

## *Elementary School Language and Literacy Education for Civic Engagement: An Evolving Playbook for Postmodern Times*

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### *Abstract*

This paper argues for the need to postmodernize literacy education for civic engagement in an emerging new world order where humans are globally-connected in an invisible digital dimension, yet physically dispersed in greater degrees of complexity. The paper summarizes a university-school collaborative learning community's evolving playbook on experimental multimodal and plurilingual language and literacy education, and illustrates project-based learning, inclusion of children's linguistic and cultural knowledge in classroom learning, immersive ludic activities, collaborative problem-solving, and agentic participation in an elementary school classroom project.

### *Keywords*

elementary literacy, ludic learning, multimodality, plurilingualism, problem-based learning, superdiversity

### *The Shifting Literacy Landscape in Superdiverse Classrooms*

The literacy ecosphere has branched into dramatically new territory over the past few decades, affecting both arenas for civic engagement and directions for language and literacy learning. Globalization, "marked by the tension between global economic and technological interdependence and social interconnectedness, on the one hand, and cultural fragmentation and political division, on the other" (Martinelli, 2003, p. 293), has remapped the terrain of social belonging in both physical geography and social participation in online communities.

Historic constructions of social belonging have expanded with increasing global population flows, through networked digital participation, and in the establishment of supra-national politico-economic zones, such as the European Union. Education systems, though, "are principally the property of states" (Lo Bianco, 2008, p. 113). Teachers are faced with nationally-focused curricular materials on social and political belonging with classes of superdiverse learners representing the globe who actively participate in social media spheres.

National belonging accruing to history, which informs much educational goal-setting, has been remade in Canada through multiculturalism, which, since it was made official policy in 1971 (revised in 1988), has promoted an increasingly complex migratory population that is aptly described by Vertovec's (2007) term: *superdiversity*. Haque (2012) traces complexities in Canadian national belonging in terms of "how a national formulation of 'multiculturalism within a bilingual framework' emerged to install a racial order of difference and belonging through language in the ongoing project of white settler nation-building" (pp. 4-5). This is an important trajectory: the curricular spaces for language and literacy learning in elementary education in Ontario are limited to English and French, following the Official Languages Act<sup>1</sup>, which enshrined the

colonial languages of the nation. The population of children attending school, however, mirrors the Canadian Multiculturalism Act<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, the languages spoken by post 1970s non-English and non-French-speaking in-migrating populations are allotted only continuing education spaces in elementary education—external to the regular school day in all but a very few cases. Spaces allotted to Indigenous languages are similarly highly restricted, though contexts and constraints are different.

Public schools in the greater Toronto area (GTA) welcome a remix of children who are globally-connected through family migration histories. Children enter school classrooms, in person and online, and merge as learners with very different life histories. Whether students have come to the nation or to a particular city with parents or family members who are sojourners, immigrants, opportunists, idealists, fugitives, refugees, entrepreneurs or transplants, they need to acquire articulate, literate, and agentic expression. It is largely up to teachers to develop each learner's individual knowledge and expressive capabilities while meeting curricular language and literacy expectations.

### *Canada's Forked Tongue: Language, Identity and Social Belonging*

Two nation-shaping statutes in a period of intense nation-building—the late 1960s and early 1970s—are at the root of the educational conundrum under discussion: teaching bilingual nationhood to a superdiverse population. The *Official Languages Act* (1969/ 1988/ 2005), and the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1971/ 1988) were in conflict from the get-go: notions of culture tended to the simplistic, assuming that splitting language from culture was unproblematic, that cultures were uniform and uncomplicated, and that people marry within a single, simple, identifiable culture. Equally specious is the suggestive undercurrent that multilingualism might be nation-threatening. Humans have migrated from one area to another since the species came into existence. In Canada, everyone who is not Indigenous has a migration story, though it may have taken place in past generations.

