



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 56
Issue 1 March 2017

Article 1

3-14-2017

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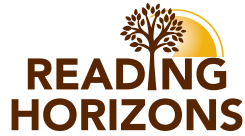
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Buelow, S. (2017). Popular Culture and Academic Literacies Situated in a Pedagogical Third Space. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 56 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol56/iss1/1

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Popular Culture and Academic Literacies Situated in a Pedagogical Third Space

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Abstract

This critical participatory action research study sought to understand what happens when students' interest and experiences with popular culture are integrated into a standards-based sixth grade English language arts curriculum. Multiple data sources were analyzed using the theoretical concept of third space. Findings showed that (a) a democratic, collaborative learning zone was established for all members of the classroom community, (b) students were successful in a curriculum that was situated in academic literacies and their popular culture interests and literacies, and (c) this experience resulted in a transformation of teacher practice. Given the current educational climate, these findings suggest the importance of fostering spaces where academic literacies and popular culture are not positioned as binary opposites; rather they are viewed as two interrelated and relevant components of a child's education. Furthermore, the findings call for an emphasis on pedagogy to produce powerful learning experiences, drawing upon popular culture funds of knowledge as assets for learning.

KEYWORDS: popular culture, third space, literacy, critical participatory action research

When I was picking songs I had to listen to them and deconstruct the lyrics which helps me better understand the mood, tone, and message of the songs. I had to think about the figurative message of the song to make better connections while thinking "outside the box." The songs I chose connect to the book and shows my understanding of text. (Chloe)

My discussion begins with a quote from a sixth-grade student in this study who describes the process she used to analyze music lyrics as text while developing a playlist to accompany a novel she was reading in class. This assignment was part of an English language arts (ELA) curriculum that I designed with input from students. Chloe (all names are pseudonyms), like her peers, frequently engaged with, produced, and talked about popular culture, yet rarely had these literacies acknowledged in school. Chloe's words capture the importance of validating and incorporating students' out-of-school interests within the official literacy curriculum, both as valid forms of knowledge.

When I collected data for this study, I was a sixth-grade teacher in a Title I suburban elementary school in the western region of the United States. Through my informal observations while working with students in this diverse school community for eight years prior, one commonality I noted was students' interest in popular culture. This led me to consider ways to honor and integrate these experiences and interests in the classroom.

I am not alone in this venture; the inclusion of popular culture in the literacy curriculum has flourished over the past two decades (Alvermann, 2010; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Gustavson, 2007; Jocson, 2008; Morrell, 2007), yet the pressures placed on educators across the United States (i.e., evidence-based education with an emphasis on standardized testing and curriculum that can be narrowed to focus on what is tested) have also proliferated (Kohn, 2000; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2014). These issues are further compounded when working in schools serving culturally diverse, low-income populations where curriculum is often focused on low-level instruction that sacrifices critical thinking to prepare students for standardized testing (Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007).

To confront these issues, I engaged practitioner research and curriculum development with the goals of (a) addressing the standards that were mandated by the state, (b) supporting my students in obtaining academic literacies, (c) fostering their critical literacy skills, and (d) engaging them in authentic and rigorous ways. I did this by merging popular cultural literacies with academic literacies. That is, our classroom was a place where literacy practices involved in popular culture and those associated with “engaging, producing, and talking about texts” (Morrell, 2007, p. 240) that are privileged in school came together in a *third space* (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997). Thus, this article explores how students' learning in a pedagogical third space supported the attainment of academic literacies and attended to the literacies involved in students' popular culture *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Research on Popular Culture and Literacy Learning

Popular culture comes from and exists in everyday life. It documents the social experiences of people through texts (e.g., movies, songs, video games, television, magazines, media artifacts) that are consumed, produced, and distributed as one participates in popular culture. It also encompasses the lived cultures of communities, such as festivals, holidays, concerts, and sporting events (Fiske, 1989; Marsh, 2005; Morrell, 2007; Petrone, 2013). In essence, it represents the big “D” Discourses or “way of being” (Gee, 2001, p. 110) shared among groups of people. Taking a critical stance, popular culture is also seen as a site of resistance to the dominant discourse (Morrell, 2007).

Scholarship in new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006)—such as social practices (Street, 2003), discourses (Gee, 2001), and multiliteracies (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; New London Group, 1996)—has contributed to the understanding of how literacy and popular culture intersect. Scholars have been examining the “potentials of expanding school curricula by drawing on children's out-of-school texts, practices, and interests” (Kontovourki, 2014, p. 4). Teachers and researchers have also documented the effective bridging of popular culture texts and funds of knowledge with the ELA curricula, leading to students' attainment of academic literacies, such as hip-hop and poetry (e.g., Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Weinstein, 2007), video gaming and problem solving (Gee, 2003; Luke, 2003), film and literature (Moje et al., 2004; Xu, 2008), and comics (NCTE, 2005;

Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). Further, Morrell (2007) found that when literacy curricula include popular culture pedagogies, this promoted political action and social change. He argued that when youth are motivated to read and write in “powerful ways,” they become critically and academically literate as they simultaneously assess, interrogate, and talk back to text (Morrell, 2007, p. 248).

Essentially, popular culture pedagogies can allow students to “fully participate in classroom learning and demonstrate emerging conceptual understanding” (Parry, 2014, p. 14). Parry argued this full participation is what heightens motivation and prompts learning. Furthermore, the need for experiences that fully engage students in developing academic and critical literacies is as great as ever with the high-stakes accountability surrounding the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards and standardized testing.

While many studies examine how students attain academic literacies by bridging popular culture funds of knowledge, the method does not go without critique. Some scholars have argued this dupes students into engaging in academic literacies through entry points with popular culture (Kirkland, 2008) or threatens the pleasure children attain from their engagement in popular culture (Lambirth, 2005). This domestication of out-of-school literacies (Wohlwend & Lewis, 2011) is what Lankshear and Bigum (1999) refer to as “old wine in new bottles” (p. 455). In contrast, a growing body of work argues that teaching and learning should go beyond building bridges between the knowledge of out-of-school and in-school spaces (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Gutiérrez et al., 1997). Rather, the practices of the two spaces must be brought together in a third space. This hybrid place holds academic literacies and students’ funds of knowledge as equal counterparts in a way that does not devalue either.

