

**STORIES THAT SOAR: A BROADENING OF THE DEFINITION OF
LITERACY THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH THE ARTS**

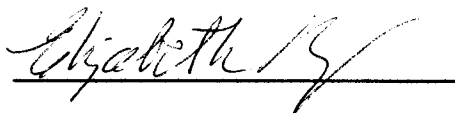
By

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Abstract

Stories that Soar is an organization that sends facilitators into classrooms in schools and over the course of six weeks, encourages students to write and perform stories. In this, my first case study of Stories that Soar, I explore findings based on observations made of secondary students experiencing the StoryShare curriculum, in which students write stories and then two classrooms swap stories and create plays out of them. During this process, students worked with someone else's ideas and kept the integrity of the original work while also creating a unique interpretation as they translated the stories from the written word to scenes and dialogue. I collected data through several observations of Stories that Soar workshops in secondary classrooms and one performance day. Two findings stand out. First, I learned that middle school and high school students don't work the same way adults do, and sometimes what looks like chaos is actually very efficient work. Secondly, I noted that it was important that the facilitator and teacher remained positive and supportive in their attitude and input, and that the students benefited greatly and were able to express themselves better and work together as a whole.

Introduction

When I was deciding on a way to explore the collaboration of arts and literacy, Stories that Soar jumped out at me because it's so interactive. I loved the idea of engaging students right in their own classrooms, encouraging them to create and innovate in a way that they may not always get to, without all the guidelines and restrictions of a formal classroom setting. I think also, because teachers are present in their classrooms, they are able to help with classroom management so that the facilitator can focus on the creative aspect of the program.

Educators often focus on two main components of literacy—reading and writing. These are important skills, but literacy is much broader. Without a richer experience that includes the elements of speaking, listening, viewing, and image-making, it can be difficult to engage students. However, when they are given the chance to be creative and step outside of an “only text” world, suddenly children who may not have been as confident about reading have a chance to shine and they become part of this transaction of literacy.

In *Stories that Soar*, facilitators ask students to take words on a page (someone else’s story) and to translate that to the stage. This requires them to inhabit the world of the story, in a sense, and someone else’s words, in order to create something that honors the original work but is also an extension of their creative selves. In the *Stories that Soar StoryShare* curriculum, students are taking stories that are created by another class and creating plays: performances that can transfer to a stage. In doing this, they are cultivating multiple important skills, including synthesizing work, changing it from one medium to another, and drawing on their own creativity and intuitive sense to shape the work.

I had several research questions when I began this study. What are the obstacles or challenges to the collaboration of arts and literacy in education? What strategies does *Stories that Soar* employ to engage children and encourage them to take agency, particularly with regard to development of literacy and imagination? I found the answers to these, and more.

Theoretical Framework: Figured Worlds

The concept of figured worlds was originated by Dorothy Holland, Debra Skinner, William Lachiotte Jr, and Carole Cain and they discussed this concept in their book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Early in the chapter, “Figured Worlds”, they explain the idea

behind the words:

By “figured world”, then, we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents...who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state (Holland et al, 1998, p. 52).

Figured worlds are a way for social constructivists to make sense of the way that people find interest and energy in imaginary situations, sometimes even so much so that it brings life to the elements of peoples’ lives that are real and not imaginary.

Benedict Anderson (1983) draws out yet another significance of human fantasy by understanding nationalism as participation in an “imagined community” (p. 49). Many of the activities that engage human energy and interest have an imaginative component.

For the purposes of this study, the students are working within a “figured world” every time they create or work with a fictional story, since they bring their own conceptions and ideas to the world they are living in, not only when they are playing and making up imaginary things and people, but also when they create performance pieces. They use similar frameworks in the make-believe world as they do in the real one. This idea is important to the research of arts and literacy.

Students are making meaning out of the world around them while they work within the fictional world of the story and the play. This is explained well using the theories of Vygotsky: Holland, et al. (1998) note that:

Describing how children develop the ability to enter into an imagined world, Vygotsky speaks of a ‘pivot,’ a mediating or symbolic device that the child uses not

just to organize a particular response but to pivot or shift into the frame of a different world . . . The tangible symbol may eventually be discarded and the child may be able to enter the play world without physical props (p. 50).

Through this frame of figured worlds, I will closely examine five observations I did in secondary (middle and high school) classrooms. When students are being given space to create this figured world of the play, there is so much “figuring” going on, even in something as simple as figuring out where the boundary lines fall. There is certainly a tension for the playmakers of wanting to make the work their own creation, while also preserving the original voice and ideas of the writer.

Some have said that play is a child’s work. If this is indeed true, then it’s a developmental imperative for children to create and shape their figured worlds, and it shouldn’t stop when they enter secondary school, but just change to match their stage of development. This is what programs like Stories that Soar bring into classrooms.