Spaces for cultural maintenance within the framework of Canadian multiculturalism have been treated superficially, relegated to safe production in the home away from the economic necessities of the workplace and the social mandate of the classroom, performed in costume as historic theatre, and reified in the marketable consumables of the global gastronomic landscape. The English-French mandate of provincial education encourages, and in some cases, enforces, dropping learners' home languages at the door to the school. Since the late 1970s, continuing education has offered what was initially called *heritage language education*—and later, with dwindling funding, changed to *international language education* (Cummins, 1992). These courses are typically run after school and on the weekend. Teachers in continuing education do not require the same qualifications as classroom teachers, though some teachers work both as classroom teachers and in after school programs. Furthermore, continuing education does not provide teachers with the school facilities available to regular classroom teachers, such as use of the photocopier, even if classes are held in a public school. Therefore, after school heritage language teachers lack the technical support available to regular classroom teachers to make a spontaneous photocopy, use the computer lab, library, class set of laptops or books, or get assistance with a faulty projector.

The cultural realities of school children have become manifestly complex. Many children in any given classroom have come to Canada as global travelers. They are then repackaged linguistically for national identity requirements. But in this global era, might not these children who have come to Canada as global citizens, also plan to work or study in the global sphere? This paper argues that the languages children import into the country (and classroom) constitute an asset in our global era, not a problem, and they should be creatively incorporated in classroom multimodal literacy practices.

### *Multidimensional Citizenship*

Birth (normally) confers national citizenship (though there are legal exceptions). Over the past half-century, facilitated by rapidly developing technologies, and spurred by national policies of multiculturalism, attention on the just treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and increasing global opportunities for work, we have a world that is awash in migrating populations. Canada is an active recipient of both in-migrating populations and refugees. Our national population is socially and culturally complex.

As a nation, Canada is relatively fixed in political structures, which are changeable but slow-moving. However, Canada is in a state of perpetual social and cultural becoming through increasingly rapid population shift, which is particularly apparent in urban areas. Global population flows have remixed the world (Pieterse, 2008), complicating identity construction, and multiplying social belonging. Many Canadians, for example, are also citizens of other nations.

Adding a permeating layer of complexity is the human reality in which we find ourselves enmeshed on a daily basis. Life is not 3D but 4D; the addition of the mobile-accessed Internet in everyday communications changes how we understand and use the dimension of *time*, creating a sense of personal reality that Scott (2015, p. 8) terms *everywhereness*. We are instantly connected across time zones and countries. Increasingly, our cognition and social lives are distributed and shared over a complex web of digital connections, involving us as participants in a new kind of digital citizenship. This 4D digital citizenship activates a global civic arena, enabling the wildfire spread of, support for, and consequential reaction to local political activity. This political activity ranges from the political grand slam, e.g., the Arab Spring of 2010 in which political uprising against entrenched dictators cascaded across four countries in the Arab world, mobilized by the collaborative potential of social media (Howard & Hussain, 2013), to the mean-spirited mob mentality manifested in cyberbullying, for example, at the heart of the tragic suicides of young Canadian women, Rehtaeh Parsons, and Amanda Todd.

People belong on different levels simultaneously as citizens of nations, members of social communities, and participants in a digitally-connected global sphere. Virtual spaces extend and hybridize the individual's linguistic, cultural, and social identities, relegating national identity a component in the individual learner's story.

### *Postmodern Civic Engagement*

What does civic engagement look like in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? National rights and responsibilities are still paramount in Canada. These rights are not universal around the world despite the existence of global political overseers, such as the United Nations, and the economically homogenizing effects of supra-national trading

blocks, e.g., NAFTA, and the Euro Zone. In Canada, adults elect a national leader by democratic vote in the parliamentary system of government, and the footwork must be set to understand this structure in school. However, if civic engagement is to be thought of as social participation and community building (rather than memorizing and participating in the existing political system), it must also include participatory dimensions not considered in 20th century modern education paradigms, notably those mobilized through social media accessed on mobile devices.

In Canada's democratic framework, citizens have obligations and derive rights, though rights are not always equal. In the case being argued, viz., public education, this inequality manifests in educational language rights, tolerance and utility. But what happens online? Is the digital realm not an environment for human rights as well? In an era of participatory culture (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008), what civic responsibilities accrue online?

