'Doing Right' by Melissa: An Inquiry into School Spaces

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Abstract

This educational ethnographic case study explores 11 year-old, Melissa's literacy experiences in an urban elementary school. This paper focuses on what it meant for Melissa to *Do the Right Thing* in various school spaces. Her interpretation and application of doing the right thing in different spaces complicates what it means to take 'right action'. Therefore, 'taking right action' is divided into three domains: 1) Institutional Domain: Compliance 2) School Literacy Domain: Balance and 3) Melissa's Personal Domain: Self- Reliance. While Melissa was considered a model fifth grader in her urban elementary school setting by her teachers and peers, her personal code of literacy often subsumed the dominant school discourse of 'do the right thing'. Analysis generated prospective inroads for understanding how literacy learning is inextricably intertwined with relationships of space and discourse. Insights from this close analysis point to the need for nuanced recognition of students' intellectual lives and underscore the plague of low expectations that narrowing curriculum imposes upon students.

One day during writing time as her classmates worked to finish their writing prompts before recess, Melissa (names have been changed to protect confidentiality) tugged on my sleeve whispering, "Mrs. Vander Zanden, Mrs. Vander Zanden, you know, I still got it. I do, I'll show you when you get to me. It's in my desk." I wracked my brain trying to figure out what Melissa was referring to as I made my way around the tables. When I arrived back at Melissa's spot, she pointed to the desk opening with a knowing wink. My face must have registered confusion, and Melissa pulled out a neatly folded piece of copy paper. As she unfolded it, she said, "I take it out for inspiration. I keep it here all the time." Looking down, I recognized Langston Hughes' poem 'Mother to Son' from a project we had worked on together in a small inquiry group several months earlier. I remembered how Melissa had been enthralled with Hughes' work and asked to keep the poem after our class session. I recalled her reading this poem aloud over and over again just to "hear the words". In that moment, I understood how difficult it was to support Melissa as a writer in a world that saw writing as a functional activity. I wondered how I could help her transition from this moment of revelation- recognition of literary legacy and homage to a great writer to editing a prescribed prompt that students were charged

with completing within the allotted time or be forced to finish during recess—and what the consequences of this kind of transition might be - where was the time to honor the literary heritage Melissa recognized and to recognize her literacy identity? How might I 'do right' by Melissa in this moment full of tension and competing expectations?

As this vignette illustrates, the co-construction of school as a dialogic space is always contested. On one hand, the focus on prompt writing might offer students some support with language structure and yet, the overemphasis on a right way to write reduced Melissa's discovery of Hughes' craft to a taboo format. Melissa kept Hughes' words with her and safeguarded them in her desk for months. She did not publicly share them, recognizing the power of certain discourses in her learning environment. Her inspiration was hidden away, safely tucked into her desk far from prying eyes. The sanctioned literacy practices Melissa engaged in, here a prescribed writing prompt, didn't warrant revealing her secret mentor. The more I observed Melissa's work and her classroom, the more I began to understand that maintaining this secrecy limited her writing to following a set of rules. While technically her writing was sound, her writing did not reflect her depth of knowledge about writing craft. In the interaction described above, Melissa dutifully completed her writing prompt and went out to recess. Her writing revealed little of her appreciation for language that her careful protection of Hughes' work seemed to indicate.

The conditions described in this study made it possible for Melissa to enact her personal literacy code in particular school spaces in a Midwestern fifth grade "majority minority, urban suburban" (personal communication, staff member, 8/09) elementary setting in the United States. While I focus on one student, Melissa, her experience may lend insight into the experience of other students in other schools. The larger yearlong ethnographic study was framed by the following questions:

1. How do school spaces, such as the cafeteria, homogeneously grouped classrooms, or small groups out of the classroom, co-construct students' literacy practices when they are regulated or negotiated in particular ways?
2. Whose interests are served and who is represented when school space is regulated or negotiated in particular ways (Lefebvre, 1991)?

In this paper I focus on the second question and investigate what it meant for Melissa to Do Right the Thing in various spaces. My analysis of whose interests were served and represented generated prospective inroads for understanding how literacy learning is inextricably intertwined with relationships of space and discourse. This study reinforces the pressing need to move beyond one-size fits all expectations in schools and indicates literacy learning's direct relationship with space and discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by critical sociocultural theory, discourse studies, and spatial theory. The intersection of these frameworks help educators understand how students and teachers co-construct physical and conceptual spaces and discourses in schools. A critical sociocultural foundation addresses repertoires of knowledge that students bring to school and is part of a responsive, constructivist approach to literacy

teaching and learning (Gutiérrez, 2008). A critical sociocultural stance on literacy learning addresses issues of power, agency, identity, and context. As Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) explain, "Activities can be viewed as social practices situated within communities invested with particular norms and values" (p. 6). In schools today, various activities and practices are privileged at different moments with varied consequences (Gutiérrez, 2008). In Melissa's case, she engaged in particular privileged practices, such as participation in a student leadership program. She also benefited from privileging other students' particular practices, for example, when working with peers she rewarded her group members with false promises to convince them to behave as she wished to complete their project.

