

## “Everyone Off the Ship”: Children Becoming Civic Minded in a Summer Literacy Program

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**“Everyone Off the Ship”:  
Children Becoming Civic Minded in a  
Summer Literacy Program**

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Increased emphasis in recent years on reading and/or math achievement have sidelined social studies teaching in elementary education (Boyle-Baise et al., 2012; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; McMurrer, 2007; Shapiro & Brown, 2018). When conversations about the democratic process do occur, experiences of marginalized populations, such as people of color or those with limited income and/or English proficiency, often are left out of classroom conversations (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). While one aim of U.S. public schools is to prepare students for citizenship, “educators have faced challenges in preparing children to assume their roles as the change agents for the future” (Berson & Berson, 2019, p. 75). Furthermore, typical elementary instruction concerning citizenship sets up students for future citizenship duties (Moyer, 1981; Swalwell & Payne, 2019) and focuses on “obedience to rules and laws, and trust in civic institutions” (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p. 127). This traditional banking model of schooling (Freire, 1970/2009) makes children the receivers of knowledge and overlooks “the very real capabilities that young children bring to act with and for their communities” (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p. 128). Efforts are needed to rethink “civic education as an emancipatory experience in which children learn to actively negotiate their identity and sense of belonging” (Berson & Berson, 2019, p. 75).

Our work examined the experiences of children participating in a summer literacy program in Tennessee as they developed awareness, sense of belonging, and engagement in their community. The literacy program sought, among other aims, to foster the participants’ beliefs in their own abilities to act as agents of change in their own environments. Troubled by vandalism to their playground, the participants and their peers were motivated to deliberate, make decisions, plan, and act to reclaim their play space. This demonstrated the children to be young citizens bringing about change in their own community.

**Theoretical Stance**

Our work is framed by posthumanist theories that shift attention “away from questions of human knowing and toward questions of entangled knowing/becoming/doing in relation with other lively matters and meanings” (Kuby et al., 2019, p. 10). As educators and students, we sought to move beyond children’s answers to adult questions and look more closely at the realities of children as “civic beings” (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p. 128) already and at the processes of their becoming change agents in their world. Rather than focusing on what the children might do at some point in the future, we explored their knowing/becoming/doing in the present, seeking “time and space *to be with* rather than aiming for a never-to-be realized future goal of *mastery over*” (Jones, 2019, p. 112). We also were interested in children’s entanglements with both humans (teachers, volunteers, peers) and non-human/inanimate matter (graffiti, books, playground equipment, signage, trash, protests) and how these entanglements led to being, becoming, and doing citizenship.

Our work also is informed by Freire's (1970/2009) ideas of student *conscientização*, or critical consciousness that leads to action, and students as "beings for themselves" (p. 74) who are "in the process of becoming" (p. 84). Freire argued that problem-posing education, which involves identifying authentic problems from the students' realities, causes students to recognize themselves as *becoming*, and thus unfinished; in turn, the students are motivated to "true reflection and action upon reality" (p. 84). In the discussion that follows, we share how teacher/student dialogue, prompted by stories in children's literature, led children to recognize the possibilities for resolving a problem in their own community and to take action to overcome the problem.

Finally, our study is grounded in socio-cultural theories of learning. Dillon et al. (2013), acknowledging Dewey's theories on the "social nature of learning" (p. 1119), noted that "problems need to be socially situated and identified to be legitimate foci of inquiry" (p. 1119). Research has shown that learning for students from families disadvantaged by poverty improves when the students find connections to their lives within the curriculum (Gorski, 2013). Elementary students need social justice-oriented service learning projects that begin with their lived experiences to develop a solid foundation in how to become social activists as adults (Wade, 2007). Teachers often conclude that stories about social justice are too troubling for young children, but "active citizenship, social justice, and service to community—these concepts resonate with children's identities as members of families and classrooms" (Dubois, 2011, p. 19). Our work centered around children's discovery of a socially situated problem, one they discovered during group play on their own playground, and on their subsequent collaboration, as

young citizens of their community, to find solutions to the problem.