A number of recent online cyberbullying cases have involved Canadian youth in stories shared internationally: Dalhousie University dentistry students' misogynistic Facebook group—and the public backlash against it; Amanda Todd's suicide over online sexual harassment; Rehtaeh Parsons suicide over a viral gang rape video. These were digital actions of unbelievable incivility that had very real tragic, and in two cases, fatal physical consequences. These, and other such dreadful instances of cyberbullying indicate that the anti-bullying lessons of the classroom are not sufficiently permeating online forums, where access to an anonymous voice has spurred vindictive and destructive actions as well as democratic political activism.

*Participatory politics*, is described by Kahne, Hodgins and Eidman-Aadahl (2016, p. 2) as “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern.” Public response to the viciously sexist Dalhousie University dental students' Facebook cyberbullying inspired substantive political action, demanding that the students responsible for the group be expelled from their dental program. The students' despicable online behaviour and the ensuing public backlash in real time and space, clearly illustrates how life online and offline are inextricably connected. Participatory politics online demands political action in real time.

### *Instilling Literacies of Postmodern Civic Engagement*

Civic engagement is constituted on numerous levels. But if we do not reconcile the ideas of rights and responsibilities beyond generic national conceptions, we accept what Professor Harold Benjamin aptly described nearly 80 years ago as a *saber-tooth curriculum* (Peddiwell, 1939). In this hilarious spoof of pedagogy focused on the past, the elders dismiss the need to teach skills for hunting and fishing post-ice age animals in favour of learning the classic skill of slaying the long-extinct saber-tooth tiger as a kind of transcendent theoretical truism more important than contemporary survival.

How can we translate the quagmire of multiple social identities, political rights and responsibilities, and digital participation in education while keeping to curricular demands? Heller (2013, pp. 190-191) makes the point that control of legitimate language (following Bourdieu, 1977)—and by extension literate facility is a deciding factor in civic engagement and power:

The linguistic rules of the game are important for deciding what counts as citizenship and who counts as a citizen in a number of ways, from the display of membership in the category of “legitimate speaker”; to the appropriate deployment of forms recognizable as belonging to the standardized, valued, national “language” (a systematization and institutionalization of variable forms and practices); and to the detailed pragmatics of communication in everyday life.

Social belonging, rights and responsibilities constitute one of the elements of complexity teachers are faced with in classrooms. While superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) may be a more apt description of the residents of urban spaces, social remixing is increasingly evident in towns and cities dispersed throughout the country. Coverage of the May 2016 evacuation of residents from Fort McMurray, Alberta, which was engulfed in flames in a massive runaway forest fire, notably included recently arrived Syrian refugees. The diffusion of refugee populations in Canada thus includes remote northern communities—not just the large urban centres of the south, i.e., Toronto, Montreal, Calgary, and Vancouver. Understanding how to interact as politically responsible citizens of a superdiverse society on and offline is critical to everyone across this huge and sparsely populated country.

#### *National Policy in Language and Literacy Education*

Schools across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are highly linguistically heterogeneous, though not every teacher walks into a classroom of high-density cultural fusion. Literacy educators, though, walk a tightrope of policies in the classroom that is fraying badly at the seams: teaching a curricular and literate embodiment of the 1969 Official Languages Act to classrooms reflecting the 1971/1988 Multiculturalism Act. Nor are Indigenous populations recognized in mandated language choices; Indigenous languages have never permeated mainstream education. The teacher is responsible for pulling together students’ actual backgrounds and the expectations of curricular study, which do not meet in the middle, linguistically speaking.

According to a recent survey of Toronto District School Board (TDSB) students and their families, children who arrive at school speaking English only at home constitute 44% of school entrants. More than a third (34%) of incoming students speak one or more languages other than English at home, and a further 22% speak English plus another language (TDSB, 2103). This means that a majority of students entering school speak another language at home.

Moreover, those speaking English plus another language at home may include people actually speaking creolized languages where English is the lexifier (such as Jamaican Patwa, and Guyanese Creole), which may be described for statistical purposes as English. However, Creoles are not varieties of English (French, Dutch, etc.), as Canadian English or Australian English might be characterized. Creolized languages develop from hybridized Pidgin languages that are built from multiple source languages. Thus, Jamaican Patwa uses the vocabulary of the colonial English within a structure influenced by a number of African languages, creating a new language: one that has some recognizable vocabulary but a hybridized grammatical structure. Children speaking Creoles, such as Jamaican Patwa, may also need help with the English of textbooks. In this linguistic landscape, all teachers are language teachers.