In this context, the third space represented a learning zone that was sustained by pedagogy that merged home and school funds of knowledge. As the students and I explored the conflicts and tensions between academic literacies and popular culture literacy practices, learning was distributed among all members of the classroom community (Gutiérrez, 2008). Student knowledge, including “alternate representations of meaning, became tools for new learning” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999, p. 295).

A Third Space Theoretical Perspective

This study relies on the theoretical constructs of a third space (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Gutiérrez et al., 1997; Moje et al., 2004) to understand how literacy skills were developed in a classroom community that merged students’ popular culture funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) with academic literacies. Founded in sociocultural and critical perspectives, classroom practices in a third space are inclusive of students’ cultural, linguistic, and embodied experiences (Gutiérrez, 2008). For example, Morrell (2007) recognized adolescents’ ability to construct arguments and counterarguments for topics that matter to them, yet struggle to write academic argumentative essays. To address this divide, he designed a unit of instruction that built on the popular culture phenomenon of television court trials to develop students’ ability to write an argumentative essay. The classroom was transformed into a courtroom, with each student playing a role in preparing a casebook for the defense team or the prosecution team. Morrell’s unit merged students’ popular culture funds of knowledge with academic literacies, negotiating a third space for powerful student learning.

Piazza (2009) argued that a pedagogy of third space is one that consciously and

purposefully “centers itself on student thinking and lived experiences that exist outside the classroom” (p. 20). Further, practices that center on the lived experiences of students to merge home and school literacies build a “culture of collaboration” in the classroom (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999, p. 88). These sociocultural practices of classrooms that embrace a pedagogical third space promote learning environments where students demonstrate *shifts in participation* (Stone & Gutiérrez, 2007). Here, students shift in and out of different competencies depending on the task at hand, sometimes serving as the expert and other times functioning as a novice as they learn from one another. This “community-centered context not only recognizes the important roles both students and teachers must have in learning processes, but also organizes literacy learning so that shifts and changes in roles and varied uses of literacy knowledge are commonplace” (Gutierrez et al., 1997, p. 373). This meant that my students shifted among several stances throughout the day: from reliance, to expertise, to mutual reliance. I also shifted among these roles. In the words of Gutierrez (2008), “learning was situated, reciprocal, and distributed, leading to new forms of learning” for all involved (p. 159).

Everyday practices of classrooms that live in the third space are socially constructed and take a critical stance when “attention to contradictions in and between texts lived and studied” as “critical social thought” is embraced (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 149). Gutierrez et al. (1997) argued that participation in a third space develops students’ tool kit of “linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural tools and practices that enhance learning,” which reflects their “linguistic, sociocultural, and institutional identities” (p. 376). Merging the students’ out-of-school popular culture literacies with academic literacies created a hybrid or third space that was sustained through sociocultural practices; was authenticated, integrated, and connected to their identities; and created a space for critical thought. The resulting classroom environment utilized the potential of students’ ability to co-construct rigorous learning opportunities that were both a challenge and a scaffold to their learning.

Methods

This qualitative inquiry used critical participatory action research (CPAR) methods (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). From a postmodern sense, CPAR was fitting as it sought to redefine the differential between students and teacher and between out-of-school and in-school literacies, hence operating in a third space. CPAR is rooted in notions of democracy and social justice. It draws on critical theory to engage research design, methods, analysis, and findings through a lens of democratic participation (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012). CPAR also takes into account the sociocultural aspects of learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) through systematic and intentional inquiry. Here, researchers seek to understand their practice, the situations in which they practice, and the outcomes of their practice (e.g., learning; Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman, & Pine, 2012; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). In this study, the trademark spiral of events of CPAR guided my decisions. This spiral began with a plan of action, followed by observations of the outcomes of the enacted plan, and led to reflection to revise and enact a new plan (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

Through our shared journey of CPAR, the students and I discovered how to collaboratively and critically examine our learning. In this inquiry, we systematically studied and documented our reactions, reflections, and decisions related to the ELA/popular culture curriculum that we co-constructed. Data were collected and analyzed over an 8-month period to answer the question: *What happens when students’ interest and experiences with popular culture are integrated into a standards-based sixth-grade ELA curriculum?*

Context

The students. Forty culturally diverse sixth-grade students from a suburban elementary school in the western region of the United States volunteered to participate in this study. The students' ethnic backgrounds included Filipino, Hawaiian or part Hawaiian, White, Samoan, African American, Japanese, Hispanic, Chinese, Portuguese, and multiple ethnic backgrounds. As an indicator of the socioeconomic status of the school's students, approximately 53% received free or reduced-priced lunch (School Status and Improvement Report, 2009). Sixteen of the students were male and 24 were female. Three students were in the school's special education program, five were English language learners, and 32 were a part of the general education population. All students were fully included the entire day for instruction and I, a White female from a middle-class English-speaking background, was their ELA teacher. The students were grouped into two classes, and I met with each class for two and a half hours each day.

The teacher-researcher. My teaching philosophy and practices are situated in a sociocultural view of learning, which holds that individuals develop cognitively through social interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, my practices are also informed by New London Group's (1996) constructs of a pedagogy of multiliteracies, which calls for situating educational experiences in students' lived experiences, providing overt instruction, creating space for critical analysis, and facilitating opportunities for students to transfer meaning from one context to another. These underlying principles guided my decisions as students and I co-constructed learning experiences.

Having the dual role of teacher and researcher can naturally pose problems and raise issues of subjectivity. To address such issues, I took several strategic steps. First, I assured students that their participation or nonparticipation in the study would not affect their grades or academic standing. Further, student participation in the study was by choice. Third, another teacher distributed and collected the consent and assent forms. Finally, students had the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time or opt out of any part of the study (e.g., an interview, a particular questionnaire).

To further address subjectivity, I enlisted the help of two other sixth-grade teachers as my critical friends (Samaras, 2011) to offer the perspective of outside collaborators, promote reflective dialogue, and, at times, assist in data analysis. Because these critical friends asked provocative questions and held me accountable to make explicit what I understood on a more implicit level, new levels of understanding were uncovered in the process. For example, when I described the shifts in participation that occurred in the cinempoem unit (Bengtson, 2007), my critical friends asked me to consider the power structure in the classroom and how it shifted, bringing a social justice (Freire, 1970) lens to the data. Having this collaborative approach to inform my teaching and systematic inquiry also helped promote validity in the research process.