A fundamental way in which ideological, situated social practices are communicated in schools is through discourse, often circulated through talk in particular spaces. Discourse is a set of broadly defined social practices that co-constitute how face-to-face interactions are carried out, in this case in elementary school spaces (Gee, 1996; Janks, 2000; Street, 2001). Discourse is embedded in networks of social relations, associated with the circulation of language (Spitulnik, 1996), language ideologies (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 1996; Woolard, 1998), and social action (Ahearn 2001). My work with Melissa documents discursive moves and illustrates the many possibilities for student agency and meaningful literacy engagements as part of the network of social practices she engaged in.

Students constantly shift discourses for a range of purposes in various spaces (Gee, 1996). Students at Rivers, the study's urban school site, adhered to regulatory measures such as ability grouping or walking in gender separated, silent, single file lines in the hallways, practices that categorize students and have long become normalized in public schools. Melissa's experience in hallways, classrooms, and the cafeteria were often shaped by a priori procedures for acting in a particular or correct way in those spaces. Yet, as the following description details, Melissa also made decisions in and between these spaces that both adhered to and deviated from these expectations to meet her own needs.

Students learn in conditions that create situated opportunities for decision-making. These decisions, in turn, constantly reshape spaces students inhabit. As Leander (2004) posits, "social space is always heterogeneous and conflictual, and more or less charged with potential for the transformation of learning and identity" (p. 10). Drawing on key themes in human geography literature, my analysis indexes how spaces are simultaneously dynamic, socially constructed, and blurred (Davis & Sumara, 2003; Leander 2002; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). Everyday social practices are the means that produce space (Lefebvre, 1991) and Melissa's tactics, such as hiding poetry and complying with school rules, for navigating her school spaces constantly shifted. Spaces are not empty vessels (Massey, 1994) that social interactions fill up; rather they are created in the process of interaction. Therefore, space itself becomes an element of the negotiated learning that is taking place and supports the possibility of student and teacher interactions within an ethical environment (Hayden, 2004). The tension between interaction and construction of space highlights the dynamic nature of spaces and is

useful in thinking about how individuals, groups, discourses, and spaces are constantly co-constructing one another.

Unfortunately, discussion about public school spaces tends to fall into static categories rather than a fluid network. Institutional criteria support these separations; students are duly sorted for remediation, accelerated learning, etc. contributing to a persisting either/or identity construction—students tend to be regarded as struggling *or* successful (Honeyford & Vander Zanden, in press). Concepts such as third space and the second classroom acknowledge the generative possibilities of student-appropriated spaces (Campano, 2007; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995), yet tightly controlled curriculum continues to narrow what can be accepted in schools.

Method

Melissa was a participant in a yearlong ethnographic study. The naturalistic study was conducted through practitioner research and ethnographic data collection methods that allowed previous data and new findings to inform each other (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Melissa's example is an educational ethnographic case study and analysis of a range of data which generated a composite understanding of her relationships in and between the three domains identified in the process (Heath and Street, 2008, Lin, 1988; Merriam, 1988). According to Merriam (1988), educational case study is particularistic, descriptive, heuristic and inductive. It involves an inductive stance that incorporates a broad range of data sources to develop insights (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1998, 2003). This study focused on a purposively selected student exemplar with a focus on her literacy experience using ethnographic practices, such as interviews and observation. As Heath and Street (2008) write:

> A social semiotic theory of multimodalities pushes ethnographers to take an interest in "the social place, the history and formation of the sign makers, and in the social environments in which they make their signs" (Kress and Street, 2006, p. viii). Ethnographers unpack and explicate both general and specific multimodalities as they look beyond the immediate situation to broad forces that create learning environments and their artifacts…(p. 23)

In developing case studies using an ethnographic approach, inferences are made from three sources (a) from what people say, (b) from the way people act, and (c) from the artifacts people use (Spradley, 1979). Ethnographic methods, such as observation, interviews, and construction of thick descriptions as well as participation in various roles (practitioner inquirer, participant observer, observer-participant) and a prolonged engagement in the school setting helped me document Melissa's case.

Melissa, an 11-year-old fifth grade, English speaking, African American student was a member of one of the six inquiry groups I supported throughout the school year. As I worked with her over time, continua of literacy engagement and resistance emerged. Researcher narratives documenting Melissa's discourse, actions, and artifacts related to literacy learning in school support my analysis and are used here to illustrate pedagogical implications for literacy teaching and learning. Studies highlighting home school literacy

practices (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Hull & Schultz, 2002) and the restrictive impact of US educational policy has had on writing instruction (McCarthey, 2008) document the disconnection in practice that is often part of students' literacy experiences. Dominant school based practices traditionally marginalized youth encounter are often misaligned with out of school practices because they typically reflect middle class literacy practices or *ways with words* (Heath, 1983). While any retelling or review of experience provides limited contextualization, Melissa's example offers both practitioners and researchers insight into exploring the complex relationship of the construction of spaces in everyday school literacy interactions.