Spaces in education are rigidly defined according to language, and these are politically restricted to English and French in Ontario classrooms, though there are continuing education programs for *international* (i.e., *heritage*) languages, and subject spaces for popular Indo-European languages, such as Spanish and German, in high school. *International* languages are spoken in communities in Canadian cities, not just in other countries. Indigenous languages can be studied in limited school contexts, configured, similarly, in terms of *heritage* rather than general interest, which is a lost opportunity for sharing Indigenous knowledges.

English-French bilingual immersion education programs have evolved from early revolutionary work (Lambert, Tucker & D'Anglejan, 1973) into an internationally-recognized model; French immersion is taught across the nation nowadays. But we have continued to work on the learning model oriented to language acquisition as measured on tests, and lost sight of the larger picture of who is using which language for what. Meanwhile, Indigenous languages are fighting for survival, and a plethora of world languages has tipped the balance of languages spoken in urban communities towards a polyglot reality that formal education is not taking adequate notice of or care with.

How and where do teachers begin the task of developing literacies in classrooms characterized by dense linguistic variation? Elementary teachers in the TDSB are required to nurture language and literacy learning towards standards that reflect past norms and benchmarks interwoven with historicized ideals of Canadian national identity. Literacy within this frame is (punitively) measurable by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Alphabetic literacy, and national historical identity are insufficient educational goals in an era where social and economic communication continues to move relentlessly into a digital dimension of time disembodied from space that is, for the most part, unlimited by national borders. This amorphous digital playground, rife with ethical potholes, commercially ransacked spaces, and biased narratives, is, nonetheless, an inescapably fundamental canvas for contemporary communication.

The digital tools we use to communicate are evolving so quickly that no teacher or school can keep on top of the technology, the evolving discursive and textual forums and genres, and how and what to teach. Teachers are squeezed, trying to meet formal expectations that students communicate according to provincial or regional standards and in official national languages, find common ground in their classrooms of learners of mixed backgrounds and abilities, sort out which digital tools are accessible and helpful for contemporary communication, and mollify parents expecting constant and instant English for their children, while trying to experiment towards the repeated refrain that formal education should teach towards creativity and innovation, not fixed subject matter. This is a very tall order.

#### *Teaching Multimodal Literacies at Joyce Public School*

The study reported in this paper took place at Joyce Public School (JPS) in northwest Toronto from 2002-2012 (Lotherington, 2011; Lotherington & Paige, 2017). Children entering JPS literally represent the populations of the world. Approximately 2/3 of children attending the school speak a primary language other than English at home. Though some children were born in another country, most are generation 1.5 immigrants (cf: Rumbaut & Ima, 1988): children born in Canada to parents who are recent

immigrants. Though these families may have limited cultural and linguistic capital in their new national home, their children are not eligible for English as a second language (ESL) instruction because they were born in Canada. Generation 1.5 kids who enter junior kindergarten in Ontario at age 4, tend to develop credible oral skills. However, their accurate pronunciation masks wobbly grounding in academic English, putting them at risk of successful academic achievement (Harklau, 2003; Roessingh & Douglas, 2011; Schechter, 2012).

A serious concern, easily swept underneath the rug of generation 1.5 children's native-like oral skills is their fledgling knowledge of home languages, which are too easily stamped out as complexities in the acquisition of *official bilingualism*. A component of my research involvement was in supporting the use of home and community languages as useful and renewable resources, beneficial cognitively, culturally, socially, and potentially, economically, not just to the child, but to the larger community. The question was: How could this be done? Teachers cannot maintain a plurality of languages in every classroom; there are limits in how many languages can be taught in curricular spaces. However, it was my contention that multilingual inclusion could be welcomed into customized spaces meaningful in specified combinations to particular families.

JPS was not adept at working with the many languages spoken by their population when I first started research in the school in 2002. They were, however, well ahead of other schools in their intrepid learning and teaching with digital technology (Granger, Morbey, Lotherington, Owston et al., 2002). Our collaborative action research project grew in sophistication and complexity from an inquiry into how *multiliteracies* could be taught in the elementary classroom (Lotherington, 2011) to a self-governing learning community co-developing cross-curricular project-based learning for creative, collaborative and agentic learning (Lotherington, 2017; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Lotherington, Paige, & Holland-Spencer, 2013; Lotherington, Fisher, Jenson, & Lindo, 2016; Lotherington & Paige, 2017).