## Review of Literature

Children, like adults, are "capable and deserving of assuming deliberative roles in the democratic functioning of their communities and nations" (Carlson, 2002, p. 39). Key principles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child are children's rights to both participate as non-voters and to deliberate, lending credence to children's voices as citizens in a democracy. Education platforms are ideal for enabling children to exercise those rights. While education alone cannot change society, education can proffer equity among children from diverse backgrounds and help develop a more democratic society by helping students comprehend democracy and "by teaching them specific knowledge, skills, and values or attitudes needed to become democratic citizens" (Villegas-Reimers, 2002, p. 36). Indeed, such teaching is espoused in most social studies standards (e.g., National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, 2010). Yet emphasis on achievement outcomes in reading and math have pushed social studies to the background in many public schools in the US (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; McMurrer, 2007; Shapiro & Brown, 2018). In a study of 350 school districts, 62% of the districts increased time spent in ELA or math, while 44% cut time for other subjects, such as social studies or science (McMurrer, 2007).

### *Children's Understanding of Democracy*

Scant research has examined understanding of the concept of democracy in teaching and learning (Mathé, 2016). We found few studies that focused on young children's understandings of democracy, particularly in communities with limited

income or English proficiency. In one study, second grade children's understandings of democracy and citizenship were fostered in environments where democracy was considered through imagery, books, and conversations that children found relevant to their worlds (LeCompte, 2006). Children's abilities to communicate their understandings of democracy were captured through drawings, photography, and captions. In another study that focused on children's understandings of democratic citizenship, researchers used photo elicitation as a method to capture K-6 graders understandings (Szymanski Sunal et al., 2011). The researchers found that younger children had difficulty using language to describe democracy, but through photographs the children construed democratic citizenship as it pertained to them. Mathé's (2016) research on children's comprehension of democracy in Norway demonstrated varied understandings and some contradictions in student beliefs about democracy.

### ***Children's Civic Engagement***

In addition to searching for literature on children's understandings of democracy, we examined studies that focused on civic learning in general and on projects that addressed civic engagement among minority or marginalized populations. A study of service learning among elementary students found that such projects "had a direct and positive effect on empathy and community engagement" (Scott & Graham, 2015, p. 364). Children in Canada used art and stories to consider community and citizenship, demonstrating their civic identities were already developing as they learned about and connected to their worlds (Swain, 2012, p. 117). The study pointed to the importance of "understanding citizenship in a more modern, socially situated and lived

sense" (p. 123). In another study in Canada, children designed their own nations, as researchers and teachers used project-based learning, multimodality, and games to guide children to learn how to take action and to share (Lotherington, 2017). Teenagers in a West Coast city used participatory research, problem-solving, and community action to bring about positive change in their neighborhoods (Wright & Mahiri, 2012). The research demonstrated the power of project-based learning and the students' ability to bring about change through their own skills (p. 129). In an study of older youth immigrants' civic learning, family experiences, as well as experiences that crossed time, borders, and schools, promoted civic learning for African immigrants in the US (Knight & Watson, 2014).

### ***Use of Children's Literature to Teach Civic Engagement***

Children's literature has been identified as a promising tool for starting conversations with children about civic engagement because of its use of both text and images in ways that students find appealing (Ferraris-Stone & Demoiney, 2019). This use of children's literature aligns with Item 4 in the *Children's Rights to Read*, which states that children should be able to see themselves and hear their own language in the books they read while also being shown the diversity of the world's people and places (International Literacy Association, 2019). Research has demonstrated that children's literature can be used in a kindergarten classroom to guide discussions about multiple perspectives, social inequities, perseverance, and community, helping to nurture civic engagement (Enriquez et al., 2017).

Clearly more research is needed on children's understandings of democracy and

civic engagement. Language development may be considered a barrier to both research and classroom discussions about democracy and civic engagement, particularly in U.S. classrooms where multiple first languages are represented. Even children whose first language is English may not have developed the language skills needed to convey their understandings of such concepts with language. Literature demonstrates, however, that children do learn and demonstrate their understandings through other means, such as art (LeCompte, 2006; Swain, 2012;), photos (Szymanski Sunal et al., 2011;), stories (Enriquez et al., 2017; Ferraris-Stone & Demoiney, 2019), games (Lotherington, 2017), and project-based learning (Scott & Graham, 2015; Wright & Mahiri, 2012).