Background

Significant to understanding the relationship between expectations and dialogic spaces' effects on student literacy practices are how and by whom—those spaces are defined. Melissa's fifth grade was ability grouped largely by student reading scores and testing data. Ability grouping created a Special Education cluster (often referred to as "a low group" by staff members though never by their classroom teacher), an English as a New Language (ENL) cluster classroom, and a high ability (HA) classroom. The grouped classes had a "low, medium, high" academic reputation. The Special Education class also had a reputation as being difficult to manage, but within each class there was a great deal of academic and behavioural diversity. Melissa was placed in the ENL or middle ability class.

Melissa participated in a collaborative inquiry group project where students generated a topic of inquiry and negotiated a literacy project. The groups, made up of 8-12 students from three different ability grouped classrooms, met with me in a trailer twice a week for an hour over an eight week period of time. Melissa's group wrote and recorded an original readers theatre, *Even Dinosaurs Play Football* that showcased themes of student persistence, struggle to meet expectations, and creativity. The group documented their process through an Audit Trail (Harste & Vasquez, 1998), and I kept audio reflective notes as well. After the eight week small group session was completed, I continued to observe Melissa in class, in the cafeteria, and on the playground. Informal interviews were also conducted in these spaces. In other school spaces, such as in the lunchroom or in class, my role varied from observer to participant observer. I took notes, then reconstructed events in narrative form and mapped my observations of Melissa. Data included video (16, 45 minute sessions), audio, field notes, interviews (formal (3)/informal (~20)), student work samples produced in and out of class, relevant media and literature, and extensive reflective researcher memos over the year long study related to Melissa. In the following discussion, I share representative critical moments to illustrate how data was categorized, and how I determined the three domains discussed.

Analysis

Melissa's case is of interest because her teachers and peers upheld her as a model student; however, at the same time, she carefully guarded many aspects of her literacy repertoire. Her case highlights the limitations of uniform expectations and encourages educators to examine the range of literacy opportunities afforded in school spaces. In the

initial analysis phase, I collected and coded data related to Melissa and her literacy work. Themes of resistance and personal engagement related to taking *right action*, a dominant discourse in the school site, emerged. I then returned to the data with this code in mind and separated *taking right action* into three more nuanced territorial domains which I labeled (a) Institutional Domain: Compliance, (b) School Literacy Domain: Balance, and (c)) Melissa's Literacy Domain: Self- Reliance, which are described below. Domains enabled me to examine how these aspects were related to one another (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Spradley, 1979). Bounding each domain based on its area of influence, or territory, included the spatial and social relationship of the data. The Institutional Domain includes aspects of daily school policies and interactions that applied to all students, including Melissa. School Literacy Domain includes data specifically related to literacy at Rivers and Melissa's Literacy Domain zooms in on literacy events connected specifically to Melissa. All three domains are nested under the initial code of taking right action. The discussion of each domain below is then followed by two examples that tease apart Melissa's personal domain and highlight *territories of possibility* or potential avenues to support literacy learning in various school spaces.

Institutional Domain: Compliance

At Melissa's school, *do the right thing*, *respect others* and *do your personal best* were pervasive school discourses in circulation (Spitulnik, 1996). These dominant discourses serve as boundaries for the institutional domain and will be described in the next section as they relate to school policy about behavior management, incentives and sanctioned space for student talk. While these measures officially intended to serve the students by offering a positive and safe learning environment, they did not reflect a perspective of students as decision makers or critical thinkers.

Behavior management.

At Back to School Night early in the fall trimester, Do the Right Thing/Treat People Right and Respect Others were explained as the "two big rules here" and shared with parents prior to discussing school behaviour management (Field notes, 8/28/09). The behaviour management plan involved a school wide system where teachers monitored individual behaviour on a clipboard, and students acquired behaviour marks when off task. As marks accrued in the day or over the week, students faced tiered consequences. For instance, a "think sheet" detailing what the student had done and what he/she could have done differently was sent home to parents. If a student was out of dress code, a point might be taken. Phone calls home and office referrals were reserved for more severe situations. Teachers used the behaviour data in various ways. Most frequently, they communicated with parents on bi-weekly progress reports and the data were used to shape incentives. For example, if a child did not earn a behaviour mark all week, they could eat lunch in the classroom or be seated at a special table in the cafeteria on a designated day the following week. Sitting with friends was highly prized, and compliant students were easily identified as they were seated separately and visibly constructed a table of "winners" and "good kids" (Interview, 5/4). Melissa was one of the approximately 20 students who earned this privilege weekly (Interview, 5/4). She was

always in uniform and rarely lost a behaviour mark during her regular class meetings; however, her class consistently struggled in special areas classes such as art and music, and she did lose marks as part of whole class punishments.

Incentives.

Melissa's school offered several incentives for Doing the Right Thing. Students could earn a place on the Life Skills honor roll, become Leadership Ambassadors, and win People Respecting Others (PRO) awards. The school also implemented a Positive Behaviour Support plan, which included tokens called Panther Paws. Teachers distributed Panther Paws for following directions, doing the right thing, turning in assignments on time, attending extracurricular literacy activities, etc. Paws could then be traded in for treats at the Panther Mall (a closet full of prizes) or for a special seating arrangement in the cafeteria. Melissa described herself as a student "who does the right thing, and tries hard to pass" (Initial interview, 8/11). She was a Leadership Ambassador and loved working with her second grade buddy class as part of the program. She earned a PRO award early in the year and frequently purchased items from the Panther store. These opportunities were technically available to all students; however, compliance was the means to acquire them and some students did not conform to these guidelines.