The curriculum. The curriculum I present in this article is blended from students' popular culture funds of knowledge and the state's mandated English language arts standards. The school was under a reform model at the time; however, we did not have mandated basal readers or scripted programs to follow. I had some degree of flexibility to design curriculum given that I addressed the state's standards and followed the guidelines prescribed by the reform model. Yet, even with the flexibility I had in curriculum development, a "test prep" culture was deeply entrenched at the school.

This article highlights examples from two units of study from the school year: poetry and literature circles. The poetry unit was approached from a multitextual standpoint. Text forms used in this unit included audio music tracks, printed music lyrics, music videos, and canonical poetry. In the beginning of the unit, students analyzed music lyrics for literary language using songs such as “No Air” by Jordan Sparks and Chris Brown (Fauntleroy et al., 2008) and “Apologize” by OneRepublic (Tedder, 2006).

Next, students analyzed music videos as text to examine the concepts of theme, mood, and tone in poetry. Two of the videos we examined were “I’m Yours” by Jason Mraz (2008) and “Crush, Crush, Crush” by Paramore (Williams & Farro, 2007). Students were then tasked to analyze traditional poems for literary language, mood, tone, and theme, applying their recently acquired knowledge. Examples of the poetry used in this part of the unit included “Untitled” by Aphra Behn (1915), “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost (2004), and “The Sun Has Long Been Set” by William Wordsworth (1932).

The culminating assessment for this unit was the cinepoem assignment: a combination of video and poetry to symbolically represent the poem (Bengtson, 2007). Students created an iMovie video to capture the mood and tone of a selected poem via images, words, sounds, and/or music. For example, one group used images and the soundtrack music from the movie *Twilight* (Godfrey & Hardwicke, 2008; based on the book by Meyer, 2005) to portray their analysis of the poem “Untitled” (Behn, 1915). Individual accountability was attained through students’ personal reflections and explanations of the meaning of the poem and their music video.

The second highlighted curricular unit surrounds literature circles. In embracing a pedagogical third space, students engaged in academic literacies (e.g., analyzing text, participating in collaborative discussions around text, reading and responding to text) but through media and text forms that connected to their popular culture interests and literacies. Novels for the literature circles ranged from young adult classics to contemporary literature, such as *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977) and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (Riordan, 2005). I selected a variety of titles to offer a range of text complexity, reading levels, and genres to meet the needs of the diverse learners in the classroom, yet they were bound by common themes of coming of age, friendship, survival, and perseverance.

Students met daily for several weeks, engaging in collaborative discussions while utilizing a variety of literacy strategies to support the analysis of their novel. Students had choice throughout the week as to how they responded to their reading; they eventually tried all strategies, which included online discussions on our class website, text messaging, and graffiti boards (Heine & Heine, 1996). The graffiti board literacy strategy required students to respond to a topic, key question, illustration, quote, or comment by recording words, phrases, drawing, or pictures on large pieces of paper. A mini lesson was held on the artistic expression behind graffiti art, the symbolism often found in graffiti, and how graffiti artists often used a code name to “tag” their work. Finally, students explored the literary concept of theme through a strategy I developed titled *Visual to Print Transfer* (Buelow, 2015) that utilized students’ knowledge of movie stars’ fashion from popular teen magazines to provide a framework for citing text evidence to support theme analysis of the novel.

For the summative assessment, students were offered two choices to demonstrate understanding of their literature circle novel:

1. Design a video game based on the plot of the novel, which must include the characters, levels, and main objective of the game.

2. Develop a soundtrack for the book, articulating the connection between each song in the play list and the novel.

This curriculum fostered students' critical literacy skills as it was situated in the lived experiences and knowledge of students. It facilitated students' critical engagement with a variety of text and encouraged students to consider and critique social and political issues that arose (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Data Collection

I collected data from a variety of sources, both directly from the students and from my researcher's journal. There were three phases to data collection: the initial phase that was used to determine students' popular culture funds of knowledge, the ongoing data collection that took place throughout the study, and the concluding data collection at the end of the study/school year. Initial data collection consisted of interest questionnaires that were used to ascertain students' popular culture interests and aided in the grouping of students for focus group interviews (FGI). After interest questionnaires were given, 10 focus groups were formed based on similar interests expressed on the questionnaire (five all-female groups and five all-male groups). This data aided in the selection of key informant interviewees. All interviews were transcribed and returned to student participants to check for accuracy prior to data analysis. The face-to-face focus group interviews consisted of seven open-ended questions with the assumption that the social context of the group would grow a richer discussion and enhance data quality (Patton, 2002). For example, I asked the following questions: (a) What is your favorite song or type of music? (b) What types of activities do you engage in on the computer at home? How much time do you spend on the computer each day? (c) Do you have a cell phone? If so, how do you use the phone? (d) Do you play video games? If so, what types of games do you play and about how much time do you spend playing each day?

Ongoing data sources included key informant interviews (KII), student work samples, self and activity assessments (SAA), and my researcher's journal (RJ). I purposefully selected 10 students (five males and five females) of diverse abilities for key informant interviews, which were conducted three times each throughout the study. In key informant interviews, students were asked open-ended questions in a face-to-face setting. Further, I conducted two rounds of the interviews and my critical friends conducted the last round to gain a different perspective and negate possible issues of a need to please me, the teacher, when asking students questions about the curriculum and the class at the end of the year. Open-ended questions for each round of interviews sought to understand students' reactions and thoughts on the curriculum and to gain input on future curriculum development. For example, students were asked the following: (a) What were your reactions to or suggestions for the cinempoem project? (b) Do you have suggestions for future activities we could engage in that incorporate your popular culture interests?

Student work samples related to the popular culture curriculum were collected and analyzed, as were the SAA. The SAA consisted of an anonymous questionnaire that was administered after each key assignment in the popular culture curriculum. The SAA asked students to provide feedback on the assignment and self-assess their performance on the assignment. For the purposes of this article, I examined the SAA from the literature circle and the poetry/cinempoem units, yielding a total of 80 SAA (40 students times two assignments each).