The SSHRC-funded study: *Developing a ludic approach to linguistic challenges in elementary education*, took place from 2008 to 2012<sup>3</sup>. The questions driving the pedagogical interventions were iterative, being constantly refined in the repetitive processes of learning through action research. Inquiries followed epistemological, pedagogical, and socio-political lines, pursuing:

1. What is literacy in the 21st century? How is literacy constituted, performed, taught?
2. How can we teach and assess literacy as contemporary social practice in a digitally-embedded, superdiverse urban context?
3. How do we change the educational machinery to accommodate rapidly changing literacy practices?

The study was conceptualized as collaborative action research; we worked as a theory-practice interface hand-in-glove as researchers, graduate students, classroom teachers, administrators, school board consultants, and community members that included a core of a dozen or so teachers, researchers and the principal, and welcomed others interested in particular annual projects. Our learning community met monthly, focused on

developing workable multimodal literacies pedagogies for superdiverse classes using digital affordances for agentive and deep learning engagement.

### *How to Build Your Own Country*

*How to Build Your Own Country* was one of dozens of multimodal projects undertaken in our collaborative teacher-researcher consortium from 2002 – 2012 that ultimately changed the culture of the school. Junior grade teachers Rhea Perreira-Foyle and Andrew Schmitt team-taught the project across the grade 5 classes at JPS in 2009-2010. *How to Build Your Own Country* was designed to teach the grade 5 social studies curriculum unit, *Aspects of Government*, which special education teacher Rhea described in hilariously understated fashion as being a little dry and needing some pepping up. The project was designed as a cross-curricular social justice project incorporating social studies, math, languages, art, and design.

The project, which was launched from a book of the same name (Wyatt, 2009), is highly illustrative of creatively thinking about political structures, civic responsibility, and social justice concerns issuing directly from political infrastructure, including the place of language in civic engagement and power. My research interest in the project was particularly concerned with questions of communication: use of plurilingualism—partial use of different languages in class and in texts, multilingual opportunities in class and in the make-your-own-country projects, textual innovation, and the like. The project included due consideration and innovative inclusion of language as a political structure; it also compellingly illustrated project-based learning, game (creation and) play for learning (sometimes referred to as ludic learning), and using improvisational techniques towards deep learning (See Hang-Coleman, Hang, Perreira-Foyle, & Schmitt, 2017, for a full encapsulation of the social justice project within larger discussion of refugees in education).

*How to Build Your Own Country* required children to think about language as a civic right and a building block in nation-building structures that children had to tackle in designing their own countries. For example, children considered: What language/s do people speak to each other in your country? What language/s is/are needed to sing the anthem? What language/s is/are on the currency? Which are taught in school? Which do immigrants to your country need to know? In producing materials (plurilingual, multilingual, and bilingual) on their (created) countries, all languages were welcomed: any language that linked with the community was invited, including creoles, which are often treated by their speakers as shameful or deficient, in keeping with colonial biases. The book led children to undertake the following in designing their own countries<sup>4</sup>:

- Stake out your identity
- Run your country
- Meet the neighbours

To accomplish these goals, children needed to come to grips with the geopolitics of nation building; develop, interpret and institute constitutional laws; and develop global diplomacy. No small task for elementary schoolchildren!

The project had numerous stages of nation-creation (e.g. stake out your identity) that required research into world nations, family research on migration histories, and

family knowledge of countries as residents and citizens. Children designed countries (e.g. run your country) that ranged from the silly (Republic of Laughter: the right to have fun in which numerous languages were used but none designated as official) to fusion nations: Gynamdad (merging Guyana, Vietnam, Trinidad: official languages English and Vietnamese). The teachers then moved on to an international resource (e.g. meet the neighbours): the online educational global think tank: *TakingItGlobal (TIG)*<sup>5</sup>: where they played the virtual game: *Ayiti: The Cost of Life*, based on the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

Students' reactions to playing the TIG simulation game based on the unfolding tragedy of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, however, gave the teachers cause for concern. Students manifested an apparent lack of regard for life and death, looking instead at winning the game. Teachers felt that kids were just not appreciating the gravity of life and death, so they instituted their own simulation game in class, based on an activity that teacher Andrew had played in one of his classes as a student.