The concept of figured worlds is important to my case study of Stories that Soar because every time students are given the opportunity to create a fictional world or to build on an existing imaginary world, they are working within a figured world. Figured worlds also tend to be characterized by collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and communication, and these are strong values of Stories that Soar as well, as I heard in my first meeting with the director and artistic director.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I am focusing on both the reasons that educators fail to use the arts in tandem with literacy and the positive benefits and possibilities when they do. The benefits I discuss are collaboration, student agency, and broadening literacy through

visual and theatrical elements. These are the main themes that emerged as I read. Ligia Pelosi (2012) states the reason for bringing the arts into literacy:

If literacy is fundamentally a social practice, it must be taught in ways that do not distance it from the full range of students' varied domains of practice, some of which include creative, Arts-based methods. To be truly meaningful, the fabric of literacy must be woven with the rich thread of family, culture and community (p. 104).

Unfortunately in general, successful students are identified by their ability to take directions and arrive at pre-determined answers, not ones who challenge the accepted answer and think critically. If educators hope to cultivate collaboration, critical thinking, communication and creativity in their students, there must be some risks taken, and they are more than worth it.

Reasons for the Lack of Arts and Literacy Collaboration: Risk

Pelosi (2012) mentions that teachers are under tremendous pressure to achieve results in literacy, and that there is a general lack of confidence with arts practices and an absence in the curriculum for this reason. However, she references another study (Robinson 2011) notes that they are even more important to fight for, especially with the push for informational text as the standard:

The Arts and creative pursuits...depend on the need for creative thought, judgments based on the application of values...but cannot be predicted, demands many trials and relies on learning from errors. (p. 102)

This risk is the reason why arts are being pushed out, because they are indeed unpredictable. But as Pelosi points out, there are often good results. She references an article by Mitchell Ditkoff (2008), a writer and speaker about creativity and innovation:

Results may often come as a surprise (delightfully). The reason for this is that central to the process of being creative is the need for individuals to extend, to put themselves on the line, to take risks in order to connect the abstract with what is concrete to this (p. 102).

This study insists that investing time in the arts, especially writing stories, is vital, and Pelosi explains why in her conclusion:

Narratives—the stories we tell about ourselves and about those with whom we share teaching and learning spaces—bring a necessary equilibrium and clarity to the loaded discourse around literacy education and Arts. Narratives allow us to tell it like it is (p. 112).

Another article about the importance of the inclusion of the arts in education outlined four main tenets of the arts called the 4 P's, in conjunction with the commonly known 4 R's (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and Restrooms). It argues that Planning, Play, Pressure, and Pause are just as vital to a child's education as the 4 R's (Anderson, 2014). While planning and pressure are often happening in a classroom, the challenge, Anderson points out, is to incorporate Play and Pause. Play elements include "diverging from a set plan, engaging with ideas, lateral thought, serendipitous discoveries, taking risks, and venturing down unknown pathways" (p. 43) while pausing is about taking a moment to think and refresh. However, often educators can see the freedom and free form nature of play in the classroom as a threat or a risk. Anderson says, "In our modern world, making plans to enable us to avoid risk seems to dominate our thinking and dominate our practices" (p. 46), but she also argues throughout the article that this quality of engaging and diverging is important to a good education. Qualities encouraged by this kind of

practice are creativity, imagination, curiosity, and communication skills. These are not just helpful but necessary for people interacting with their world.

Reasons for the Lack of Arts and Literacy Collaboration: Isolated to Gifted Students

The concept of creativity in education originated in the domain of the gifted and talented, as far back as the space race, a peak time for the urgency to obtain innovative scientists and mathematicians (cite). However, this article argues that arts education is for more than just the gifted. Instead, the arts should be made available to anyone and give students a better chance of succeeding and even excelling. As Flint (2014) suggests, “Educators should set the bar high and then, by including creative opportunities and curriculum, help all students at least attempt to reach their personal best” (p. 66). One of the queries of the article is “What happened to Play in/as learning?” As a former public school teacher, Flint draws on her experience:

I know what infusing creativity, play, drama, music, and movement into lessons can achieve. Doing so results in deep, rather than rote, learning. This infusion leads to the joy of a job well done and fun in the doing (p. 67).

However, when asked why they don’t include the arts, teachers have said, “I don’t have time to be creative” and “I get in trouble from my principal if my students are too loud/not sitting at their desks without fidgeting, and perhaps most telling, “I have to teach directly to the test”(p. 67).

Flint recognizes these limitations and has some simple but revolutionary ways to implement creativity. She suggests that teachers purposefully provide ambiguity within their teaching, instead of delivering information the same way every single time, and also encourage creative inquiry and discovery.

By including the arts and creativity for all students and not just the gifted, educators can not only strengthen literacy, but encourage a generation to be innovators and entrepreneurs. This idea of exploration and pioneering new ideas were values that the United States of America was founded on, but it will take intentionality and work for them to be maintained. The collaboration between arts and literacy will support that.