### Context

The setting of our study was a summer program for children in grades K–4 that featured daily literacy instruction for six weeks, using a curriculum built around multicultural children’s literature. In addition to three hours of morning literacy immersion, the children participated each day in two hours of afternoon cultural enrichment activities that included visual arts, theater activities, music lessons, STEM explorations, and field trips. Children also received breakfast, lunch, and snacks. The summer program was facilitated by trained college students in small group settings; the program’s 29 children were divided into three classrooms. University and community volunteers delivered many of the afternoon enrichment activities. The program was housed in an elementary school, with access to the school’s classrooms, gymnasium, cafeteria, and playground.

Our research, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects, focused on the literacy program’s emphasis on guiding

children to recognize that they could become agents of change in their world. The program used high-quality children’s literature which had been vetted for historical accuracy and inclusiveness. After reading literature that explored community problems and ways to address them, teachers invited the children to consider their own community and its problems.

### Participants

Study participants were seven children enrolled in the summer literacy program, which recruited from a local elementary school whose students were 68% Hispanic/Latinx and 67% economically disadvantaged (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018). State test scores indicated only 14% of the school’s elementary students were on track or had achieved mastery in English Language Arts (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018), demonstrating a need for literacy enrichment. Study participants, all from families who self-identified their children as qualifying for free or reduced school meals, included three Latinx children, two European American children, one African American child, and one child identified as both African and European American. One participant was 8 years old; all others were 9 years old. The number included four females and three males.

### Data and Analysis

Data included program observations by researchers, who worked in various roles in the summer program; journaling by one researcher who coordinated the daily program and spent the most time with the children; individual interviews with the participants; and various documents and artifacts, such as lessons, children’s books, and art and signage created by the

participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants as well as for other identifying information.

Our data analysis amounted to thinking through our data with a posthumanism lens that focused not on outcomes but on “entangled knowing/becoming/doing in relation with other lively matters and meanings” (Kuby et al., 2019, p. 10). Posthumanism decenters the human and focuses on the entanglements of “bodies, matter, time, and space” (Franklin-Phipps & Rath, 2018) in the research setting. Our thinking through included individual reviews of data both in search of these entanglements and to look for ways that students enacted agency or made sense of their entanglements. Researchers then met as a group to share notes, find consensus, and develop descriptions of these entanglements and moments of meaning.

## Findings

The following sections describe the entanglements of human and non-human matter and the moments of meaning that we discovered as we viewed our data through a posthumanism lens. *Abandon Ship!* describes participants and graffiti on their playground and meanings that emerged from the entanglement. *Connecting Stories to Reality* shows participants making connections to their own worlds as they read powerful stories. In *Recognizing Their Becoming* and in *Books and Signs*, we share the children’s plans and actions in their community. Finally, *Interview Data* describes participants’ responses to questions about citizenship, democracy, and community.

### *Abandon Ship!*

From day one of the program, the “very real capabilities” (Swalwell & Payne, 2019,

p. 128) of children to be change agents were apparent. After a morning of learning new songs and chants, becoming acquainted, and reading books together, the children moved outdoors for recess and made their way to the playground. All seemed harmonious until a swarm of shouting kids came running to the teachers. One of the researchers heard “everyone off the ship!” and “bad words on the ship!” A few older children had discovered that a large play structure shaped like a ship had been vandalized with profanities. Their words of warning and their reporting to their teachers seemed enough to satisfy some children but not others. Older children in particular wanted assurance that no “little kids” would go near the ship and “see the bad words.” The teachers declared the ship off limits until further notice, but some children questioned what would become of the ship and the people who committed the vandalism. Promises to report the problem promptly to the school principal briefly quieted the questions, but it was clear the children found the playground incident disturbing and would not soon forget it.

### *Connecting Stories to Reality*

As the summer progressed, children were exposed to a variety of children’s picture books that told stories, through text and illustrations, of people changing the world around them for the better. As the children read Tonatiuh’s (2014) *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation*, which illustrated a clear difference between a school for students who were white and a school for students of color, the children became aware of the injustices of segregation and were asked to develop a plan to improve the school for students of color. The children suggested improving the school’s playground. During the reading of

another story, Milway's (2017) *The Banana Leaf Ball: How Play Can Change the World*, the children observed characters' reactions to the banana leaf ball being destroyed. Four weeks had passed since discovery of the ship graffiti, but the story about the destruction of the banana leaf ball reminded the children of the vandalism to their own play space. They began to talk of ways that their own playground could be improved.