### *The Circle Game*

*The Circle Game*, as it came to be called, was played in real time, using four tables to represent different nations. Children were randomly distributed as citizens at one of the four nation tables, which had varied natural resources, different mandated means of choosing a leader, and unequal population bases. At Table A, 5 children shared plentiful resources except for a shortfall in rulers. They elected their leader democratically. At Table B, 5 children shared slightly more of all resources than they needed. They used the rock/paper/scissors game to choose a leader on the basis of luck. At Table C, 8 children negotiated unequal resources that included an overabundance of paper but not enough of anything else, including stickers, of which they had unequal amounts of the different colours (signifying health, food, education, and the environment). They were permitted to function without a leader. At Table D, 16 children vied for 8 chairs around an inadequately resourced table. They had insufficient everything except for rulers of which they had a surfeit. They chose their leader in an arm-wrestling contest.

Citizens of each table were required to labour to produce currency (without an explanation as to why), which were circles of paper, to which were affixed coloured stickers representing aspects of health: red (money), blue (food), yellow (education), and green (healthy environment), as pictured in Figure 1.

# The circle game

Grade 5 teachers: Rhea Perreira-Foyle and Andrew Schmitt



Figure 1. The Circle Game

The game unfolded in four stages: 1) learning to survive; 2) people with power; 3) emergent government; 4) survival of the fittest. As the game progressed through the four stages, Andrew and Rhea slowly ceded authority for learning to the children to conduct their own activities, videotaping the class activity for research and teaching documentation. This approach, reflecting Sawyer's (2006) advocacy of "disciplined improvisation" (p. 45), calls for the teacher to facilitate collaborative improvisation among students and guide them towards the social construction of their knowledge. In this case, Andrew and Rhea slowly withdrew their authority as the children assumed responsibility for their own discovery-based learning.

The simulation was highly effective in facilitating different lived socio-cultural experiences at each table consistent with differential economic resourcing and political infrastructure. Table D, the pseudo-underdeveloped nation, saw the rise of a despot through physical force (i.e., arm-wrestling), and the subsequent marginalization of women, including the creation of a feminized slave labour force as the boys took all the resources for themselves, stripping the girls of equal rights and making them do all the work. Table A, simulating a wealthy nation, did not fare much better, becoming rich, apathetic, and too self-satisfied to bother to vote for their leader (sound familiar?). The life and death quotient was surprising: it was Table A who almost lost a citizen because he was too lazy to work at the set labour to save himself from dying. His migration to a less well-resourced table was negotiated in international (i.e., inter-table) dealings, based on humanitarianism. The game opened up under-the-table transfers of people and currency as those with individual resources managed their accumulating wealth and developed into wheeler-dealers. On the bright side, children also developed thoughtful solutions: an assembly line for currency manufacture at Table B. (Hang-Coleman et al, 2017).

### *Project-based Learning, Embodied Literacy, and Civic Engagement*

What does this grade 5 multimodal literacies project tell us about literacy, learning, and civic engagement? *How to Build Your Own Country* utilized project-based learning—a pedagogy where subjects are taken out of curricular silos and combined as problems to be solved in context—as in real life. Kymlicka (1996, p. 1) adds, “education for citizenship is not an isolated subset of the curriculum, but rather is one of the ordering goals or principles which shapes the entire curriculum.” In this project, children learned from doing and making in a multi-stage project, which included the mammoth task of designing an entire nation.

The underlying learning goals: understanding the geopolitics of nation building, the development and institution of constitutional laws, and the importance of global diplomacy, were transformed into an engaging multi-stage project involving a creative research and design task, game play hinging on economic and social choices, and collaborative decision-making in simulated nation-building with unequal resources and statutes. The learners were collectively immersed in designing and gameplay, resulting in collaborative, embodied learning. The unstated activity was civic engagement. Language was a political element in nation building.