Consistent with my decision to use CPAR methodologies, I kept a researcher's

journal to document my decisions, thoughts, questions, and increased understanding of a popular culture/academic literacy third space curriculum. This process involved systematic examination and analysis of students' learning, interwoven with an examination of my intentions, reactions, decisions, and interpretations. The journal also served as a place for my critical reflections on teaching, curriculum, pedagogy, assumptions, and beliefs. There were 21 dated entries in my researcher's journal.

Concluding data sources include a final course evaluation (FE), which was administered at the end of the school year. The FE was completed anonymously and solicited student feedback on the curriculum and a "final grade" for the teacher. Finally, fifth and sixth-grade reading standardized test scores from this group of students were used as a source of data.

Data Analysis

I employed the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in a recursive process throughout data collection and analysis to generate initial codes, categories, and broader themes. In addition, I asked interpretive questions at each phase to enrich the analysis (Stringer, 2014). I posed two questions most often: (1) Why is this significant? and (2) To whom is it significant? The preliminary analysis, reflections, and input from students helped guide further data collection and the direction of the curriculum. For example, I noticed several boys in the class often referenced video games, but I had not considered ways to include gaming in the curriculum at that point. This led me to ask questions surrounding the literacies involved in video games and to consider how these literacies could be brought into our curriculum. Eventually, this line of inquiry led to students creating a video game to match a novel they read in literature circles.

In the first phase of coding, each data source was coded independently by marking line by line and/or whole paragraphs to analyze the documents. I used the qualitative software HyperRESEARCH (ResearchWare, 1988–2010) to assist in the digital organization of the data and the analysis. I organized the data into 15 initial codes. A member check was then conducted by presenting my initial analysis to my critical friends. I asked for their input concerning the relevancy of the findings and for any possible biases they might detect. It was here that my critical friends questioned how students' popular culture identity was influenced both by peers and by parents. This pushed my thinking to begin noticing how boys and girls often preferred video games that perpetuated gender stereotypes, such as girls playing Nintendo's *Cooking Mama* and boys playing Nintendo's *Mario Kart*.

Through the process of comparing data during the second phase of analysis, I assigned the data to categories for a more holistic understanding. Six categories spanned all sources of data. After the development of categories, I began to notice patterns and similarities within the data. For example, I noticed how student achievement was often attached to my discussions on empowerment. Finally, using an inductive approach to synthesize the data and patterns, three themes were identified. Table 1 displays the constant comparative coding scheme I used to understand the data. It shows the relationships between themes, categories, and codes, and provides data exemplars. This process of reading, analyzing, comparing, and questioning the data was done until no new codes, categories, or themes emerged.

Table 1
Coding Scheme Using Constant Comparative Methods of Analysis

Theme	Category	Code	Data exemplar
Learning with them and from them	Positive social and emotional classroom environment	Cooperative learning	“I always choose PowerPoint to present my papers because I thought it was easy, but when some people created websites I thought it would be cooler to do things that I can’t do in PowerPoint. I was kinda scared to do a website. I thought it was really hard, but after seeing others do it I don’t think it is hard anymore.” (Emily, KII)
		Socialization	
	Student empowerment	Social networking	“I was inspired to write about what I learned because we got to choose the format of how to write our paper.” (Anonymous, FE)
		Relationships	
Situated literacies	Formal curriculum	Voice in the curriculum	“My topic for argumentative writing was on getting more skate parks in the community. It is something real people like, instead of researching something the teacher assigns.” (Ethan, KII)
		Standardized testing	91% of students met or exceeded proficiency in reading on the state’s standardized assessment.
	Popular culture disclosures	Literary elements	“From watching music videos, I learned that tone and mood are important to a poem because they express the author’s feelings and the words; they are strong.” (Ethan, KII)
		Popular culture interests	“I like rock music because it makes me free. It helps take the stress out of my life.” (Amelia, FGI)
		Pleasure and subversion	Popular culture interests
Popular culture identity	“I love video games. They are my hobby.		

Table 1 continued

Theme	Category	Code	Data exemplar
Surviving and thriving		Subversive behavior	They are my sport.” (Jaxon, KI)
		Resistance	“I like text messaging in class because it is something we are NOT suppose to do in school.” (Anonymous, FE)
		Pleasure	“I didn’t like reading but you got me into it. You made learning fun and enjoyable because the assignments were new to me and FUN!” (Anonymous, FE)
	Change and growth	Teacher empowerment	“I feel empowored as my students find success in learning where they take over as the more knowledgeable other.” (RJ)
		Reflective practice	“Aligning my theory with my practice is situating my work in the third space. This represents a new space for me, one where I am critically aware of how my practice is action to my beliefs.” (RJ)

In the discussion that follows, I merge my findings with the discussion around the three themes gleaned from the data. Because CPAR emphasizes that meaning is constructed throughout the process, I analyzed and collected data simultaneously in a recursive spiral, yielding results that represent a collaborative approach to the research process.

Findings and Discussion

This paper isn’t about a single project or curricular unit, nor does it focus on one particular popular culture text. I initially began this research with the notion of incorporating popular music into the curriculum but quickly realized that my students’ out-of-school literacies and popular culture funds of knowledge were expansive and vast. To focus on only music would, in a sense, continue to perpetuate a curriculum where they were not all represented. It was through initial interest surveys and focus group interviews that I realized the importance of honoring all forms of popular culture, so I followed the CPAR spiral of events by reflecting on initial data, revising my plan, and I took action. To focus the discussion in this article, I use findings from two units of study that incorporated the many popular culture interests of my students: poetry and literature circles.

In the discussion that follows, I discuss three themes while weaving in data exemplars to highlight a pedagogical third space that brought together out-of-school and in-school literacies. Using a third space perspective, I categorize the data into the following themes (a) learning with them and from them, (b) situated literacies, and (c) surviving and thriving.