### ***Recognizing Their Becoming***

The following week, the children were asked in their separate classrooms to decide on a project for making a difference in their own community. Each group, independent of the others, said they wanted to improve their school's playground. Erasing the vandalism from the ship was important but only part of the dream. Inspired by the stories they had been reading, the children suggested placing signs around the playground to encourage their peers and community to take care of the space. They also wanted to add trashcans and recycling bins to eliminate the litter they continued to discover on the playground, and they wanted to paint the ship so the community would take note of how much the space meant to them. Out of concern for the possibility of disagreement amongst younger peers over the ship's new paint color, the older children suggested painting the ship in a rainbow of colors so that each person's color idea would be included. As the discussion ended, one child asked: "Are we really going to do this"? It was a powerful moment, one researcher noted, when she was able to respond, "Yes!" In the following days, parents also questioned the reality of the playground project and were told that it would happen.

On a hot day in July, the children and their teachers went to work with brushes and paint. Earlier in the week, they had worked

side by side with sandpaper and primer to remove the graffiti and prepare the ship for paint. Now it was time to apply the fresh coat of color. The children seemed reluctant to pull away when teachers suggested water breaks and even when required to board a bus for the day's field trip. When they returned from the field trip, they were surprised and elated to discover that community volunteers had picked up where the children left off and finished painting the ship. The children exited the bus, running toward the rejuvenated ship as quickly as they had run away from the vandalized ship on the day they discovered the graffiti.

### ***Books and Signs***

During the summer, teachers and children shared rich stories that led to authentic and personal conversations about change. While reading *The Banana Leaf Ball: How Play Can Change the World*, children discovered Deo, a child who was bullied by a gang in a Tanzanian refugee camp where he lived without any family. At the conclusion of the story, the children created posters with affirming words or phrases—"You matter" and "You are not alone"—that they thought might have been helpful to Deo. They displayed the posters in the hallways so that they might encourage fellow students. Later, as part of their playground revitalization, they suggested similar positive and welcoming messages for their playground, and professional signs with such messages were later printed and installed around the playground. Other actions taken by the children over the summer demonstrated the power of stories and subsequent discussions to lead children to act as agents of change. One hot afternoon, study participants made signs and marched with other peers to the lead teacher's office to request popsicles for everyone. On another day, participants

helped devise a plan to place both a trash can and a recycling bin on the school's playground in hopes of reducing litter on the playground.

### ***Interview Data***

The participants were interviewed individually to gauge their understanding of the concepts of citizenship, democracy, and community. The children's answers indicated they had limited knowledge or language skills for discussing the concept of democracy. Asked what it means to live in a democracy, one participant said the word sounds like a bad place because it "sounds like demolish." Another said nothing bad happens in a democracy, and yet another said "we always have to clean" in a democracy. The remaining participants responded with "I don't know." The participants had more to say when asked what it means to be a citizen; being a citizen was described as being part of a place, participating in a community, or helping others in the community. Asked *What does a citizen do*, six participants said citizens "help" and one mentioned voting. The participants' discussions of community were richer. Asked what they think when they hear the word community, six participants used the word *people*. Community also was defined spatially, with two participants mentioning buildings such as a library, a church, and a post office, and two participants described community as people helping each other. When asked *What are some important parts of your community*, their answers included "things to keep you safe," places to meet needs (police station, park, supermarket, hospital), and living beings (family, friends, and animals). One participant declared: "All of your community should be important." When asked about *a time that you did something because you were part of a community*, four

participants said they painted the playground ship. Other participants remembered picking up or cleaning up around parks or school, one mentioned planting trees at school, and another said he picked up books from the floor of the library.

### **Discussion**

When children in our study discovered graffiti on their playground equipment, they responded first with dismay and concern, but their response soon demonstrated that they were both children and citizens. This seemingly small problem led to inquiry and grew into a community action project with far-reaching impact that involved their peers and teachers, their families, their school, their community, and their town. In reflecting on an experience at a preschool in Sweden, Schulte (2019) noted that "what comes to matter is most often a problem that emerges with and transforms through the encounters that we have with the world around us" (p. 71). He noted that "children are especially adept at attuning themselves to the material of such moments" (p. 71), and they recognize that the existence of a problem means the need for a solution. The children in our study recognized the playground graffiti as a problem. They responded immediately, acting to prevent younger children from being exposed to the offensive words by shouting words of warning to "get off the ship." They demonstrated, immediately, that they were citizens *already* by working to ensure that younger children were not exposed to the offensive language.