There were no right answers in the simulation game played out in class; nor were there in the digital game played on the TIG site. Students laboured to make currency with unequal national resources, seeking solutions for personal and national betterment as the game progressed. In the table nation run by the despot who came to power through physical might (which was approved educationally to simulate a military *coup d’etat*), there were visceral responses to the resulting unfairness. In a clip caught on video by the teachers, a (male) student is documented repetitively screaming: “This is not fair!”

The goals for this combined grade 5 social justice project were multiple, complex, and intertwined: the teachers pinpointed a central curricular goal, *Aspects of Government* in the social studies curriculum. Additionally, the teachers met contractual research goals, including the children’s languages appropriate to the learning project, which answered to my research agenda, and approaching learning with a ludic, or game-oriented, perspective, in response to Professor Jensen’s research agenda. The teachers also had to attend to perennial modifications for ESL learners, and for children with individual education plans (e.g., modifications for learners with cognitive, social, and/or physical challenges). Children engaged in multiple activities, including:

- Designing their own countries, which required:
  - intergenerational research
  - language planning
  - political organization
  - law
  - art
  - design;
- Calculating the cost of life in Haiti, which activated:
  - applied mathematics for family financial decisions that carried serious, and potentially fatal social consequences (e.g., Were family members left hungry so one child could attend school?);

- Playing an in-class simulation, which required each learner to make personal and national (e.g., pertaining to the table-nation) decisions about:
  - economic and social welfare
  - humanitarian concerns
  - ethics.

In this project, children collaborated on their countries and in their table nations despite falling along a spectrum of ability, and having different linguistic reserves. Together, they created customized solutions through doing and making. Their literacy engagement was multimodal, collaborative, agentive, and purposive towards understanding civic engagement both from the perspective of nation designer and as a random player assigned to a nation in an inequitable world. Students shared their language knowledge as part of the production, and engaged in immersive game play in which learning and civic responsibility and action were embodied. The children's complex, embodied engagement illustrated how:

citizenship education is not just a matter of learning the basic facts about the institutions and procedures of political life; it also involves acquiring a range of dispositions, virtues, and loyalties which are intimately bound up with the practice of democratic citizenship. (Kymlicka, 1996, p. 1)

*Our Evolving Playbook to Re-R/W Language and Literacy Education for Postmodern Civic Engagement*

Literacy is neither a singular nor a terminal project, as Luke (2000), quoting Freire reminds us: it is transitive, forging access, and mediating information, communication, and action. Luke (2013, p. 139) asks, “How do language, text, discourse, and information make a difference? For whom? In what material, social and consequential ways? In whose interests? According to what patterns, rules and in what institutional and cultural sites?” These important questions surrounding critical literacies must be contextualized in the reality of the superdiverse classroom. I argue that children's (and teachers') multilingual acumen constitutes a benefit in global times, their languages being appropriate to learning in a society that has changed beyond recognition of the statues defining language spaces in classrooms in Ontario today. Teachers need to ask: What linguistic knowledge do children bring to school? What digital literacies? How and where can I build children's knowledge into achievement of our learning goals?

Conceptions of literacy are rapidly metamorphosing from its canonical majority language print base into multimodal forms that include a broader range of semiotic resources (including other languages and scripts) and challenge what we think of as a text. Fundamental questions in a superdiverse context such as Toronto are: How do we teach language and literacy in school? How are we working with the profusion of both languages and mediating technologies in curricular learning? Are we meeting students halfway in the classroom, working from what they know to what they need to learn? This requires customizing currently restricted media for and prototypes of language and literacy learning.

At Joyce Public School, researchers and teachers—with the visionary guidance of the school administrator—built a learning community to develop pedagogies responsive

to social literacy needs and practices while fulfilling curricular requirements (Lotherington, 2011; Lotherington & Paige, 2017). Our learning community pioneered a university-school action research project to provide a working vehicle for sorting out pedagogical issues by juxtaposing theory and practice and merging academic research and professional teacher development. My research motivation was to develop plurilingual designs for learning, and texts creatively capitalizing on new media to produce multimodal expression that included children's (and teachers') complex cultural and linguistic affiliations. My co-researcher, Jennifer Jenson, was invested in play-based learning designs. One of our many discoveries was that these orientations worked well together towards experimental, creative pedagogies and multimodal textual products (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011).

