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Relational Literacies and Restorative Justice: “We’re Part of Something Bigger and as Big as the Collective”

Erica Holyoke, University of Colorado Denver

Abstract

Restrictive instruction and punitive discipline often run parallel in schools, prompting a continued need to provide authentic learning opportunities that value children’s literacy strengths in an inclusive community. Restorative justice has been identified as a pedagogical stance in addressing harmful policies in schools, and it is most often examined in secondary contexts and specifically in relation to discipline—rarely in relation to young children’s literacies and learning. This multisite case study explored the intersections of restorative practices and literacy learning in elementary classrooms (K–3) across three schools in the same large public school district in the United States. Using relational literacies and languaging as theoretical frames, the talk, reading, and writing practices were analyzed through actions and thoughts of the teachers and students. Findings indicate that children and teachers engaged in relational literacies to build collective meaning-making that honored individual strengths and capacities in, with, and for texts and one another. The findings demonstrate a blurring of storied and lived worlds and how children work with, in, and alongside texts collaboratively. The findings indicate a need for viewing literacy and community-building practices holistically and the importance of centering how young children build meaning relationally.

Keywords: relational literacies, elementary classrooms, dialogic learning, classroom communities, restorative justice

At 8 am on a Monday morning, kindergarteners busily “swappy-swapped” their schedule by creating invitations for loved ones coming to their reading celebration. They had finished a morning community-building circle and eagerly transitioned. Writers sprawled around the room in spots they chose, deciding who their invitations were for and planning the exact message they would write and draw. The class discussed previewing reading powers for loved ones, and children readily named these powers with ownership and affinity as they wrote. They beamed, “I do pointing power” or “I’m gonna tell them snap power.” Three children gathered with the class talking piece as they shared their writing and offered feedback. Over the excited hum, you could hear Zara coaching Anthony on stretching the word celebration and Darnell announcing that his grandma would be there first, so he used red to draw because she liked that best. Ms. Ryan
worked with Jared at her table, exploring the implications of writing for an audience and determining if he should sign his letter with his nickname or full name because he was writing to his sister, and she only ever used his nickname. Periodically, Kahlil and Noelle weighed in, imagining how they would feel as his sister.

This vignette, from expanded field notes, illustrates how children in a kindergarten community were doing literacy in a community. The purpose of writing was to cement their literate identities and share those identities with loved ones while the teacher also taught strategies and structures of writing. The learners displayed their collaboration, writing craft moves, and skills. As authors, they developed and affirmed identities through and with their text compositions (Yagelski, 2012). Literacy, through talk, reading, and writing, privileged connecting to and with one another as readers, authors, and people. The children demonstrated their literate knowledge in community and through connections.

Often in early elementary education (PreK–Grade 3), there are narrow perspectives of literacy, prioritizing individual learning and achievement (Dyson, 2013; Yoon, 2015). And in schools serving communities of Black children, Indigenous children, and children of color, such as the classroom in the vignette above, restrictive academic learning and punitive discipline are often intersectional (Comber et al., 2017; Gregory et al., 2010). These intersections manifest through resource disparities, learning opportunities, disproportionate punishment and exclusion, and hyper surveillance of what is taught (Dyson, 2013; Genishi, 2016). Narrow perspectives of literacy learning perpetuate deficit narratives and limit literacy as a right and tool for agentic and active learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). These approaches to instruction position children, especially in schools serving Black children, Indigenous children, and children of color, as passive learners mapping progress against predetermined paths of literacy skills (Dyson, 2018), in contrast to the vignette above. The focus is on outcomes rather than the process of children’s socially situated and relational learning.

This study explored how young children enact an alternative to restrictive literacies, instead engaging relationally through literacy practices in classrooms founded on the premise of restorative justice as a way to confront inequities in schools (Lysaker et al., 2011). Relational literacies, which explore the way we know through being with texts and each other, connect to restorative justice in enhancing a community where children’s “voices, ideas, and lived experiences can be heard” (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011, p. 167). This view is about making things right rather than being right (Winn, 2018b). Making things right indicates inclusivity of ideas and a shift away from dominant ways of being, knowing, and doing. Extending Winn’s (2016, 2018a, 2018b) work in secondary contexts, this study explored the intersection of relational literacies and restorative justice in early elementary classrooms.