Learning With Them and From Them: A Democratic, Collaborative Learning Zone

Using popular culture became a catalyst to transform my practice and our

classroom environment. By interviewing the students, I gathered their input on curriculum development and sought feedback on what we were currently doing or had just completed in class. Students had a voice, were offered choice, and could see themselves in the curriculum; through this process our classroom became a more democratic environment. I also learned about their out-of-school literacies and interests and came to realize the different popular culture funds of knowledge my students possessed that I did not.

Humans naturally learn from others (Vygotsky, 1978), and shifts in participation (Stone & Gutiérrez, 2007) occur in all contexts. Learners shift from being an expert to being the novice, depending on the environment, content, or task. This applies to academic settings, but also to the skills, knowledge, and literacies involved in popular culture. For example, in an interview with my student Juan, he professed to be an avid skateboarder and explained that he observes his friends at the local skateboard park to learn new tricks. He emphasized how they often teach one another new tricks—he learns tricks from his friends and he teaches them tricks also. This led me to realize that students needed these same opportunities in the classroom. However, not only did they need to learn from one another, but I also needed to shift in participation from expert to novice if a democratic, collaborative environment was to be achieved. Creating a safe environment where we were all learners fostered risk taking and encouraged everyone to critically interrogate, examine, and talk back to ideologies and texts placed before us.

To highlight the many contexts in which shifts in participation occurred, I'll first share examples from our poetry unit. Initially, in this unit I was the expert in facilitating learning experiences for students to critique and analyze poetry. I taught mini lessons on literary language, mood, tone, and theme. I drew from a wide variety of texts—from canonical poems to music lyrics to music videos. Through thoughtful scaffolding, students shifted from being novices to experts in their ability to analyze how word choice and tempo set the mood, tone, and theme of poetry.

For example, I observed two boys engaged in a thoughtful selection of background music to capture the mood of the poem “The Sun Has Long Been Set” (Wordsworth, 1932) while creating their cinepoem. Caleb and Ryan were listening to nature sounds on the computer and reading the words to their poem over and over. They tried out several different tracks of nature sounds before deciding on one they felt matched the selected words to their poem. They drew on what they had learned about mood and tone from previous lessons where we analyzed music videos to determine how the background music and images captured the mood of the lyrics, thus shifting from novice to expert in selecting words, images, and background music to capture a specific tone for their cinepoem.

In our classroom, collaboration was the vehicle to co-construct knowledge and solidify new learning. Students learned from one another and learned with each other, shifting in participation throughout the day. Provided with opportunities to “work in groups and bounce ideas off each other” (Anonymous, SAA of poetry unit and cinepoem), a learning cycle developed in which students undertook dynamic and varying roles between novice and expert. These shifts in participation from novice to expert (and vice versa) helped students internalize new knowledge as we operated in a third space. In her final interview, Chloe describes being a novice and learning from her peers in the poetry unit:

I liked working in a group for the cinepoem because I understood the poem a little bit, but by doing the cinepoem and dissecting the poem with my group I got a better understanding. We figured out the deeper meaning together.

Another student described her experiences of being the more knowledgeable other:

“I helped the team work together and I helped them when they didn’t know how to do something” (Anonymous, SAA of literature circles unit). And a third student described how the group learned together: “We worked so hard on trying to learn what the poem was about—working together as a group” (Anonymous, FE).

While it was important to create learning opportunities for students to shift in participation, it was also critical that I shift in participation from expert to novice (and vice versa) if our classroom was to operate in a pedagogical third space. I recall a pivotal moment when I realized it would be okay or even preferable to relinquish a perceived need to be the more knowledgeable other. I learned I could let my students’ expertise take the lead. This occurred the first time we used the program iMovie to make a music video for the cinempoem assignment. I began the project with the end product in mind: what I needed students to learn about poetic elements and literary analysis, and the standards I needed to address. Then I let students take the lead to complete the project as they created cinempoems for poems such as “Remember” (Rossetti, 2004), “Untitled” (Behn, 1915), “The Road Not Taken” (Frost, 2004), and “The Sun Has Long Been Set” (Wordsworth, 1932). I captured this sentiment in my researcher’s journal:

I didn’t teach them how to do these things [create an iMovie, edit the movie, download music from other sources to add background music, etc.]. I just gave them the resources [CDs, cameras, computers] and the foundation of the literary elements and standards I was addressing. They figured the rest out on their own. They were in their element. I went into this unsure of how we would arrive to the final product but they proved to know more about these digital literacies than me. I learned a lot from them! Now I know that they can run with it and figure things out.

The poetry unit was a breakthrough both for students and for me in terms of thinking critically about the roles we each undertook. It was also an important lesson in the value of taking risks because I could have avoided situations where I placed myself as a novice by limiting students to assignments where I was comfortable and the more knowledgeable other. Initially, students were novices and I was the more knowledgeable other in extracting figurative meaning within poetry. However, during our experiences with iMovie, my role was that of a novice and students were the more knowledgeable other with digital literacies. I realized that students could figure out how to master the technology available to them and they could teach me while they were learning. We worked in a third space, each playing an important role to co-construct meaning and solidify new learning, thus building a collaborative learning community and democratizing our learning environment.

After our experiences in the poetry unit, I felt empowered to create more opportunities for students to serve as experts and for me to serve as the novice. I learned through focus group and key informant interviews that my students were frequently engaging in the literacy practices involved in online social networking and online games outside of school. As students engaged in these out-of-school literacy practices, I realized how they were extending their learning beyond the school day through collaborative online discussions. I decided to incorporate online social networking as a tool for literature circle discussions in response to their out-of-school literacy practices.

To do this, I drew on the expertise of a student named Liam. In an interview, he discussed how he liked to create websites in his free time at home using the online platform Yola (www.yola.com; formerly Synthesite). I asked Liam if he would help me find a free website that required a login or code to access the site, but would also allow us to post threaded discussions. Liam researched websites for our class and reported on his findings.

He was the expert on the topic, shared this information with the class, and assisted us in deciding on a platform to use as a class website.