The discovery of graffiti on the boat was just the beginning. In the weeks that followed, as they explored stories of other children's experiences, they began to "recognize themselves as *becoming*" (Freire, 1970/2009) and to demonstrate their "very real capabilities" (Swalwell & Payne, 2019,



p. 127) to act as “civic beings” (p. 128). With simple acts, such as a protest for popsicles and displaying positive signage around the school, the children demonstrated their capacities for action and their desire to make a difference in their world. The children’s recognition of the playground injustice continued to occupy their thoughts weeks into the summer program, and through children’s literature and subsequent discussions with their teachers and peers, they began to see possibilities for real change. Swalwell & Payne (2019) noted that much traditional teaching in civic education, which focuses on obedience and compliance, ignores the reality that people, laws, and institutions can fail and are often oppressive; thus, we need to prepare children for these failures, large and small, which they are certain to confront in their own communities.. In discovering graffiti on a favorite playground structure, children in our study were forced to ponder an act of vandalism, a deliberate defacing of something they valued. The children were puzzled, wanted to talk about it, and were moved to respond. As Swalwell & Payne (2019) have noted, and we agree, “identifying and disrupting these injustices should be at the heart of civic activity” (p. 128).

Not everyone supports a critical approach to civic education for young children (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). One argument is that children are not developmentally ready to learn about or act on such problems. Unfortunately, many children have already experienced such injustices “based on their social identities and community membership” (p. 128). Indeed, after widespread news reports in July 2019 that U.S. President Donald Trump had authorized raids to detain illegal immigrants for deportation, some children in the literacy program told teachers they might be absent the following week because their

family might have to hide. The children described how a family member was once deported and expressed fears that police would come again to take away their relative. This incident alone—and there were others—demonstrated that children in the literacy program were aware already of social inequities and injustices. Through powerful stories and illustrations in children’s literature and subsequent discussions with their teachers and peers, the children realized that they can respond and act, even as children, to inequity and injustice.

Interview data indicated that while participants struggled with the concepts of democracy and citizenship, they recognized that they were part of a community and could act as citizens in that community. We noted, similar to the findings of Szymanski Sunal et al. (2011), that participants, who were in grades 3 and 4, had limited understanding or lacked the words to describe the concept of democracy and had a somewhat better but still limited understanding of citizenship. But clearly, as their descriptions revealed, they understood not just the importance of community but also that they could act and be a part of the community. By painting the ship, participating in trash pickups or school cleanups, or planting trees, they were acting as citizens in their community.

Miles Horton, founder of Highlander Folk School, once said that children are taught in public schools that “the present isn’t worth anything . . . they’re taught about the future; they’re prepared for the future” (Moyers, 1981). The children in our study clearly demonstrated that what happened in the present mattered. As the children became entangled with humans (teachers, volunteers, peers) and non-humans (graffiti, playground equipment, books, signage, trash, protests), they found opportunity for

“knowing/becoming/doing” (Kuby et al., 2019, p. 10) in the present.

### Implications for Practice

In an elementary education environment where high-stakes testing in reading and math results in a narrowing of curricula, room must be found for children to be citizens and to become agents of social change. Providing children with opportunities to identify, deliberate, and act on the problems in their own schools and communities can be a powerful way to teach concepts of citizenship and democracy, even as children are learning to read and calculate. Though they may not yet have the language skills needed to pass a traditional achievement test or an oral exam on such concepts of democracy, citizenship, and community, children can, through problem-posing education, identify problems within their own worlds, recognize themselves as agents of change, and *do* what citizens do in a democracy and in a community. Such action provides opportunities for fostering language skills around the children’s experiences and their world. Children’s literature, filled with powerful stories and illustrations, is a rich resource for generating discussions that can lead children to recognize their own capabilities for enacting change. If children recognize their capabilities and become agents of change in the present, we believe they will be better prepared to participate in the democratic process in the future.

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