Benefits to Arts and Literacy Collaboration

While there are challenges and obstacles to the collaboration of arts and literacy, there are countless benefits. Here I outline some of the ones that stood out the most and appeared more than once but they are by no means a comprehensive list. Collaboration and student agency often appeared together, because students were working in groups for many of the activities discussed. I also broke down some concrete examples of broadening literacy through visual and theatrical elements.

Collaboration and Student Agency

Many studies explore the effectiveness of collaboration and student agency in the context of education, but one of the most dynamic examples was one that involved young children working with space in a multimodal fashion. Facilitators encouraged children to play and to share their figured worlds in a study that specifically discussed “ways in which young children collaboratively use narrative play and the available space materials around them in order to exert cultural agency” (Daniels, 2014, p. 103). Daniels started the day by providing a group of boys with a large piece of paper and asked them to design a spaceship. This first step was carefully chosen based on the boys own concerns and interests, which were mainly aliens and space travel. So this already ensured that they were much more likely to be engaged in the activity. They talked about the spaceship design among

themselves and began to draw a prototype. One boy had a particular fascination with aliens, and so the ship was filled with green aliens by the time they were done. Then they took the drawing outside and put it up on the wall. Then they spent about thirty minutes building the spaceship. As they did this, they discussed what features it should have, where they should journey to, if there would be aliens, etc. In constructing the ship, they repurposed old vacuum pipes to be part of the ship's power source and a computer keyboard as the controls.

As they went on in their play, they also used their imaginations, counting down until blast off and bringing the drama of an alien approaching who was possibly unfriendly and working through the process of questioning and rejecting or welcoming the newcomer. They played in this vein for well over forty five minutes, taking on various roles. Then the activity was extended into a few different parts: creating a space map, returning to the classroom to browse the books on space, painting an alien, and even writing a story.

While this is an example of a younger group (3-5 years old), many of the same principles apply when it comes to connecting literacy and the arts for secondary students. The activity would have been very different if it was just reading books about space or writing a story. Instead, Daniels invited the children to inhabit the roles of the aliens, of the explorers, not by telling them to play a certain, but by noticing what they were interested, providing all the materials for them to explore and create and imagine, and let them take over and create their own figurative worlds within that frame. In the same way, programs like Stories that Soar provide a structure for students to create a performance piece, without putting too many rules or restrictions on the work like much of classroom work has.

Lenters and Winters (2013) discuss an activity in a fifth grade class in which students took classic fairy tales and “fractured” them, making them their own with additions and twists that made them fresh and original pieces of work, and then filmed short videos of their performances. There is so much strength in an activity like this, because according to the authors, “Multimodal storytelling incorporating the arts, literature, and digital media can build oral, gestural and spatial communication and ignite process writing for your intermediate learners” (p. 227).

The class began with reading the original fairy tales, with many different versions from around the world; students were especially encouraged to explore the ones told by their families and cultural groups. Then they were split into small groups and directed to locate fractured fairy tales, and then to make a list of the elements that remained intact in both the traditional and fractured versions. Then the groups planned out their own fractured fairy tales, and they were allowed to record orally, which many of them chose to do. Lenters and Winters describe the process:

As the students came up with ideas, they began to make decisions about how they would use speech, gesture, space, and simple props to tell their stories. This initial drafting took place just before the three-day workshop with the Monster Theatre actors. In the series of workshops, the students learned how these actors took traditional stories and modified them to produce five-minute adaptations for the stage (pp. 230-231).

One notable instance of a dramatic shift was an English Language Learner (called English as an Additional Language there in Australia) who “wrote a piece of greater length, cohesion, and passion than previously seen in his work” (p. 234). According to the

researchers, the multimodal opportunity and the advice of the actors strengthened all aspects of his writing. They reference another study (Winters, Belliveau, and Sherritt, 2009) as they conclude:

Active approaches to language arts, which use literature and the arts, disrupt dominant pedagogies that tend to privilege print alone. By assembling these diverse modes, children are offered opportunities to think about, create and distribute information in a variety of ways. They may also collaborate, coming to understand that authorship cannot be thought of as an isolated or stable phenomenon, for it is always bound up with semiotic, social and critical meanings that interrelate with and interanimate each other (p. 235).

Agency comes into play when the students take the materials they are given and create their own elements within that figured world. In these two cases, the students were inventing their version of space and aliens and of a fairy tale, which also promoted collaboration. No world is particularly fun or interesting with just one person, even an imaginary one, and it takes collaboration to make the world work.

Broadening Literacy: Visual Components

One way to broaden the field of literacy and to move beyond print-only teaching is to bring visual elements into the classroom, from graphic novels to photography to allowing the students to first draw what they are going to write. This not only provides a richer, more varied environment but also can be really helpful to English Language Learners and assist them in expressing their thoughts in a cohesive way.

Gillenwater (2014) reports on an experiment performed in an Advanced Placement Language Arts classroom. For his high school students, seniors, a teacher used graphic

novels to talk about different themes and worked with them like he would have with more classic or traditional novels. The engagement of the visual aspect, reaching beyond simple print format, combined with the fact that these were relevant and enjoyable to the students made a huge difference in the level of engagement he experienced. Even those who hadn't been as interested in the class were able to really enjoy and understand the material and themes that they were discussing. The instructor drew parallels between the heroes in these graphic novels and the characters in Beowulf.