I was a novice at setting up a class website, but with students' help we accomplished the task of creating one that had both blog and wiki capabilities. As we explored ways to enrich discussions around literature, we shifted in participation from novice to expert and back. We learned how to use the site together, and this technological tool engaged and extended students' learning beyond the school day. They were familiar with the literacies involved in writing posts and threaded discussions from their experiences with online social networking outside of school, and once they realized the same processes were involved in an online discussion about the books they were reading, they became experts in this method of collaboration. The students shifted in participation from novice to expert as they transferred knowledge of how to post on social networking sites and reply to others' posts to blogging about their novels through a threaded discussion about the text. This website became a portal for online book discussions as well as a place for social networking among the students, and they valued both aspects. Honoring students' interests and voice also served as a way to democratize the learning environment.

Beyond finding pleasure in the novelty of using the site and being able to chat and connect online as a class, several students commented that seeing what others had to say about the books they were reading helped them come to new understandings about the novels, which often prompted them to post responses to their classmates' discussions on the books. In his final interview, Ethan said;

It was pretty cool that our class had a website because it was new for everybody. I liked the part where we read what everybody wrote and then got to respond. It was neat to see everyone's opinions about their books.

The shifts in participation that occurred during the poetry and literature circle units were not isolated events. As I began looking for ways I could learn from students, learn with students, and facilitate students learning from each other, these shifts began to occur seamlessly. The dynamic roles of student and teacher, and of novice and expert, were the centerpiece of this pedagogy. Learning became situated in the everyday literacy practices of my students' lives. It was reciprocal, in that my role as a teacher and a learner were interchangeable given the context, and so were the students'. In this democratic learning environment, all members had a voice and something to contribute. Risks were encouraged, and a mindset of critiquing the status quo was fostered, essentially paving the way for students' academic success.

Situated Literacies: Academic Literacies Meet Gaming and Playlists

I love video games. They are my hobby. They are my sport.

I begin this section with a quote from Jaxon. His statement was the impetus for restructuring literature circles so that his interests and literacies involved in video games could be cultivated and honored. Jaxon's participation in video games and his classmates' participation in watching music videos, looking at teen magazines, or engaging in activities on their cell phones represent active engagement in literacy practices that parallel academic literacies. By bridging the gap between academic literacies and popular cultural funds of knowledge, our curriculum was situated in the everyday language and literacy practices of the students (Morrell, 2007; New London Group, 1996), thus creating a third space.

The poetry and literature circle units offered daily opportunities for learning that was situated in my students' everyday literacy practices. For example, students created

graffiti boards, sent text messages, used magazine images to support theme analysis, analyzed music videos and popular music lyrics, participated in online book discussions, created cinemoems, created playlists for their literature circle novels, and developed video game plans for their literature circle novels. Because instruction was directly related to students' expressed interests, our curriculum represented a third space that bridged the perceived gap between academic literacies prescribed by the state's standards and students' popular culture funds of knowledge.

As I stated in the opening quote of this section, Jaxon's expressed interests in video games were the impetus of the video game assignment. For this assignment, students first needed to analyze video games as a text, taking note of the elements that make up a video game. For example, students noted that video games have missions or goals, levels, characters, problems to overcome, and ways of rewarding players for completing missions, levels, or tasks. Their second step was to consider how the elements of a novel could be organized into the genre of video games and to then transform their novel into a video game proposal. After analyzing the video game *Need for Speed* (Electronic Arts, 2016) and reflecting on how he might convert the plot of *My Side of the Mountain* to a game, Jaxon offered the following:

I think the video game should have levels with stormy weather. Sam should have to find tools such as a hammer, rusty nails, and shovel! One mission should be that Sam must befriend animals.

Another member of the group, Lilly, added:

He befriends animals by collecting nuts, berries, and roots that he drops in a sack. Each sack can hold a certain amount (one sack can only hold 36 and another can hold 22, etc.). If the sack isn't full he can lose it to squirrels, raccoons, and the Baron weasel in a fight.

Finally, a third member of the group, Mason, continued to develop ideas for the game:

Sam and Frightful win the game by collecting all the food in the sacks and defending themselves among all the reporters and wild animals to get health and shelter.

As they engaged in the task, students needed to analyze the literary elements of both texts, consider the themes, and transfer knowledge and skills to move from one text form to another. Their final step was to reflect on how their novel changed when presented as a video game, how the elements of the novel were preserved when adapting it to other text forms, how effective their video game was at communicating plot, and how the elements of a video game impacted the plot of the novel.

In their individual reflections on the assignment, all three students demonstrated understanding of the novel *My Side of the Mountain* by comparing and contrasting the elements of the book to the video game they created. Mason reflected:

Our video game kept the theme because then the game wouldn't be the same. We also needed to keep the climax because the game would not have any turnaround events; the game would be boring. The levels of the video game is almost the exact same thing as the main events of what happens in the book. We made the challenges in the game harder than those Sam faced in the novel because he was able to finish it by himself in the book.

Lilly also draw connections between the video game and novel:

I think a video game was once a novel because it has settings and all of the other elements. Like how books are made into movies. In the book, Sam has to prepare for winter and he has to be prepared for everything. Like if he runs out of food, or if he'll be warm—he spends a lot of time making clothing, collecting food, and getting his basic needs. This is why he has to collect the nuts and berries in the game. Sam puts in a lot of work in the book and it takes a lot of energy to survive in the wild. But companionship helps him survive because he would get lonely. That's why he has Frightful in the video game too.

These examples demonstrate how students developed skills to critically and actively read and construct meaning from a variety of texts while writing through and creating multiple media forms. These skills were exemplified in students' critical readings of video games and novels, but also in their creation of new hybrid texts. Because thinking was stressed over the gratification of the right answer, students learned how to apply a critical eye to anything placed before them. They were successful in obtaining academic literacies through unconventional curricular approaches and were engaged in their learning. Lilly captured this sentiment: "This assignment is different. It has to do with what we enjoy and ties to our learning. That's cool!"

Students were offered another option for the video game culminating assignment. Rather than develop a video game plan, several students selected to develop a playlist to match their literature circle novel. The work we did in our poetry unit supported students' ability to analyze music as text, and they were able to draw connections between popular music and their novels. They used the website playlist.com to construct their playlist and were required to select a minimum of 10 songs to capture the theme, characters, events, and/or setting from the novel. They were asked to submit copies of the lyrics of each song, deconstruct the lyrics, and draw connections between each selected song and the novel. After working with her group to develop a playlist, Tiana clearly articulated the connections she drew between songs on her playlist and the novel *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967):

We choose "Paradise City" [Guns N' Roses] for the part where Johnny kills Bob when they're in a fight because in the song the way he's describing things, it's like he's describing Ponyboy's life and neighborhood. Also because they want to run away to a Paradise City and change their life.