Student Talk.

During my time at Rivers, the focus on compliance was most recognizable in the cafeteria and in the hallways. The phrases, Do the Right Thing and Respect Others, were posted above each classroom doorway. The language used around these procedures seemed to be consistent throughout the school and was regularly reinforced by the school staff. All students were placed at assigned tables in the cafeteria and followed preset procedures for getting food, throwing their trash away, lining up, etc. Students not doing the right thing in the cafeteria, most frequently talking to friends, were removed from tables or reprimanded verbally. If undesirable behaviour continued or a small group was particularly loud, the whole group, including me as I sat at the tables with kids, was told, "It is now silent lunch, turn your voices off" (Field notes, 3/23). Each day at the five minute mark before lunch ended, upon the monitor's signal, students raised their hands in a nonverbal cue to others to shush any talking and to indicate lunch was coming to an end. The daily sea of hands frequently cut off conversations mid-sentence and effectively quieted the room. Often students began to raise their hands to signal silence prior to the monitor's cue.

In most spaces, students were expected to exercise self-control by waiting to be called upon to speak. A common remark from teachers and school staff was that the fifth grade students were loud or chatty. One teacher noted that, "sometimes they *are* talking about the right thing, it's just so much!" (Interview, 4/12) While supporting writing conferences in Melissa's classroom, a support staff member mentioned to me that in the past, "kids were never like this. *They* knew when it was their turn. These kids just think it's always their turn" (Field notes, 9/15), echoing the sentiments of the adage that children should be seen, not heard. Doing the Right Thing at Rivers meant speaking at the proper time, fitting uniform expectations, following directions, and avoiding

questioning adult decisions. Compliance was monitored through behaviour management procedures such as a token rewards system or recognition of desired behaviour, and subsequently through interactions within these structures. Onsite discourses that were performed and circulated school wide were consistent with a hierarchal school model that privileged a behaviour model of unquestioned compliance.

School Literacy Domain: Balance

Rivers had a school focus on literacy improvement and was working to meet the school district's suggested balanced literacy approach to teaching reading and writing. The school literacy domain includes artifacts from school and district policy as well as observations on site. As described on their website:

> A balanced approach to literacy instruction combines language and literature-rich activities associated with holistic reading instruction with the explicit teaching of skills as needed to develop the fluency and comprehension that proficient readers possess. Such instruction stresses the love of language, gaining meaning from print, and instruction of phonics in context. (Retrieved March 20, 2009, district website)

The literacy curriculum was a focus for improvement as part of a school improvement plan, part of which was funded and monitored through US federal guidelines under Title I. Title I is housed under the No Child Left Behind Act. Title I, originally part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), provides financial support for professional development, instructional materials, resources to support educational programs, and for parental involvement for schools serving traditionally underserved populations, such as students living in poverty (see http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html for additional information on Title 1). As part of Title I support, two new literacy coaches supported the staff in discussions about implementing reading workshop. Removal of the basal series from the language arts portion of the day was a significant change made in the literacy block. Classroom libraries of leveled texts were added to each fifth grade room, and the teachers visited another school to observe a reading workshop in action. Professional conversations circulated about reading for pleasure and making connections; independent reading was integrated into every classroom.

School wide professional development focused on reading with meaning and supportive physical classroom environments for literacy development. For example, after one staff development session, teachers entered a lottery to win a room makeover. The literacy coach redesigned meeting areas and access to the classroom library for one of the fifth grade teachers. The new room design was then highlighted on a segment of the morning announcements on the school wide network. These aspects of school literacy seem to represent the diverse range of student learners and provided teachers with a menu of pedagogical tools to support student literacy achievement.

The fifth grade teachers implemented the workshop approach variably. Class sizes increased from 24 students to 30 students in the fifth grade, which presented new

challenges. All three teachers embraced the use of self-selected texts for a portion of the reading time, although there was a range of how this looked in each room. For example, the Special Education designated classroom had a daily read aloud ritual and students spent an additional 30-45 minutes of self-selected reading time each day. In contrast, the designated HA classroom continued to read whole class novels, spent more time working on collaborative projects, and read independently for homework. River's provided a supplemental commercial reading program available to all teachers, only the ENL class and HA class in fifth grade participated. Students read books at their designated reading levels, earned points on computerized reading quizzes and then traded those points in for prizes. Melissa frequently selected books she could read quickly to rapidly gain points with minimal effort, an example of the enacted curriculum at odds with that which is mandated.