Another study (Lilly and Fields, 2014) focused on pictures (photographs) as a catalyst for teaching informational writing. As well as studying existing curricula around the country, one of the researchers, Fields, created a project to better capture the interest and attention of her fourth grade learners, using photographs as a starting point. The researchers explained the reasoning behind the appeal and effectiveness of the method by stating:

Using photography in teaching photography has been found to enhance students' literacy skills by naturally invoking their interest and motivation, and eventually children can combine pictures and writing to tell read or imagined stories, containing personal meaning and looking at the world through their unique lenses (Lilly and Fields, 2014, p. 99).

For this particular instance, the students chose a topic and then took photographs that corresponded to it. This immensely helped with the informational writing that they had to do, since they had concrete images that aided the process.

Fields saw a lot of progress in the areas of idea development and organization through this project, which she measured by a rubric aligned to common core standards.

Another example of classroom work that they found in their research were kindergartners taking a picture of the body part that they liked the most and then writing short sentences about that part, then mounting the picture and the sentence strip on small poster board pages and making them into a book that included the work of the whole class. There were also projects that focused on roles and responsibilities in the individual families, landmarks at the school, and essays about the child's heroes. In all of these projects, the children were able to have both text and image to work with.

Not only does this method allow students to have agency, as they take their own pictures and experience looking through different lenses both literally and figuratively, but it also reaches students who are more kinesthetic and not as good at organizing their ideas as words on paper. This is a great way to help both students and teachers meet standards while enjoying the process more as well.

A study related to work with English language learners was actually conducted in Australia (Adoniou, 2013), but is entirely transferrable to any context with student learning a second language. Adoniou points out that "Writing is the dominant mode through which most learning and assessment is mediated in schools (p. 261)." She also references Vygotsky's view and the synthesis and application in terms of the study:

"Vygotsky (1978) describes drawing as a pictorial language that allows children to find concrete visual means of representing their thoughts. Our analysis of children's drawings definitely shows that from the psychological point of view, we should regard such drawings as a kind of child speech" (p. 263).

The study involved letting children who were learning English as a second language first draw out the steps of what they were going to write—in this case, how to make

pancakes and explaining how honey was made. There was a significant improvement in the articulation of the students in the final product, the informational writing. The drawings were used as a kind of scaffolding or an outline for the words that corresponded to them. The students that had the option to draw and not just write did significantly better than the students that did not have access to this option (control group), writing work of greater length and higher quality. This is a simple but effective way to give students learning a second language the tools they need to succeed. This is especially relevant in states like Arizona, where there are many English Language Learners that are struggling and could really benefit from methods like this one.

Broadening Literacy: Theatrical Components

It seems like common sense for teachers to allow English language learners to speak the language and not just write it, but perhaps not quite as intuitive an idea to have students act out what they are saying as well. However, this is a very effective way to help them cement vocabulary and concepts, as a study (Greenfader and Brouillette, 2013) demonstrates.

This study breaks down the concept behind the Teaching Artist Project (TAP), which “affords students the opportunity to practice speaking and listening skills in a comfortable and fun environment” (p. 172). Students construct stories and then act out dramatizations of these stories. Teachers that utilized this method not only saw students improve in vocabulary, structural and grammatical skills, topic understanding, and recall, but also saw an increase in the quality of communication overall. One teacher, impressed with the effects of the project, explained:

It’s the kinesthetic piece. ELL students are *hearing* it. They’re *doing* it. They are

understanding it. It's huge. It's hearing it and doing it themselves. This is how people learn. It's different from sitting at the table (p. 175).”

In the practicing and performing process of the StoryShare curriculum, physical props often help students to fully inhabit their roles in the play, and it gives that extra bit of help for creating that figured world and building within it. For example, at Greenfield Middle School there was a play involving ducks, and the yellow duck-billed hats aided the students in playing their parts. Literacy can be so much more than sitting at the table, from print as the sole material that teachers are working with. Not only is a multimodal, diverse approach more effective, it's also a lot more dynamic and fun for everyone involved.

Methods

Research Design

My case study of Stories that Soar was conducted over the course of seven months, September 2014 through March 2015. I attended workshops at 3 different schools and also observed an end-of-the-unit performance. I observed and took notes, and was able to see the way that students naturally interacted with each other. I circulated equally among the different groups to make sure that I was capturing the range of different working styles and dynamics.