My students' interest in music guided our poetry unit, which in turn guided the playlist assignment. This assignment provided students with opportunities to analyze, compare, and contrast multiple texts to demonstrate an understanding of the events and themes of each text. Both the playlist and video game assignments were situated in the literacies and interests of students' popular culture funds of knowledge while at the same time addressed academic standards. Learning was scaffolded, situated, and meaningful.

While engaging in these assignments, students began to apply a critical perspective to anything presented before them. They questioned perpetuated gender stereotypes found in video games and music, they sought an audience for their work, and they wanted their voices to be heard. It was this shift in what counted as knowledge that defined our work in a third space. Popular culture served as a scaffold because it was an entryway that was familiar to students, it engaged and motivated them, and it led to their success in academic literacies. For example, Chloe said, "Popular culture helped me understand what I was learning because it showed me how things relate and how I could use my popular culture interests to learn other things." Furthermore, students began to recognize the value the

out-of-school literacies, or funds of knowledge, as valued practices in our curriculum. When students were encouraged to think about the ways in which they already possess the literacies valued in school and were allowed the freedom to explore how they use these funds of knowledge to make meaning, they began to feel empowered with a new sense of wonder.

Surviving and Thriving: Transformation of Practice and Self-Discovery

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue that CPAR transcends the generation of knowledge and yields change in practice through reflection. By the nature of the design of this study, reflection on practice was integral to my work. Further, Gutiérrez et al. (1997) write about the importance of reflective practice in classrooms where learning environments are informed by sociocultural understandings of language and literacy learning: “There is a shift in foci from teaching to learning, from individuals to collectives, from classrooms to communities, and from habitual to reflective practices” (p. 372). Did reflection improve my practice? What did I learn from this experience, and how does this study help other educators gain insight into the complex process of learning through reflection?

I was critical about my practice as I systematically reflected on my work and on students’ learning as reported in one of my researcher journal entries: “I’ve improved dramatically from my beginnings as a teacher. But I know that I’ve grown more in the last year than I did in all the other years combined.” But what did this mean? How does this translate to practice, and how did I learn to thrive as a teacher in an era of accountability? From a critical examination of my practice and students’ learning, I share three takeaways that may also inform the work of others.

First, I learned it was okay to let students explore areas in which I didn’t hold all the answers, because it meant a commitment to a pedagogical third space. I first realized this when the students were able to apply their digital literacy expertise (e.g., downloading music, editing photos) to create music videos for their cinempoems. Students took the lead and I became the guide on the side. I learned *from* them. I can still recall the moment I came to this realization and how empowered I felt when I let go of the reins and students were still learning. I knew at that moment that I had crossed a threshold in my career; I had entered a transformational space. I was empowered, and more importantly, my students were empowered. From that experience, I learned that if I carefully set up the learning community and provided my students with the scaffolding needed, they would soar.

As an educator in an era of standardized testing accountability, one area I particularly struggled with and documented in my researcher’s journal was standardized test preparation:

I would like to think that good teaching will be enough—that we don’t need to spend countless hours on strategies to solve multiple-choice questions unless the questions serve a larger purpose to the education of my students.

My researcher’s journal chronicles the struggles that I felt in choosing not to spend time on extensive test preparation because I believed that my students were demonstrating a high level of academic success in a curriculum that was meaningful, relevant, rigorous, and engaging. According to my teacher-made formative assessments, most students were meeting the standards, but I still questioned whether I was preparing them for the expectations of the standardized assessment. I also worried about how I would be judged if they did not perform well:

I am feeling torn about spending class time on these projects in which the kids are engaged in authentic activities of reading and writing rather than test preparation. As much as I am against the ideas of a single test having so much

weight, I still want my kids to do well because I am judged solely on how they perform on this test.

While I never intended to use standardized test scores as data in this study, they presented an opportunity to provide external validation of a curriculum that centered on students' popular culture interests. When the test scores were released, I felt a sense of relief and felt validated in implementing a curriculum that honored students' popular culture funds of knowledge and was at the same time rigorous and educationally sound. Results from the state standardized test showed that my students outperformed any other class in the school's history. Overall, 91% met or exceeded proficiency in reading, performing well above the state average that year, which was 65%. This same group of students scored 57% on the same metric in Grade 5 (School Status and Improvement Report, 2009). These data do not define me as an effective teacher, rather they give me leverage to speak from experience on the powerful learning that can be cultivated when we adopt a mindset of a pedagogical third space in the classroom. The data give me confidence to speak to the importance of situating academic literacies in students' out-of-school literacies. From this experience, I learned that an unconventional curriculum could meet the expectations of conventional measures.

And finally, I learned to dwell in and embrace the struggle. I encouraged my students to take risks by trying new ways to represent ideas but didn't consider how my own risks and struggles as a learner turned out to be a model. To highlight this phenomenon, I share a story about one of the students named Emily. Students often turned to multimodal tools for publishing their writing, and I offered new choices as I learned of students' interests. Students presented their writing in the form of comics, PowerPoint presentations, movie scripts, and websites to name a few. Emily always selected PowerPoint, and I was curious why. In an interview, we discussed her multimodal writing choice:

PowerPoints are easy, but when some people did websites I looked at it and thought it would be cooler to do things that I can't do in PowerPoint. I was kinda scared to do a website. I thought it would be really hard.

When probed further, Emily revealed that she was afraid she would "mess up and get a bad grade." Another student, Ethan, shared the same fear of "getting a bad grade" (KII) when probed about the reasons why he did not want to create a website. Fear of failure is not a new phenomenon for students or teachers (Freese, 2006), nor is research on the power of grades to motivate, control, or manage student behavior (Strong, 2003). Strong (2003) succinctly summed up the issue by saying that learning requires risks, taking risks may lead to mistakes, and making mistakes can result in lower grades. I acknowledge the fact that I was responsible for grading and how this may have prevented some students from taking risks, but also recognize that many students took risks in spite of being graded.