As described on the district website, the curriculum did seem to support a balanced literacy approach across classrooms. Students in all three classes completed reading logs and writing assignments as part of their homework. All three teachers used fluency buddies and variations on word work in their classrooms. However, students rarely generated writing projects in class without a teacher- selected topic. The increased class size and inconsistent resource support, particularly for the Special Education designated classroom, shifted student classwork toward a focus on skills and individual seatwork in the Special Education and ENL classrooms. A perceived higher ability expectation supported more rapidly paced instruction and increased collaborative project-oriented work in the HA classroom. For example, the HA class was typically ahead in the math series and covered more social studies content than the ENL and Special Education classes. The inquiry group work for this study was conducted during literacy time and all three teachers supported the projects done outside of the classroom. Divergent thinking and creativity was accepted and celebrated when it fit into the daily activities. School literacy achievement seemed to be a means to reflect student ability to follow teacher suggestions in the classroom.

Melissa's Literacy Domain: Self-Reliance

Melissa's Literacy Domain consisted of compliance with the school literacy framework coupled with a simultaneous and concerted effort to exclude innovative or emotional content in her typical literacy engagements in class. Described below are various school spaces where the Institutional Domain and School Literacy Domain overlap with Melissa's Personal Literacy Domain. The final two examples illustrate the interwoven relationships between the three domains and reflect the interconnected critical sociocultural and spatial theories underpinning this study, particularly in light of agency and social construction of spaces.

Melissa began at Rivers in Kindergarten and was placed in the ENL grouped class because her test scores were neither low nor high. When I interviewed Melissa in the beginning of the year she talked about a book club that she initiated over the summer with five other neighborhood girls. She described herself as a good reader and claimed that she "even got promoted to captain" of the book club (Interview, 8/20). She then listed several favorite young adult novels (*Tale of Despereaux, Sisterhood of the*

Traveling Pants) the group had discussed. She claimed she was "ok at writing" and if she "has to do her best then she probably would" but otherwise she wouldn't write much. She described herself as caring, thoughtful, respectful, and "willing to do anything to pass" (Interview, 8/20). She was part of a large family and lived with seven siblings. She often travelled to a nearby Midwestern industrial city to visit relatives, and recounted stories about these trips. During a writing conference one day, she told me, "almost all my family lives there or here" (Field notes, 12/08). Midway through the year, Melissa shared a poem with me in secret, titled "How Can I Live Like This." Her poem described her reaction to finding out that the man she considered her biological father was in fact her stepfather. Melissa often talked about her mother; it was evident that they had a close relationship. She described her school as "Creative…clean, stylish, cheerful, um…boring sometimes" (Student interviews, 5/6). Melissa was consistently academically successful in all subjects, making honour roll each quarter.

Melissa in school.

Melissa was regarded as a model student and seemed influenced positively by the rewards available to her. She was a Leadership Ambassador; a teacher-referred leadership position and wore a special lanyard that identified her as such. She enjoyed planning character education lessons for her second grade partner class. Her class actively traded Panther Paws for rewards. For example, Melissa's class could trade Panther Paws for a privileged seat at a small round table in the back of the cafeteria rather than sit at predetermined spots at long rectangular tables as described above. At the beginning of the year Melissa and her friends coordinated their purchases on the same day so that they could sit together. After winter break, the lunch monitors changed this policy because "the same kids were always getting to sit there" (Field notes, 1/14). Teachers then designated a day and number of seats/kids they were able to invite kids to sit at the round tables. This became what became known as "Tuesday Club" or "Thursday Club" and no longer provided students the opportunity to negotiate and plan to sit together. Melissa was part of these lunch clubs, but mentioned she preferred the original procedure because she could talk with friends in other classes.

At recess, I often observed Melissa engaged in discussion with a group of girls from the three classes. When there were too many girls to fit on the bench, they traded spots in a system that Melissa devised. Gathered there, the girls were relaxed, laughing, and at times serious. I asked what they usually talked about and Melissa said, "everything, stuff we like and maybe sometimes boys or teachers" (Field Notes, 9/23). It was in this group of friends where Melissa shared a play she had written with her sister at home. A friend of hers came running up to me on the playground, "Mrs. Vander Zanden, you gotta hear Melissa's play. You just gotta. She's gonna publish it" (Field notes, 10/18).

In her own classroom, Melissa typically followed directions and generally had a book or two below her chair ready to read at any moment. She raised her hand to answer teacher-initiated questions and refrained from side conversations. Melissa was designated a substitute teacher helper, a position reserved for students in strong standing. Melissa rapidly consumed short chapter books stacked under her desk to take computer tests on

and always completed her reading log for homework. I noted that the books she tended to self-select for the computer program had simple plots with little challenging content. They varied from the rich summer reading club selections she said she read on her own, but provided her the chance to quickly earn more points for prizes. Melissa appeared annoyed when waiting for classmates to follow directions or quiet down. Her classroom was highly structured during instructional time, and personal choice was typically embedded in a series of options provided by her teacher.