I observed Jim Rhodes¹(the Arts Integration Coordinator of Stories that Soar) teach in both elementary and secondary classrooms. In the elementary context, the primary teachers were present and assisted with order and general organization. In the secondary classrooms, the teachers were not present, but there were also fewer students (10-15 rather than 30). Mr. Rhodes gave me a copy of one of the secondary StoryShare curriculum

¹ All names of people are pseudonyms.

units so that I could understand the whole scope of the program, since I wasn't able to attend all the weeks of the unit. I also informally interviewed Mr. Rhodes, asking about the theoretical framework of the organization and the vision of the program overall. He referenced a concept he called "the hedgehog", where everything comes from the same place—the student. An idea that came up at least twice was empowerment—empowering them to adopt a positive perspective of reading and writing, and empowering them to share their ideas. Along with this he noted student agency as vital to the creative process. He told me that he once told a class, "I'm here to help you guys. You're going to get what you put into it." He said that this was an especially important concept for older kids, the idea that they had that agency to create and to take care of another person's story. It was really exciting and invigorating to not only hear him talk about these foundational concepts, but see them in action through my observations.

Data Collection

I conducted a series of five observations at three different sites. I observed two different middle school classes (one two times, the other once) at Middle School², a high school English class at Regent High School, and a drama class at Bellview High School. Stories that Soar implemented StoryShare at all of these except for Bellview, which used a different curriculum called Stories that Soar High! This program was slightly different in that the students were working with stories written by a different school.

Because the program at Stories that Soar High! was different than those at the other schools, I asked Mr. Rhodes about the defining elements; one of them was that the collaboration between the two schools served as a bridge between them and built a strong

² All school names are pseudonyms

sense of community.

I took notes on what I saw, and particularly looked for examples of student agency, which is very important to the concept of figured worlds, when students are forming their own imaginary stories and situations.

Data Analysis

First, I did open coding (Saldaña, 2009) of the all the observation notes that I had written looking for patterns. Then I counted the codes and made a codebook (see Appendix A), so that I knew what the definition was for each code and what the abbreviations corresponded to. Next, I went back through and re-coded, making sure that I had noted the appearance of the earliest codes in the later observations. Then I put all the codes into categories and subcategories, grouping them by similarity and relationship to each other., for example “Within Student Selves” held the two sub-categories self-evaluation and self motivation. Then I wrote by category, using any pertinent examples that showed up in the data for each code.

Findings and Discussion

When I examined all my observations and looked at the range of experiences that I saw in the three different locations, there was so much to explore and to discuss. I centered in on elements of the external (environment) and internal (what was happening within the students themselves). I did this because I wanted to show the effects of the classroom and facilitators on the students, and also to see what the students took initiative to do themselves and how they responded.

Environment

Environment is very important to the building of a figured world. When students are

given a space to create in, it is like another character. The area may be small or large, loud or quiet, and even if it is not the same as the figured world of the play that they create, it will affect the outcomes. I specifically noticed the influence of classroom dynamics and student conflict on the environment.

Classroom dynamics. Every class of students has a different dynamic, which affects not only the way that the individuals behave, but also how the class is run. One of the best examples of this can be found in the Greenfield Middle School. This school is known for being free-flowing already, but one of the junior high classes that Sean worked with was particularly lively and rambunctious. The first time that I observed the class, students were climbing on chairs, lying around on the floor instead of sitting at the desks and jumping off of furniture. Overall the atmosphere felt very chaotic. Add to that the fact that the task that they were given had a lot of room to develop and carry out their own ideas of how the story they had been given should play out on the stage, and the room became a place for exploring those ideas without too many strict guidelines or limitations. This was a challenge, since the idea was to give the students agency and let them work on their scripts in the way that was best for them, but there was also a need for some order as well, both so the students didn't hurt themselves and so that they could focus on the task at hand without undue distraction.

One specific instance of this was that there was a student that was climbing on chairs and when asked to stop, he used the excuse that they were stairs from a key scene in the play instead of stopping immediately, although he did stop after Sean made it clear that wasn't a good enough reason, since it was precarious and somewhat dangerous for him to continue that behavior.

In contrast, in the drama classroom at Bellview High School, the students knew where they were supposed to be and kept to those designated spots. One group opted to sit on the floor and the other in chairs, but neither group was distracted by the positions they were in.

At Regent High School, all of the groups were in one classroom except for one, because of space (I call them group four). Group four was directed by the teacher to go downstairs and had their own space to work and stage the play. They struck me as the most self-motivated group, which may have had to do with their environment as well as the personalities of the students within the group. Since I only observed them one time and that was the only situation I saw them in, it's difficult to know all of the dynamics.

In all of these different classrooms, the students were essentially creating their own figured worlds. As groups collaborating and creating something brand new, even the ideas that shaped the way that the groups were run were unique to each one. This activity gave each student potential responsibility in their group by nature, whether or not they chose to function that way or not.