Review of Related Literature

Three areas of research frame this study: social and relational literacies, agency in learning, and restorative justice in education. These areas offer response to the realities of restrictive learning environments (e.g., Dyson, 2018; Yoon, 2013) and punitive discipline in classrooms with young learners (e.g., Boonstra, 2021). Restrictive and narrow lenses of literacy are often framed through a focus on achievement and standards-based
learning and assessment and, as Dyson (2018, 2020) has explored, typically limit opportunities in schools serving marginalized communities. Dyson (2020) further explored the intersection of skills-based literacy, exclusion based on achievement, and lack of relationships in the classroom community for a young Black boy in his transition to kindergarten, where he was positioned as an outsider through intentional isolation from the classroom learning community. These notions are echoed for young children, especially Black learners, in terms of discipline. Boonstra (2021) elaborated that racialized and ableized perspectives frame discipline practices in kindergartens, which mirrors racialized exclusionary practices across early childhood studies and research (Blackson et al., 2022).

**Social and Relational Literacies in Early Elementary**

Whereas early elementary classrooms often draw on structured and scripted curricula (Yoon, 2013, 2015) in which children work individually, young children seek out opportunities to engage with their peers socially and relationally through their literacy learning (Dyson, 2013; Holyoke, 2021; Wohlwend, 2019). The scholarship emphasizes how teachers and children are empowered when learning consists of co-created experiences “reflective of the children’s realities, interests, and cultural legacies” (Souto-Man ning, 2010, p. 152). In a study of preservice teachers working in Head Start settings, Souto-Manning (2010) emphasized the importance of moving from remediation to re-mediation. She explained this as an “expansive, hybrid, and additive approach to differences and diversities” (p. 153), as opposed to remediating deficits in students’ literacies. The findings explored how teachers decentered ethnocentric literacy practices, shifted away from their perceptions of their own cultural backgrounds as the norm, and instead saw the multiplicity of resources children brought with them to the classroom.

Furthermore, children make meaning through relational understandings and engaged responses to texts (e.g., Lysaker, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2004). Rosenblatt (2004) explored how children used their knowledge when connecting with texts, and Lysaker (2000, 2018) illustrated how children integrated their identities while reading relationally (Lysaker & Nie, 2017; Lysaker & Sedberry, 2015; Lysaker & Tonge, 2013; Lysaker et al., 2011). In one study, 5- and 6-year-olds read wordless picture books (Lysaker, 2006). They created meaning on transactional levels (i.e., reporting what they observed in the text) and engaged standpoints by speaking themselves into the story using first person pronouns in their retellings. The self-positions varied for each child, indicating a rich diversity in relating to and making meaning with texts. Extending from the previous scholarship, I look at how children engage together and with texts, both self-created and published, as connected to restorative justice.

**Children’s Agency and Literate Identities**

As children negotiate meaning in their social worlds and relationally with texts, they employ agency in establishing literate identities. I draw on students as the curriculum (Winn et al., 2019) to connect agency and literate identities with restorative justice. Studies have analyzed how individual children navigate their identities and experiences within structured and mandated curricula or through teacher-mediated revisions (Dyson, 2018; Purnell et al., 2007; Worthy et al., 2012). For example, Brownell (2017) looked at the implications of a mandated program for Ariana, a 10-year-old Latina student, and how
she positioned herself in the class context through the writing program. In the mandated curriculum, children were evaluated on their skills as writers. However, exploration beyond the mandated curriculum revealed how children created opportunities to extend beyond explicit learning to establish their identities and positioning in the classroom community. Likewise, Dyson (2018) followed Ta’Von, a Black student, as he transitioned from preschool to kindergarten. In kindergarten, narrow views of what counted as literacy resulted in deficit labels by the teacher and his peers. Ta’Von was positioned as an outsider and experienced “dislocation” because of intersecting societal constructs of gender, race, and class, as well as his academic standing in narrow constructs of literacy learning (Dyson, 2018, p. 258). These compounding factors resulted in Ta’Von being positioned in harmful, exclusionary, and deficit frames. Pertinent to this current study, I examine how children expand their literate identities collectively by acknowledging personal and collective agency in a shared space that values individuals’ experiences.

**Restorative Justice in Education**

Restorative justice in education is often viewed as an alternative approach to punitive discipline by disrupting the preschool-to-prison-pipeline (Allen & White-Smith, 2014) and focusing on community, accountability, and relationships (Vaandering, 2010; Zehr, 2005). Restorative justice focuses on individuals or groups who have been harmed (Winn, 2018b; Zehr, 2005) and originates from a long and rich history in Indigenous and First Nation communities (Boyles-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Ortega et al., 2016; Vaandering, 2016). Core tenets of restorative justice include “respect, dignity, and mutual concern for all members of the learning community; a commitment to justice and equity; and a belief in the value and worth of each person” (Gregory & Evans, 2020, p. 4). Limited research has been conducted on restorative justice and literacy learning as a way of being. Although Winn (2016, 2018a, 2018b; Winn et al., 2019) has emphasized relational ways of being and the humanness of teaching and learning together, the studies were situated in secondary contexts, indicating a need to explore intersections of relational literacies and restorative justice with younger learners.