While learning about persuasive writing, Melissa and her classmates were required to write an essay (i.e. no letters to the editor) and select from the topic list provided. The essay's introductory sentence had to include part of the prompt, *my favorite place to visit*, and seven sentences. "Writing Process Steps" were posted on the wall and clothespins with student names were positioned to show where they were in the process. Revision was done with special red pens reserved for this purpose. Students used an 8-question checklist to revise, which focused predominantly on editing (Field notes, 12/08). Initially, Melissa's essay was about the large city where her family lived. She described how she was going to include the fun things to do when she went there, such as visit her family, shop at fashion stores, and eat at the best chicken place, as a way to convince others to go. Later in the week, I noticed she changed her destination to a park nearby which many of her classmates chose as well. When I asked her why she had switched her topic, she explained that she did not have four facts listed in her prewriting so she had to change it. I was unsure whether her teacher requested she switch or if Melissa chose not to write the facts she knew about the city in her prewriting. When I inquired, she glanced down and said, "I just switched. It's ok." and turned back to her work.
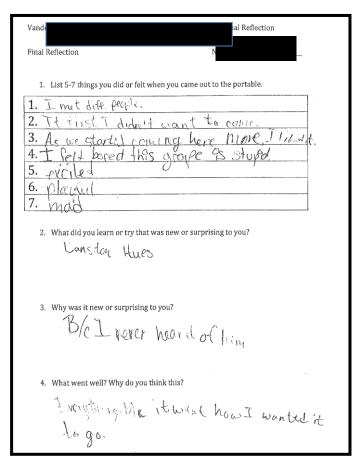
Melissa's class had a series of behaviour management techniques in place in addition to the school behaviour plan. Students were seated in groups to foster collaboration and support teamwork. Each group earned collective points, which were redeemed for small treasures at the end of the day. Points were recorded on the front board and student record keepers were called on to "Erase a point from table 2, please" (Field notes, 9/23) or "Add three points to table 1, Alex" (Field notes, 1/19). Many students loved the job of switching the points so much that they would fight for the job. As a result, in November the classroom teacher assigned a "point changer" job to reduce the "competition she was starting to notice" (Field notes, hallway before school, 11/17). In the small group Melissa stated that she "was glad we don't have table points, geez…we don't even use tables in here!" When I asked Melissa to explain, she said, "well, always one person wrecks it and I hate changing points" (Field Notes, 10/27). This statement was consistent with my observations of Melissa's frustration with disruptions in class.

Melissa in the small group.
At the start of our small group session, Melissa often arrived somewhat disheartened; she didn't like to "miss reading time" and was worried "she would have to make up work", although I assured her that her teacher and I agreed this would not happen (see Figure 1. Student Group Reflection). As she learned more about the inquiry

project, her anxiety diminished. She was vocal about extending the group meeting times, and asked about joining a second group.

Figure 1. Student Group Reflection

One day, all four students in the group from Melissa's class were 20 minutes late to the small group. Melissa was sobbing when she came in and immediately put her head down on a desk. They had just had to write 50 times "I will follow directions". Unfortunately, a student acted out during this initial punishment and the assignment was then doubled to 100 times. Melissa composed herself after a few minutes and said, "I was following directions and I just hate this school. Teachers hate kids here. I am not going back in there." After a few minutes she asked, "Why can't we just stay out here?" (Field Notes, 11/7) By the time it was time to return to class, she was calm and smiling, ready for class as if the previous incident had never happened.

Initially, Melissa's small group wanted to write a play. We investigated several options and settled upon writing an original reader's theater script. We read published reader's theatre scripts and poetry to learn more about oral expression (Field notes 10/13). As the opening vignette referenced, Melissa discovered Langston Hughes' work in our group. She spent 20 minutes during one session reading *Mother to Son* by

Langston Hughes over and over. Melissa stated six times in a ten-minute video clip, "I just like saying these words," and later "I am going to look that poet up" (Field notes, 10/15). We talked about the Harlem Renaissance, and I suggested poets and artists she might be able to find in the library. In another session, she revealed that she had talked about Hughes with her mother, and they had looked "up a whole bunch of his poetry" because her mother learned about him in school and liked his words as well.

Melissa's appreciation of language helped her become an integral part of the revision of the script. She and a partner worked on fitting segments partners wrote separately together into one script. Her ideas were generally well received and the group loved the storyline. In my weekly notes to her teacher about the inquiry project, I referenced both her excitement about reading Langston Hughes' poetry and the writing projects she had shared with me at recess (Field notes, 10/20, 11/17).

Outside of the group, when I saw her in the library selecting books, I encouraged her to read more challenging books because she was a deep thinker. I recommended books related to the Harlem Renaissance and novels with social justice themes, such as *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* or *Maniac Magee*. I frequently asked her what she was writing or reading at home and gently questioned her choices for such light self-selected reading in school.

Across school spaces, Melissa was consistently rewarded for her decisions. She was easy going and well liked by her peers. Her social and academic progress was strong and she was able to navigate many groups of friends. She adhered to assignment guidelines and maintained her visible student role model status by following directions, publicly doing what she was supposed to do, and completing her work on time.

The following two examples are examples of territories of possibility. I describe how Melissa's Personal Literacy Code had an impact on the small group and her school experience. The *Kick Me* and *Candy Coercion* incidents are then discussed in relation to doing right across domains. These two incidents highlight contrasting perspectives and serve as reflective points for practitioners and researchers to consider alternatives in school spaces.

Incident 1: Kick Me.