Student conflict. Some of the conflict that held the most interest for me as I watched it play out was not the conflict between two students, but the conflict within a group or even between a student and the material or a student and the facilitator.. For example, there was a girl in the junior high classroom at Greenfield Middle School who declared in no uncertain terms, "I don't care!" in reference to the script she was supposed to be helping write and perform. Sean both fervently and firmly replied, "You *have* to care!" He wasn't asking her why she didn't care or asking her to work through that, but implying that this was her responsibility and the ball was in her court, so to speak. I wish I had

followed up on this more, since she did continue working on the script with her group and eventually perform it, but it would have been interesting to track the transition and the journey of her attitude and behavior. What I found fascinating about this encounter was the way that Sean was telling her, through those words that she had to care, how she was important to the creative process, to her group, to the success of the endeavor. For this particular individual, that was much more effective than trying to figure out why she didn't care, since perhaps what she needed was to be reminded that she was needed and vital, rather than feeling that she was just another person in the group.

At Regent High School, there was one group that had difficulty coming to a consensus about the use of drums. Mr. Rhodes and their classroom teacher were trying to draw out the opinions of the quieter people in the group, and helping them come to a consensus. They ended up putting it to a vote, and the majority vote won, which made the person who had voted against the drums unhappy, but it was deemed fair and the conflict was resolved.

The best example of how a student functions within her figured world is a situation I observed at Bellview High School, because this student decided she needed something more outside of the bounds of her group and the amount of boys they had. Her action of requesting and commandeering the presence of one of the students in another group was bold, but also made sense in her mind. For her plan and vision to be carried out, she needed him. So she took him. There were a limited number of boys (only three in the class and one was in her group). She essentially told the other group that she needed to use one of their boys, and it wasn't phrased as a request so much as a need. The boy that she had asked did join their group (at least for that play) and work with them to complete the scene, but his

group wasn't thrilled about it. When I talked to Mr. Rhodes about it later in our debrief, he said that this was not the first time that there was a demand for more boys because of the demographic, and that perhaps, while it was a bit of an inconvenience for the boy's group that lost him, they were understanding about it, if somewhat annoyed. This situation demonstrates how comfortable she was being a leader and initiator within that context, not just accepting things as they were.

Facilitator correction and encouragement. One of the things that struck me about the input of the facilitators, both from Stories that Soar and the main classroom teachers, was that it was largely positive and supportive of the students' creative thought. Only when the idea that students had was implausible or the activity they were doing was dangerous would one of them comment in a distinctly negating way. An example of this encouragement is when, in a Regent High School classroom, one of the students wanted to use the smoke machine; the teacher responded that they would try to make that work, rather than telling them to simplify their vision. I believe that when facilitators can support students this way, they build the confidence and assurance of the students that they not only have viable ideas, but have the ability to carry them out.

At Greenfield Middle School, the teacher was not present in the classroom for either of the classes I observed, so Mr. Rhodes was the only facilitator and adult directing the students. Perhaps because these classrooms were more high-energy and rambunctious than those in the other schools I observed or perhaps because of the dynamic (lack of a main classroom teacher), most of the instances of Mr. Rhodes providing input were in the form of correction or suggestion.

For example, a student kicked another student when they were performing their

play, which was not supposed to be a part of the plot. Their reason when asked why he had done that was, "He's trash!" Mr. Rhodes firmly said, "He's not trash!" Another instance of a suggestion was when a group was acting out a scene which involved a door, and he told them to mime opening a door.

At Bellview High School, the classroom teacher was very vocal in giving input to her students about ways to make their scripts come alive, but was equally supportive of their original ideas. For example, when one group was working with a script almost entirely in Spanish, she suggested that they do the narration in English, so that people that didn't speak Spanish would understand what was going on. She was careful to add, "It's up to you, but that's a way to make it happen."

This exemplifies the idea that the more that adults can encourage innovation and creativity of individual students within their figured worlds, the more likely students can produce something new and be leaders or initiators (followers with something to say) in various contexts. Conversely, negative feedback or lack of support could cause students to not want to come up with new ideas. It's a delicate balance, how much to say and not say. Put simply, positivity goes a long way in helping students feel comfortable as an agent in their own figured worlds.

Working style. One of the things that I noticed as I observed the secondary classrooms, especially the middle school one at Greenfield, was that sometimes when middle school students are doing their best work, it looks a lot more like chaos. It took great attention to detail and actually being in the middle of the groups to realize that they were not only doing the task, but doing it quite well. For example, one group was lying on the floor or putting their feet up, which for adults could be interpreted as disrespectful or

lazy, but when I went over to the group, they were throwing around ideas earnestly, and while they had one scribe who was writing things down, every person was participating in generating material. There were also other groups that seemed not to be working from their body language or how they were positioned, but when I listened to them, they were thinking critically and collaborating to put together the final product, the script.

In Regent High School, there was less outward disorganization and all the groups looked like they were working, but once when I joined a group, they were completely off task. The teacher happened to be at that group when they were wandering in subject, and instead of scolding them, she just redirected them back to the subject at hand. Then they continued to talk about the script, and were able to stay on track, so far as I was able to tell, since I did move onto a different group shortly after. So in some ways, it was the opposite, a flipped version of their sister school, Greenfield. They all appeared to be working and some of them were, but it took much closer observation—actually hearing what they were saying—to confirm the level of focus and productivity.