As we talked through Emily's and Ethan's perceived barriers to creating a website, I reflected on the barriers I created that kept me from trying new things. Fear of failure was the underlying factor for each of us; they were afraid of failing grades and I was afraid of failing my students with an unconventional curriculum. Supporting Emily and Ethan to dwell in the struggle when things are unknown forced me to examine struggles I avoided and risks I was reluctant to take. This is when I began to acknowledge the subversive side of popular culture that I had previously pushed aside in our curriculum. I decided to embrace these interests in our curriculum, acknowledging that I was taking a risk by allowing them into the classroom.

By allowing the subversive side of popular culture into the classroom, my

challenge became one of how to honor this discourse while still maintaining respect for all students. My first experience with risk in curriculum content occurred when students selected controversial topics such as abortion (taking a pro-life stance) and support of gay marriage when we engaged in argumentative writing. While these topics are not subversive in nature, they do represent controversial issues in society. With parental permission, students explored these controversial topics and wrote argumentative essays to demonstrate their research. They also created public service announcements using iMovie to share their work with peers. I took a risk in allowing a space for students to research topics that are controversial in society, and I worried about the outcomes on a daily basis. What would other parents think? Would my administrator approve? Should I allow this to come into the curriculum? I pondered these questions daily and felt more confident each day with my decision to take a risk and allow my students to inquire into topics of personal importance. I realized it was necessary if I truly wanted to align my practice and beliefs about the power of students' out-of-school knowledge and the transformative potential of a curriculum that operates in the third space. In the end, students produced well-researched arguments to support their point of view and academically addressed counterarguments.

Looking back, there were certainly moments when I questioned my decisions and reflected on ways that I could have better supported the learners in my classroom. However, I feel confident that the year I spent learning with this group of students has forever changed me. While we both tried something out of our comfort zone, I am left to wonder: What if we were not successful in doing so? What if student test scores were below expectations? What if creating websites and multimodal texts was a distraction from producing high-quality writing? The complexity and uncertainty of these questions can only lead me to report on what I know. I know that I learned to let students take the lead, that powerful learning experiences will produce academic results, and that being mindful of the larger purpose will give you focus and clarity as you learn to embrace, expect, and dwell in the struggle of learning.

Implications

My findings highlight the importance of fostering spaces where academic and out-of-school literacies are not positioned as binary opposites; rather they are viewed as two interrelated and relevant components of a child's education. From these findings, I focus the discussion around the idea that pedagogy takes precedence over curriculum. In other words, the emphasis of education should be on how we teach rather than what we teach. Accordingly, I offer three implications for how to facilitate this shift so that learning is situated in students' lived experiences.

First, teachers must listen carefully to their students, to take the time to get to know about their interests (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Tejada 1999; Marsh, 2005). In my case, interviewing students opened my eyes to their expansive popular culture funds of knowledge. Once they knew I was listening and acting on the knowledge they shared, they began to open this side of themselves more freely. They offered ideas for projects and reminded me of the importance of students having choice and collaborative experiences.

In analyzing the results of this work, I learned that a pedagogical third space related to popular culture is more than the inclusion of commercialized products. Rather, it is an understanding of the embodied practices of students as they engage with these products. Teachers must go beyond inquiring about the names of popular video games and songs, but also learn about the ways in which students engage with these texts (Morrell, 2007). Concurrent with existing research, I found the distance between the literacies

involved in students' engagements with popular culture and academic literacies was "not as vast or immutable as one might believe" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 65). We cannot simply use popular culture as a way to engage students before moving on to the *real* work of school. The two must be brought together, both subject to critique, analysis, and production.

Second, I encourage educational leaders and teacher educators to support teachers with development surrounding the *how* and *why* of teaching rather than *what* is taught. As seen in my findings, the curriculum was just a set of materials and desired end results to be achieved, but my pedagogy is what brought it to life. William (2011) succinctly captures this sentiment by arguing that a poorly designed curriculum taught well is a better experience for students than a well-designed curriculum taught poorly. When we focus on the *how* and the *why*, we create better experiences for our students.

All students deserve access to meaningful curriculum and effective pedagogy. While the reality may be that teachers do not have choice over the basal reader, novel, or curriculum they will be asked to teach, they might have freedom to include multimodal and popular culture texts along with the seminal texts (Morrell, 2007). Knowing how to do this requires a shift in focus from curriculum to pedagogy.

In practice, I suggest that teachers take risks, try new approaches, and consider new forms of text. When students in my class saw me go through the learning process and model responsible risk-taking, it shifted my participation from expert to learner. This established a more democratic classroom environment. It also shifted my focus from curriculum to pedagogy, which allowed for more meaningful experiences to emerge because it situated my practice in the lives of the students I taught.

Finally, my findings validate an advocacy for a pedagogical stance that honors the practices and literacies of students' popular culture funds of knowledge. As Morrell (2007) has argued, creating demanding and engaging literacy curricula that impart academic literacies to students from historically marginalized populations is a political action that promotes social change. My culturally and linguistically diverse students from low socioeconomic backgrounds achieved academic success through our experiences with popular culture. They gained "literacies of access" (Morrell, 2007, p. 237) that allowed them to fully participate and succeed in school. However, they also gained critical literacy skills as they read and rewrote a multitude of texts and challenged existing structures of dominant discourses. Therefore, I encourage teachers to develop students' critical literacy skills. Create experiences that allow students to question, to critique, to find their voice, and to consider larger political and social issues affecting them.

These findings show that with pedagogical know-how, students' popular culture funds of knowledge can be integrated within a standards-based curriculum to foster both student and teacher learning and empowerment. Further, my analysis shows that when students are actively engaged in meaningful and relevant learning, the need for extensive "test prep" to pass standardized tests is decreased. To end, I'll share a quote from Jaxon's final interview that captures the essence of why this work is important:

Pop culture is what is going on nowadays and what kids know about. We created a video game plan that incorporated my interests. We got to work in a group and think of ways to show what we know and what we do daily. School used to be like you have to do this and that and sometimes you have to do independent work, but this year you actually get to do something that you want to do.

Due to what I learned as a teacher-researcher, popular culture will always be a priority as I consider ways to develop learning experiences situated in a pedagogical third space.

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