It seemed important to Melissa to be on time for all classes and to participate as expected. On October 20, I discovered a "Kick Me" sticky note on one of the group member's chairs. I included the following in my weekly notes to the teachers.

> *We did have a minor incident with a "kick me" sign. Stephen wrote the note not intending to put it anywhere. Enrique found it and put it on his chair, Tanya saw it and told everyone about it. This story took some time to get out…I asked the person responsible to come forward, after a few minutes Melissa claimed she did it. As we [prepared to return to class], Stephen couldn't stand the guilt of someone else taking the blame and he came forward. I talked with Melissa about being proud and how important it is to be truthful. She was anxious to move on and get to class, which I understand, yet this is a dangerous thing to start doing. I*

spoke with Stephen as well. He admitted that he didn't mean anything, but that he didn't know how to stop it… (Notes to teachers, 10/20)

When Melissa and I discussed this incident days later, I talked with her about the severity of taking the blame for someone else's actions and how she deserved to treat herself with respect. I mentioned how I expected she felt horrible when I complimented her false honesty after admitting she had been the culprit. She replied, "Yeah, I thought I would explode in, that's a whole lotta heavy to hold, at least that's what my mom said" (Field notes, 10/27). Melissa had discussed the incident with her mother and had already reflected on her decision.

In this example, Melissa worked within the rigid Institutional Domain of compliance to regain social order. Students were not expected to discuss and resolve problems among themselves. The institutionally dictated rules designating appropriate behavior were present, even in the small group in the trailer physically outside the school. Perhaps the situation could have been resolved in the moments before heading back to class if open discussion and problem-solving practices had been more typical and group discipline been less frequent. Perhaps the small group environment was not yet developed enough to support democratic dialogue. Regardless, the inquiry space was co-constructed within the dominant discourse and for Melissa, the pressure to return to class on time outweighed navigation of the disequilibrium caused by the note among the group. Doing right in this incident clearly called for doing wrong, blurring the boundaries of expectations. The threat of punitive action resulting in returning late to class far outweighed the messy business of resolving a community disturbance.

Incident Two: Candy Coercion.

Melissa's group completed the script within the eight week session but was not able to finish the audio recording within the timeframe. The students wanted to record the play rather than perform it live, in order to have a personal a copy. I arranged to meet with the group during recess. Students voluntarily met for five additional 20 minute sessions to complete it. After the first meeting, Tatiana, the only student in the group who had opted out of additional meetings, asked me at lunch if she could have some candy. I was confused by her question and she explained that Melissa and JR told her that I gave out candy at our extra sessions. She wanted to know if she could get it because she was part of the original group. I explained that I hadn't given out any candy but that I hoped she would change her mind and join us. Later as kids were lining up, I asked JR why Tatiana thought that I was handing out candy. He explained that Melissa came up with the plan to convince Tatiana to join the group because we "needed her voice and she is part of the group." He admitted it probably wasn't a good idea. I spoke with Melissa and she immediately responded, "Yes, I did tell her that, but you know, I know I shouldn't have, it wasn't *the right thing to do*, but it is so important she is there because she was in the group and so, I am not sorry" (Field Notes, 11/24). I was struck by Melissa's response, particularly by what I perceived as her demonstrated commitment to the group, given her on/off public engagement with the project during the eight weeks. I was less surprised by her methods; Melissa is very intelligent and candy was often handed out

when students helped teachers in the fifth grade. Melissa, herself, had experienced this quite a few times.

In this example, Melissa restructures the space of the inquiry group to meet her goals of completing the recording with all the students by applying the tactics she has observed in other school spaces. Rewards were commonly used at Rivers across contexts, particularly in her classroom, and Melissa co-opted this approach to support what she perceived as essential actions for the group. However, Panther Paws and candy were not used in the small group at any point. Furthermore, meeting during recess time, the only unstructured social space available to students; could potentially be viewed as punitive. Her actions highlight the gaps in the institutional code of compliance as well as showcase student recognition of contrived methods to coerce desired behavior.

Discussion

Melissa knew how to do the right thing as dictated by the dominant discourse of compliance in the school. She worked hard, raised her hand before speaking in class, and was rewarded with a referral to participate in the Ambassador Leadership program and listings on the academic and Life Skills honor rolls each quarter. She was a mature student and her teacher mentioned she could talk with her like an adult. Melissa had such a low tolerance for students who distracted others and held up progress in class, that she accepted blame for the kick me sign in an apparent effort to maintain order when she had not been a part of the prank (Field notes, 10/20). However, Melissa's efforts to create plausible stories to convince students to do what she wanted, and meet the needs of the group were certainly not a part of doing the right thing as purported by the institutional domain. Rather, the ruse of tempting Tatiana with candy enabled the group to complete their project and do right by Melissa's standards. Lying to achieve her goal privileged completion and indicates Melissa's recognition of and ability to manipulate typical practices, like offering candy for accepted behavior, to outwit a classmate.