In Bellview High School's drama classroom, perhaps partly because the students were used to working with scripts and coming up with scenes, the groups were fairly organized, and while the pace of the two groups was different (one was working out staging long and doing run-throughs long before the other), both were dedicated to the task and stayed focused the entire time. It's interesting to note, in relation to environment, that one group sat on the floor and one on chairs, and that perhaps the group on the floor felt closer to each other because of the way they were positioned, but because this was only one isolated instance, this is not a claim that can be substantiated.

The concept of figured worlds comes into play here because in each instance, the

groups and the dynamics were elements that were being formed largely by student choice. Even if the teacher or Mr. Rhodes picked the groups initially, the way that each group was run was unique and important to that group. Working style tended to display the personality of the people group and sometimes the characteristics of the school showed through that as well.

Within Student Selves

While there were many group dynamics, there were also more individualized behaviors within the figured world of the classroom. When examining the instances of self-motivation and self-evaluation, they revealed some of what the students saw in themselves and their role in their groups.

Self motivation. In sharp contrast to the students that were disengaged, there were students that were very self-motivated, for one reason or another, and actually were leading or pulling their group along. There was a boy in one of the middle school classes at Greenfield who, noticing his group was lagging, said, “I know this is kind of a boring class, but we can’t just be unproductive” and then pulled more than his fair share of the weight of the work. It wasn’t clear from observing what his motivation was besides possibly an internal drive to do well in the class; however it’s certain that he was motivated, for whatever reason, even though his group was far from enthused to do the work.

In both Regent High School and Bellview High School, there was a high level of self-motivation. This was in part, from watching the students work, because they were older. I think it also did have something to do with the classroom teacher being present in the classroom, since there was a certain level of accountability that

Self-evaluation. Self-evaluation was a skill I saw mostly in the high school classrooms I visited, and one that showed a fair amount of investment and critical thinking on the part of the students who were assessing themselves. At Bellview High School, when the class was asked how they felt the previous week had gone, they said they had gotten a “very positive vibe” and that the time had been “really productive”.

At Regent High School, I observed a class that was one of the last ones of the unit with Stories that Soar and the students were reflecting on goals made at the beginning of the unit. Both the goals themselves and the reflection showed a lot of progress and even shifts in attitude. For example, one student wrote that he wanted to figure out his he liked acting, and when he was sharing said that he doesn’t think it was his forte because he doesn’t “take things seriously”. This showed a fair amount of self-awareness and introspection, even if possibly he was being too hard on himself, as Mr. Rhodes implied as he said, “You *do* focus and come up with ideas. Maybe you’re not taking it as seriously because you’re in class.”

There was a form of self-evaluation in one of the class sessions that took the form of peer evaluation, or “feed-forward”, as Mr. Rhodes called it. He had the students watch the other groups perform their plays and give them suggestions. This was not particularly effective in this case, since the students were not good at articulating what they meant by what they said; however it was a skill that was good for them to develop regardless, and feeds into the element of collaboration that is one of Stories that Soar’s main tenets.

Collaboration and Communication

Since the entire program depends upon the collaboration and communication of students in different classes and also students in groups, it is no surprise that these two

codes (which often overlap) showed up again and again in my observations. Students worked together excellently for the most part, and were able to convey ideas and carry them out without too much trouble. This shows that the students functioned well in their figured worlds, and made the most of them.

Within the groups at Greenfield , there was a clear (if not always equal) division of labor. On more than one occasion, one student would take on a specific role of scribe (writing down the ideas of the whole group and making them into script form) or leader (championing an idea or motivating students to work in the group that didn't appear to be self-motivated). The rest of the group usually fell into the category of idea producers, which worked well, since everyone writing down the ideas and the script would have been chaotic and redundant.

At Regent High School, the most notable example of collaboration was within the same group four, the one that had their own space. They were eager to carry out their artistic vision and didn't have any trouble with conflict that I noticed, but each took their specific roles and worked on staging the play before most of the other groups were ready to do so.

At Bellview High School, there were two groups, and one group did strike me as more unified than the other (I call them group 1). This was due, at least in part, to the fact that everyone in the group was contributing ideas and the leaders were willing to listen and have a discussion about the possibilities, while in group 2, the leaders tended to know exactly what they wanted and communicated that vision to their group, accepting ideas but synthesizing themselves. This was a case more of a difference in working style, perhaps, but group 1 worked more smoothly and efficiently overall (getting two of their plays staged

before group 2 had finished one).

Student agency. At Greenfield Middle School, the best example of student agency came during the performance, when they acted out the plays in front of the school. There was some great ad-libbing, where they spoke lines that weren't originally scripted, but worked great for the play. It also showed that they understood the figured world that they had created, and could move around comfortably within it.

At Regent High School, the instance of the teacher supporting the idea of the student who asked to use the smoke machine (facilitator input) also falls under the category of student agency, since it was the student that originated the idea and voiced the desire for the use of the special effect. The fact that the student was encouraged in their thinking and agency is a bonus, and models how positive a working environment student-centered teaching can create.