Researchers have also examined the benefits of supporting students with social and emotional literacies and behaviors when implementing restorative justice practices (e.g., Kehoe, et al., 2018; Schumacher, 2014). Across studies, children draw on emotional literacies in talking circles and build strong relationships through circles as a participation structure and practice (e.g., Schumacher, 2014). Consistently, participants found joy in connecting through restorative circles and built self-efficacy through enacting emotional literacy skills. Restorative justice is also a “proactive relational strategy to create a culture of connectivity” (Davis, 2019, p. 24), thus priming it for embodied enactment in early elementary contexts. Restorative justice is less frequently studied in early elementary spaces (c.f. Hambacher, 2018; Holyoke, 2021), and my study recognized restorative justice as a way of being, as teachers and children in the study found alternatives to curricular restrictions.

**Intersections Across Scholarship**

Literacy learning happens in social contexts and through relations with texts and people (e.g., Dyson, 2013; Lysaker, 2006; Rosenblatt, 2004). Through literacy learning,
children establish literate identities (e.g., Brownell, 2017; Dyson, 2018) and apply personalized meaning-making and schema to revise learning as relevant for who they are and who they are becoming. Agency, learning in social contexts, and studies of restorative justice add to the literature, suggesting that justice in schools can be addressed through relationships, dialogue, and building a trusting community. Research in these three domains provides an understanding of literacy as a way of being, the interconnectedness of how young children engage in self-work and collaborate, and the urgency in education to confront harm caused in schools.

My study recognized the interrelationships of literacy learning, classroom community, and equity-oriented pedagogy, such as restorative justice. I argue for the intersection of these issues to examine literacy holistically through an inclusive and relational frame as related to justice. Aligned to scholarship, I define justice as “encourag[ing] the growth of community” and the “worth of the other [being] placed in the forefront of our attention” (Vaandering, 2010, pp. 146, 147). These definitions of justice frame study design. To explore this intersection, I ask: In early elementary classroom communities committed to restorative justice, how do children engage in literacy practices?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This study is situated on understanding literacy as a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Street & Street, 1984). I explicitly draw on theories of languaging and relational literacies to analyze and inquire into how children enact literacy practices as individuals in a collaborative community focused on restorative justice.

Languaging recognizes discourse as constantly evolving actions based on experiences, texts, and knowledge (Becker, 1991; Bloome & Beauchemin, 2016) and emphasizes the interconnectedness of learning, language, and relationships (Beach & Beauchemin, 2019). This theory builds on scholarship from Buber (1969) in how people maintain I-it or I-thou perspectives. When people employ I-thou through languaging, the emphasis is relational and upholds the value of individuals in dialogue rather than detachment. Seeing literacies as languaging provides a deeper understanding of how individuals enact literacies in classroom communities and move toward belonging (Holyoke, 2021). Languaging is how individuals and groups create, relate, and build their worlds (Bloome, 2017). This framework offers a perspective to examine togetherness and cohesion through literacy learning.

Relational literacies examine how we know through relations with each other, with texts, and within a shared context (Lysaker, 2018). A relational perspective departs from outcome-based and standardization of literacy and looks at active roles children employ through literacy learning. Readers and writers engage in self-activities, wherein “self is reconfigured, as it is refracted, reencountered, and re-known in the movement of self into and within texts worlds” (Lysaker, 2018, p. 76). Self-activities turn attention to the personalized interactions children have with texts. This framework, alongside languaging, echoes definitions of justice introduced above in considering the growth of oneself within and with the community.

Lysaker (2018) elaborated on three ways of being through relational literacies; these perspectives of relational literacies examine possibilities for becoming through
Relational Literacies and Restorative Justice  • 67

meaning-making: being-in, which incorporates how readers and composers are engaged; being-with, which examines how children position themselves with storied characters; and being-for, which connects to a moral imperative of action in storied worlds and lived realities. These are not sequential but overlapping and recursive. Like a restorative justice framework, relational literacies imply that people and literacy events are “worthy and relational” (Vaandering, 2016, p. 63). Together these theories provide a framework for seeing the children as whole people and analyzing how literacy manifested in the communities through the lens of restorative justice.

Methods

This qualitative, multicase study (Thomas, 2016) analyzed literacy practices in three early elementary classrooms (Table 1) where pedagogies of restorative justice were enacted (all names of participants and schools are pseudonyms). The intention of the research was to examine the influence of restorative justice on literacy learning in early elementary classrooms. This article’s analysis draws primarily from read-aloud and writing observations as triangulated with artifacts and interviews.

