching and learning in its ability to defy assumptions of the “right” way to engage with literacy. It values skills beyond

reading, writing, and speaking by bringing in social, emotional, physical, and artistic skills; skills that students who might not be “academically inclined” can excel in. When scripts explore diverse identities and experiences, theatre can push even further into anti-bias and social justice teaching and learning.

### **Limitations**

The way theatre operated in our classroom was still constricted by the expectations of curriculum as well as what I was able to create as a student teacher. Our Reader’s Theatre script was provided by the district’s research-based reading curriculum, rather than created by the students. This limits the full abilities of the students to make meaning of language and communication on their own, as well as explore some of their curiosities with the topics they are already learning about or issues they might see in their everyday lives. It also limits the ability to allow students the opportunity to bring their own language into the classroom, full of their unique cultural and social connotations.

The study was also limited by the full extent that I could engage the students in basic theatre practices. Because I had to follow a prescribed curriculum, there was very little time or space to go “off-script.” While the students used their bodies to perform, we did not spend time experimenting with different kinds of gestures, as I normally would with students I teach in my musical theatre summer camp sessions. The prescribed curriculum also restricted what kinds of texts and resources could be brought into the classroom. This impacted our ability to reach fully anti-bias work in terms of representation, such as exploring students’ perceptions of different identities and experiences, perhaps like those of children living in urban environments.

If students are able to be exposed to literature and content that move away from a predominantly white, middle-class, English-speaking narrative, they can see literacy and language that includes various dialects, languages, and cultures reflective of society. This is the essence of multiliteracies: creating new possibilities for what kinds of texts and language practices are accepted in the classroom for teaching and learning. Students who do not align with the predominant narrative can see themselves reflected in content and have a greater chance at excelling in their school work, rather than be excluded by the limitations of traditional practices that focus on a white, English-speaking, Eurocentric view. Students can also see how their realities of communicating with family members, neighbors, and friends is valuable to learning how to read, write, and share material. This brings what our communities and world look like into the class, preparing students for interactions outside of school in the present and future (New London Group, 1996).

Finally, my role as a student teacher limited my time in the classroom. I was only with my students for the first half of their first grade year, so I could not fully compare their progress as critical thinkers and creators from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. As a student teacher, I was navigating the beginning challenges of teaching while being a researcher. This made it difficult to document our study to the full extent possible. As I continue in my career as an educator, I look forward to opportunities to further my research and discover new possibilities for integrating inclusive practices, like theatre, in the classroom.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

When I began my inquiry, I was concerned with how I could not only better meet the needs of my students, but truly elevate their learning experiences. I experienced transformative learning through theatre and whole-body, immersive practices, so I wanted to bring these experiences to my students. I wondered how theatre might highlight strengths that traditional teaching practices are not able to, or might even exclude. From research and my own personal experiences, I know that the arts can positively impact academic growth as well as social emotional development. However, in the specific context of my student teaching placement, theatre was not as readily accessible to my young learners. I wondered: How can the classroom teacher integrate theatre with limited resources and access?

My wonderings led me to investigate the integration of theatre from a broad context, considering how theatre might be applied across multiple content areas. As I got to know my students as learners and people, I narrowed my focus. I turned to the relationship between theatre and literacy. I looked to the framework for multiliteracies because of the pedagogical approach's inclusive nature, and its focus on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills demanded of new conceptions of literacy and my students' futures.

My student teaching practicum site, referred to as Sugar Hill Elementary for this study, focused on traditional literacy practices provided by Title I funding and researched instructional strategies for lessening achievement gaps. I was skeptical of the limitations these practices brought. Traditional literacy favors middle and upper class language and cultural understandings, but most of my students were from working class families. It is one of my highest priorities as an educator to create comprehensive, authentic, and deepened approaches to learning, especially for



literacy. Theatre and multiliteracies presented a possibility to provide my students with literacy experiences that reflected their own strengths and values.

While I used theatre as a strategy for teaching personal narrative writing and giving students ‘brain breaks’ that also reinforced relevant reading concepts, the findings from my inquiry focus primarily on two other ways that I integrated theatre in the classroom. These were using a form of drama pedagogy to teach social studies and Reader’s Theatre to teach reading. Literacy skills were deeply considered and highlighted in each of the lessons regardless of the subject area.

Theatre provided new possibilities for my students to develop in their literacy. Our theatre lessons pulled on the multiliteracies framework by drawing on students’ understanding of both verbal and physical modes of reading and communicating, providing a space to think critically about socio-cultural and behavioral implications on meaning making, and encouraging students to collaborate in a way that reaches 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy skills. In addition to addressing literacy, the collaborative nature of theatre allowed my students to work together at a time of transition for many of them, having unexpectedly redistricted from a very different elementary school that summer. Our school was very clearly navigating a new mix of class and race.