At Bellview High School, the setup facilitated agency and spread it out among different people. Each group was given three stories, and the responsibility for coming up with a concept and staging was given to three different people. That gave those three the opportunity to lead and have their individual visions carried out, rather than just one. Specific examples of the choices that students made were wordless scripts and only instrumental music, asking for one of the boys from the other group to complete the cast, and working with two different languages to create a bilingual script that would be enjoyable to both audiences who spoke English and Spanish.

Agency is very important in the concept of the figured world, since nothing would happen without it. Students have to choose what materials they are going to use and how they are going to use them. The play is a world in itself within the one that they are

navigating, so they are living in two. If, as in Bellview High School, students have full access to more than one language, that can be a great way to exert agency, using a second language for select words or scenes. But it is a broad category, and in every group, it will look slightly different.

Limitations

There are many things I would do differently if I were able to replicate the study. One of them would have been to narrow down my focus to just elementary or just secondary sooner, since originally I collected data for both. This way I would have more data that was specific to the topic. However, it took the elementary observations to realize that I was more interested in older grades, from fifth grade and up, so perhaps they were an important stepping stone, even if only as scaffolding. I would have clarified my research questions and then had them in mind when I went into observe, instead of writing down what sometimes felt like random information that didn't pertain to the essence of what I was trying to explore. I also would have spent more time observing, which was a limitation mainly based on the fact that I was a full-time student while doing this research. I also would have started writing earlier, reflected more after every observation, to think about and process what I had observed and the implications and findings that were emerging, so that they were clearer to me by the time I needed to write my findings formally. Since this is a case study with a small sample size, the research and findings here cannot necessarily be generalized to other settings.

Implications

As a senior in college who is going straight into graduate school to become a secondary language arts teacher, I am trying to learn as much as I can about how to make

literacy something not only palatable for students, but also to teach it in a way that builds skills that are going to help them function better in the world. When the definition of literacy is broadened and multimodal, arts-infused options provided, students are able to collaborate, be creative, think critically, and communicate in a way they wouldn't otherwise.

It's not that bringing the arts into education is a new idea, but I do believe there is some freshness in the idea of broadening literacy, allowing space for a multimodal, exploratory type of learning that hasn't always been accepted in classrooms. I believe this is tolerated a little better in the younger grades, but that as children grow older and learn how to focus, educators often assume that they should just fit more into an adult mold and sit at a desk and write because they *can*. This doesn't mean that this is the optimal way of learning. The more that educators can engage secondary students, the richer their experience will be, and the less likely their students will be to "check out." Otherwise, many students in middle and high school don't do as well in the areas of reading and writing, finding that they don't relate well to the printed page. By showing the strengths of organizations like Stories that Soar and the work that they do, I hope to demonstrate at least to some degree how important this kind of collaboration between arts and literacy is, and convince skeptics that it's by no means a waste of time, and could change everything in the way students process literacy.

Further Research

In terms of further research, I want to do an even more in-depth exploration of the differences in classrooms that incorporate the arts and a broad definition of literacy and those that don't. Beyond my own research, I believe that this is an important field that

deserves a lot more attention. For example, more studies should be conducted that explore the short and long-term effects of literacy with the incorporation of visual elements like pictures or drawing into language arts classrooms. More work should be done on the links between drama and an increase in creativity and critical thinking in writing and reading.

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Appendix A: Codebook

OC~Observer Comment—When a somewhat subjective comment is made that may or may not be backed up by evidence; necessary to look at the context and see if the idea is valid (15)

SA~Student Agency (21)

CD~Classroom Dynamics—the physical set up and emotional climate of the room, can often affect the students' work (10)

SC~Student Conflict—when there is some sort of tension or negative emotion with a student and facilitator, between two students, or with a student and the group (the latter can fall into group dynamics as well) (5)

TE~Theater Elements—anytime script-writing, acting, staging or other aspects of theater are involved in a classroom experience (19)

D~Disengagement—When a student is not participating for one reason or another, or expresses apathy for the activity at hand even while participating (6)

C/T~Collaboration/Teamwork—when students are working together on the project, especially highlighted when they are doing it well (8)

FI~Facilitator Input—Anytime Mr. Rhodes (Stories that Soar facilitator observed) or the classroom teacher suggests a course of action or affirms or amends an idea that students have presented (20)

CR~Creativity—When students come up with an original idea that adds to the overall effect of their piece (12)

GD~Group Dynamics—The way that the group works together and how they navigate the different roles and responsibilities (21)

SE~Self Evaluation—When the students assess their own progress or work (3)

SM~Self Motivation—When students are working well on their own (in a group or individually) without much supervision or input needed (17)

L/F~Leader-follower—could also fall under group dynamics, but is a more specific instance of when there are clear leaders and followers within a certain group (7)

WS~Working Style—The way an individual or a group of students chooses to work. (6)

A/D~Appear to be vs. actually doing—When students seem to be doing one thing, but when one takes a closer look, they are actually doing something completely different. (4)