Melissa hid her literary life to some extent. She engaged in writing plays and poetry out of class and shared them with peers and me in the hallways and on the playground. She led book clubs in the summer but selected less challenging books for points in school. She seemed to place more value on what I perceived as deeper thinking or personally relevant work outside of school, yet continued to be rewarded for her leadership, academic success, and social competency. Her personal code reflected a self-resiliency that led to taking the blame for an incident she didn't have any part in with little regard for her personal welfare as a result. She mastered coercive techniques as demonstrated in the candy example, yet monitored her peers on the playground to enable equal seating. Finally, she carefully guarded her extracurricular reading and writing habits by playing the literacy game of school. She read texts to earn point and completed formulaic written work, all the while withholding her appreciation for book clubs and celebrated poets like Hughes in her desk.

Melissa is an example of a student who generally fit the institutional model of a successful student. She knew how and when to do the right thing and was rewarded for her achievement at school. However, I interpret Melissa's decisions regarding the kick me incident, candy coercion, and "hidden inspiration" to be indicators of how the

institutional domain was structured in a way that precluded her from being able to follow and be recognized for her personal code more publicly. Her ability to move through educational spaces, especially those that fall within the school literacy domain with commendation, yet hide her passion for writing, reveal her awareness of institutional structure and an intellectual prowess well beyond what was routinely expected. She found ways to maintain her own agency in a place that seemed focused on limiting or controlling agency. Hidden inspiration in a desk seemed an apt metaphor for the variety of discursive strategies Melissa employed throughout my study. Melissa's example demonstrates how the pressure to follow one right thing conflicted with her individual goals.

Pedagogical Implications

While I focus on Melissa through various pinpoints in space and time, the co-construction of discourse and school spaces is relational, fluid, and dynamic. Having her inspiration hidden away in her desk, so to speak, worked to weaken the power more procedural and rigid expectations imposed as she responded to on a daily basis. This analysis led me to the following insights:

1. Students engage in rich literacy work in and out of school *despite* school practices.
2. School spaces/discourse are not deterministic, they are dialectal and the people within them experience them in different ways at different times. Rewarding uniform expectations undercuts potential growth for students like Melissa.

Teachers can notice seemingly minor details, such as the coordination involved in convincing Tatiana to join the group or the importance of a slip of paper in a desk, as territories of possibility. They are opportunities for exploration and thereby they are chances to more fully engage students, even those students like Melissa who appear to be successful and meet achievement goals. As Leander (2002) writes, "semiotically, meaning is achieved not through the artifacts themselves but through their relations to one another. Hence, such configurations are continually coordinated, resisted, and blocked in the processes of self and other-identification" (p. 202). Thinking about the domains highlighted above as persisting artifacts in this case reflects both insights. Melissa participated in literacy practices with permeable boundaries and privileged various aspects depending on the implicit discourses in those school spaces. For example, she could only hide Hughes' poem because she was not expected to share it with the class or choose to reflect upon it. The students only modified their dress because of the strict dress code.

One consequence of the narrowing of curriculum and what counts as literacy has been a significant reduction of opportunities in school spaces for open or student directed conversation and dialogic engagement, a fundamental pillar of democratic life (Larson, 2007). Conversation is increasingly monitored in school spaces that are typically socially mediated, such as the cafeteria at Melissa's school where silent lunch was part of students' daily, lived experiences. The rigid socially constructed conditions in Melissa's school experience drove students to seek interaction forms and discourses that were often under the radar, and at odds with both implicit/explicit behavioural expectations to follow

directions. These arbitrary parameters can be incredibly confusing for students because a uniform way of being, doing, or thinking is inherently impossible. It doesn't have to be this way.

Conclusion

Melissa's case, and likely the case of many other students that readers may think of, provides an opportunity to notice how students are negotiating permeable boundaries and co-constructing school spaces. Educators are morally obliged to look closely at what is happening in schools; they cannot be afraid to think things through or they risk missing the rigorous work students like Melissa are engaged in. Erickson writes that, "Discourse is how things get done… in the interplay between macro/micro socio-political nature of relations in schools/society" (2004, p.128). The interwoven domains document how discourse, spatial practices, and a critical sociocultural perspective on literacy impact Melissa's literacy experience in school. This study contributes to the literacy field by focusing on spatialized practices and the dialectal between context and discourse. Additionally, it provides conditions for comparison; educators may re-examine interactions and literacy practices in their sites for possible opportunities. We need to improve our identification of productive spaces and notice students' powerful discursive practices.

Educators also need to keep in mind the consequences for *doing wrong* by Melissa. Rewarding Melissa and her classmates for the quantity of books read enabled Melissa to chose to read "light" books to earn more "points". Limiting writing to a series of procedures and prompts sends a message to students that writing is for school and is devoid of their personal investment. Is it ethical to define success so narrowly? Will students in Melissa's situation in later years take action to challenge or change injustices? Will students with a limited access to purposeful writing or choices about where to sit be ready to make critical decisions about their communities or their futures? Perpetuating a tiered educational system, where only some students are encouraged to think critically and engage in authentic literacy practices, is one potential consequence of closing our eyes and missing out on new territories of possibility students' co-construct as they navigate and build their literacy lives. Re-imagining how students' decisions and conversations can be once again made central to democratic education is a step toward doing right by all students.

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