Our work provided my students with a chance to engage with an art most of them had not experienced before, but after seeing their participation, really enjoyed working on. Through theatre, my students learned new ways to read and communicate. They developed stories laced in meaning, with a freedom to draw on their own choices for language and behavior. They thought critically about how different words and gestures impact the way we understand one another and texts, which characters could be included in stories, and how they grew as readers. We met

district curriculum and state reading standards in a new way by allowing students to analyze characters by actually being them.

Theatre impacted three students in particular who, from a traditional perspective, are viewed as “below average” or “struggling” readers. Theatre as a multiliteracies allowed them to connect with content, themselves, and their peers in a way they had not been able to before in our classroom. They could break out of the limitations that might be placed on their leveled, reading groups; groups which divide students into a kind of “reading hierarchy” based on their performance on traditional, standardized reading assessments. Max could be expressive, a skill he was working on in reading and in his own peer relationships. He was able to use his body to communicate and create important story elements with the help of a classmate who helped bring him out of his shell. Joel was given a chance to read with his peers; he transformed this into an opportunity to lead, negating perceptions of him as a “lone reader” in his own guided reading group. Jackson channeled his exuberant energy towards a character of interest. Theatre relied on his body and natural movements, unlike traditional practices that might try to limit them by sitting to read and write. These boys could practice skills they might not be exposed to during their separate reading groups and interventions.

As a class, my students were engaged, confident, and connected. These findings push for possibilities in deeper learning and inclusive classrooms. Theatre defied ability defined by reading tests. There was not a “right” way to be literate; rather, the students could discover literacy through their own leadership and collaboration. Our engagement with theatre is just a beginning step towards bringing multiliteracies into the classroom through theatre. Our work was not without flaws, and there is always room to improve and discover more about ways that children learn best. Furthermore, our experiences with theatre were unique to our classroom.

Theatre will operate differently in other classrooms based on the specific needs, personalities, experiences, and identities of the students, as well as the role each teacher plays.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I will continue to bring theatre into my classroom because I believe in its power to transform learning and build relationships between students. While I am very proud of the work we did in our class, I envision using theatre in a different way as I move forward. Husband (2014) offers an approach to drama pedagogy that aligns with my next goals. I want to focus more deeply on what my students feel is necessary to share through dramatic storytelling. I plan to explore themes and problems my students determine using unscripted, improvised, and student-developed activities. With practice, my students will make sense of these topics by creating scripts of their own. Through this work, we will look into the relationships between linguistic and cultural differences more deeply, returning back to one of The New London Group's foci when theorizing multiliteracies. Our work will reflect many races, ethnicities, classes, cultures, languages, and dialects; my students will see both themselves and learn from the experiences of others to conceptualize and create discourses that are truly representative of our diverse society.

My inquiry has led me to know wonderings. I wonder how theatre can be better aligned with social justice standards for education to open new possibilities for equity and anti-bias teaching. I also wonder what this might look like in a different classroom context, for a teacher who does not have an arts background, and/or over a longer period of time in the classroom. I am curious as to what can be gained when theatre is paired with media and technologies to delve into the more popular pieces of the multiliteracies framework; how closely tied can theatre and

multiliteracies be? Since my focus students happened to be boys in this inquiry, I wonder how girls' experiences might be different. How can we empower our young girls through theatre and multiliteracies? What about students of color? Students who are multilingual English learners?

My inquiry has helped me grow tremendously as an educator and reflective practitioner. I am incredibly proud of the way my students embraced a new way of learning with one another. I am grateful for the opportunity to integrate a “non-traditional” approach with traditional contexts. My students and our work makes me hopeful for the future. As an educator, my work in bettering my practice never stops. This inquiry will continue, growing and changing with each new class of students I have the privilege of teaching. I am excited by the possibilities of creating even deeper, more authentic learning experiences for my students through theatre. I hope this work can bring new understandings to what it means to build classrooms and schools that are inclusive, collaborative, and transformative.

## Appendix A

### IRB Approval



**Office for Research Protections**  
 Vice President for Research  
 The Pennsylvania State University  
 205 The 330 Building  
 University Park, PA 16802

814-865-1775  
 Fax: 814-865-8699  
 orp@psu.edu  
 research.psu.edu/orp

#### EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

**Date:** September 30, 2019

**From:** Joyel Moeller,

**To:** Shannon Walker

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Theatre in the First Grade Classroom
Principal Investigator:	Shannon Walker
Study ID:	STUDY00013199
Submission ID:	STUDY00013199
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walker, Semi-Structured Interview.docx (0.01), Category: Recruitment Materials</li> <li>• Walker, Theatre in First Grade HRP-591 - Protocol for Human Subject Research.pdf (0.02), Category: IRB Protocol</li> </ul>

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

This correspondence should be maintained with your records.