We educate for the future, not the present, and certainly not for the past, though past learning informs future directions. English literacy is still largely conceptualized as print-based, despite continual changes to communicative practices and literacies with portable digital mediating tools, and exposure to global languages in the local classroom. Heller (2013) underscores how Bourdieusian theory explicates the power of *legitimate* language in civic engagement. What we did at JPS was to teach towards multiple language awareness and sharing, even where language knowledge was partial—as it always is (see Lotherington, 2011; 2013) while teaching the majority languages of power. This is an important lesson for parents, many of whom think the faster they can ditch their heritage language, the better. In fact, not only are minority community languages increasingly important in terms of global diplomacy and trade, supportive of broader cultural and social vistas and knowledge repositories, and facilitating of cultural tolerance and understanding, they facilitate the learning of additional languages (Cummins, 2000), such as English and French, in Canada. Maintaining, supporting, and learning multiple languages creates a multilingual resource for the individual and the society alike. Recognizing and appreciating languages creates a culturally aware and tolerant society.

Our remaking of literacy in the classroom required experimenting with digital mediation in textual creation to make new ways of expression—which were customizable, linguistically malleable, and inclusive. Our re-envisioning of elementary education, classroom literacy, and social belonging might be seen as postmodern in orientation. According to Aylesworth (2015, para 1):

That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism. However, it can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning.

Our decade long experiment at JPS led our learning community to postmodernize elementary education towards project-based learning in which children achieve and learn by agentive discovery, doing, and sharing. In this educational orientation, learning is collaborative, dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981), multidimensional, distributed, agentive, and customizable. Teacher-researchers are embedded in a technologically-mediated network (Thumlert, de Castell & Jenson, 2014) where digital technology interactively supports and helps to shape, but does not drive pedagogies. The languages and digital know-how

that children bring into the classroom are seen as elemental in their learning, easily accommodated in customizable multimodal spaces, and instructive to classmates as well as teachers.

Literacy learning in this postmodern vision is embedded in a complex mediated social network involving the local and the global, the physical and the virtual. Literacy teaching is project-oriented, collaboratively planned, integrating curricular goals, and strategic local and digital community knowledge and participation. This means that local languages and cultural knowledge are invited into the discussion, as is creative textual expression.

A postmodern conception of knowledge is not simple, monocultural, linear, or squeezed into 20<sup>th</sup> century print conceptions written in a fossilized textbook language. This is not to say that textbook language is not of paramount importance in accessing archived resources. However, it is invalid as a culturally homogenizing force in our polyvocal society. Subjects can be released from their siloes, and put to work in service of real world understanding. Learners can learn agentively, interactively and responsibly solving actual problems.

Knowledge external to the classroom is where we are headed, not what we are excluding. Online learning is increasingly permeating the brick-and-mortar walls of schools, increasing learners' opportunities to be connected with and involved in real world problems, not simply the hypothetical problems of the classroom. Life online can no longer be separated from life offline.

The extension of education into a rapidly developing digitally-mediated global society is not easy. In the classroom, the subjugation of right-wrong answers to critical thinking and creative meaning-making requires developing a culture of risk, and of trust that learners can take responsibility for their learning. Teachers, too, must be trusted to prepare learners to do this.

In the context of our research developing multimodal literacy education in an elementary school in northwest Toronto, the conception of citizenship grounded in colonialism that is presented in curricular objectives and resources is at odds with the superdiverse composition of learners in school classes. The mantle of colonialism, evident in prescriptive language learning agendas in Ontario, is outdated. Our project developed an innovative mechanism for bridging the language know-how of the community to the languages of power in the classroom. It is my contention that ensuring social and cultural awareness and responsibility for inclusive globally-focused learning in the classroom is a crucial step in developing civic engagement writ large.

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<sup>1</sup> Official languages act 1969/ 1988/ 2005: [http://www.ocolclo.gc.ca/en/language\\_rights/act](http://www.ocolclo.gc.ca/en/language_rights/act)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian multiculturalism act 1971/1988: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/citizenship.asp>

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<sup>4</sup> This YouTube provides an interesting animated book review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut7ci-SJKRk>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.tigweb.org/>