We would like to know how the IRB Program can better serve you. Please fill out our survey; it should take about a minute: <https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/feedback>.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

# Shannon Walker

### EDUCATION

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**The Pennsylvania State University**, University Park, PA May 2020  
*The Schreyer Honors College*

Certification: Pennsylvania Educator, Pk-4

Bachelor of Science in Elementary and Early Childhood Education

Minors in Special Education, Education Policy Studies, and Theatre

**Relevant Coursework:** Short-term student-teach abroad in Thessaloniki Greece (Nov.-Dec. 2019):  
experience teaching English to students in Grades 1 to 11; Social Emotional Learning Pilot Seminar  
(Jan.-May 2019)

### HONORS & SCHOLARSHIP

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*The Dean's List* (Fall 2016 – Present), *College of Education Student Marshall* (Spring 2020), *The Lucy Valero Scholarship*, *SPSEA Leadership Scholarship*, *Penn State College of Education Student Teaching Abroad Scholarship*, *Heand Johns Silvestri Scholarship in Education*, *Penn State Provost Award*

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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**First Grade Student Teacher** Aug. 2019 – Nov. 2019

- Instructed whole group, small group, and one-on-one in all subject areas
- Developed lesson plans with a balanced approach to literacy using *Benchmark Literacy New Standards* and Jan Richardson's *Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*, integrating opportunities for student talk and collaboration
- Planned and executed Personal Narrative writing unit using Lucy Calkin's *Writer's Workshop*, fostering student independence and collaboration in writing
- Taught science and social studies through inquiry, hands-on, and arts-based learning opportunities
- Participated in school-wide PBIS and district professional development training focused on phonics and math interventions
- Integrated Whole-Brain Teaching and social emotional learning strategies

**Community Education Extended Learning (CEEL) Support Staff** Feb. 2020 – June 2020  
*CEEL Ferguson Township Elementary, State College Area School District* State College, PA

- Lead/support afterschool enrichment classes and supervise outdoor/free play for students grades K-5
- Facilitate inclusive play environments

**Substitute Teacher** Jan. 2020 – June 2020  
*State College Area School District* State College, PA  
*Kelly Educational Staffing, Bellefonte Area School District* Bellefonte, PA

- Implement lesson plans of head classroom teacher and/or paraprofessional for grades K-12
- Maintain positive learning environment in accordance with classroom and school expectations

**Summer Instructor** June 2015 – Aug. 2019  
*Community School Musical Theatre Camp, Central Bucks School District* Doylestown, PA

- Co-directed 2 sessions of 15-25 children, ages 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade and 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade, 6 hrs./day
- Developed lesson plans that balanced teaching basic theatre practices with workshopping rehearsals

**Classroom Support Teacher**Aug. 2018 – May 2019  
State College, PA*Bennett Family Center*

- Supported lead teachers and students with varying ability levels and English language proficiency in infant to toddler aged preschool classroom for six hours per day, 1-2 days per week

**Volunteer Teacher**

May 2018

*D.C. Social Justice Fellowship, Penn State University`*

- Co-taught original, inquiry based lessons about social justice issues to high schoolers in D.C. public schools

**Volunteer Counselor**

Oct. 2017

*Shaver's Creek Outdoor School, Penn State University*

- Assisted and taught small-group, discovery based environmental science lessons to 5<sup>th</sup> grade students
- Integrated kinesthetic and musical learning opportunities
- Transitioned between role as teacher and camp counselor, leading cabin group and developing personal relationships with campers

**Student Teacher (Early Field Experience)**

May 2017

*The Philadelphia Urban Seminar, Penn State University*

- Observed a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom in the School District of Philadelphia with a focus on analyzing the effects of racism, sexism, and ableism on student learning
- Assisted substitute teacher in leading class during head classroom teacher's absence

**LEADERSHIP & ENGAGEMENT**

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**Student Pennsylvania State Education Association**

Fall 2016 – May 2020

- Served in various leadership roles: **Chapter President** (April 2019-present), **THON Dancer** (2020), **State Delegate** (June 2018/2019), **Moral Chair** (2018-2019), **Media Chair** (2017-2018)
- Attended annual PSEA conference, participating in professional development and school outreach projects
- Elected as one of 15 student representatives to attend the NEA Aspiring Educators Conference and Representative Assembly, advocating for students and educators nationwide by lobbying, debating and voting

**The Penn State Thespian Society**

Fall 2016 – May 2020

- Served in various leadership roles: **Children's Show Co-Chair** (2018-2019), **Producer** (July 2018-Oct. 2018), **Co-Producer** for cabaret benefitting Centre County AIDS Resource (2017-2018), **Assistant Director** (Aug. 2017-Oct. 2017)
- Led weekly writing meetings of adapting a popular children's book into a children's play for local library
- Collaborated with Director and Technical Director to organize and communicate with production team of 100+ members

**Service Project Leader**

Aug. 2016 – Dec. 2016

*Honors Leadership Jumpstart, Penn State University, PA*

- Worked with a team of 4 other freshmen to develop an original service project focused on educating youth about healthy habits for nutrition and exercise, engaging children in artistic and physical activities
- Collaborated with directors of State College Schlow Library and the Children's Garden at the Penn State Arboretum