Context

Each school was situated in unique neighborhoods in the same large city in the United States (Table 1). The kindergarten classroom taught by Ms. Ryan was a dynamic and vibrant classroom community at Prosser Elementary, a Title I school in a northeast neighborhood, serving primarily Black and Latinx children and families. Mrs. Lara taught first-grade in an affluent southwest neighborhood, at Wheelock Elementary, one of the state’s largest elementary schools, serving over 1,000 children. The school had some racial diversity, but most children identified as White. Finally, the third-grade community taught by Ms. Kelly was at Roosevelt Elementary, a Title I school in a quickly gentrifying and changing neighborhood in a southeast neighborhood. The school served primarily Latinx families. The context of these communities is relevant in recognizing the possibilities and diverse perspectives of implementing relational and restorative literacies in schools.

Participants and Classroom Communities

Ms. Ryan, Mrs. Lara, and Ms. Kelly each identified as White women. I worked with these early elementary teachers because of their commitment to restorative justice, leadership in their school/district for innovation, and their self-identification as continually striving in their practice. They were selected because of their prioritization of restorative justice in early elementary grades. Further commonalities included structured and open-ended literacy activities, where children frequently voiced their needs for more time, opportunities to work collaboratively, or the chance to pause the literacy learning for another day. All three communities engaged in daily restorative community-building circles (Boyles-Watson & Pranis, 2015), restorative chats, and teacher- and child-initiated circles addressing needs in the classroom. The community-building circles were both proactive, in sharing connections, experiences, and feelings with a group, and restorative, in responding to a harm caused by others in the class or to an individual beyond the classroom. The classes had centerpieces for their circles, a talking piece, and shared agreements. The learning environments provided opportunities for children to draw from
### Table 1

**School and Classroom Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prosser Elementary</td>
<td>615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelock Elementary</td>
<td>1,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt Elementary</td>
<td>865</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Prosser Elementary, total enrollment: 615

- **School enrollment by race/ethnicity**
  - African American 20.2%
  - Hispanic 77.7%
  - White 1.6%
  - American Indian 0.3%
  - Asian 0%
  - Pacific Islander 0.2%
  - two or more races 0%

- **School enrollment by student group**
  - Economically disadvantaged 94.8%
  - English language learner 64.9%
  - Special education 11.5%

- **Demographics of kindergarten classroom**
  - 17 students • 8 identified as girls, 9 as boys • 10 identified as Black, 6 as Latinx, 1 as Asian American, 1 as biracial

#### Wheelock Elementary, total enrollment: 1,123

- **School enrollment by race/ethnicity**
  - African American 1.9%
  - Hispanic 16.2%
  - White 64.0%
  - American Indian 0.3%
  - Asian 13.4%
  - Pacific Islander 0%
  - two or more races 4.3%

- **School enrollment by student group**
  - Economically disadvantaged 3.8%
  - English language learner 7.5%
  - Special education 8.4%

- **Demographics of first-grade classroom**
  - 22 students • 10 identified as girls, 12 as boys • 13 identified as White, 6 as Latinx • 2 as Asian American, 1 as Black

#### Roosevelt Elementary, total enrollment: 865

- **School enrollment by race/ethnicity**
  - African American 7.7%
  - Hispanic 74.9%
  - White 11.8%
  - American Indian 0.1%
  - Asian 2.2%
  - Pacific Islander 0.3%
  - two or more races 2.9%

- **School enrollment by student group**
  - Economically disadvantaged 70.9%
  - English language learner 30.9%
  - Special education 13.4%

- **Demographics of third-grade classroom**
  - 23 students • 11 identified as girls, 12 as boys • 11 identified as Latinx, 6 as White, 2 as Black, 2 as biracial, 1 as Asian American
their evolving habits of engaging in circles as an academic practice to facilitate book talks and whole- and small-group participation. Aligned with teachers’ stances as culturally responsive educators, diverse texts were selected in classroom libraries and in children’s self-selected texts.

**Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

I identify as a White female educator committed to growth toward antiracist and justice-oriented ways of being. I acknowledge my privilege and strive to address that through close attention to the children’s and teacher’s actions and continual critical reflection of my inferences and conclusions. I used background knowledge and personal experience using restorative perspectives while closely observing and memoing the events to capture the experiences in the classroom and remain open to surprises. I positioned myself as a friendly adult (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), chatting with the children during their arrival, engaging in play at their centers, and getting to know them informally at recess. Per teachers’ requests, I joined community-building circles before formally collecting data to create space for children to ask me questions and discuss why I visited their classes, they saw me as part of their classroom, as I was there on the first day, met their families and caregivers at open house events, and returned regularly to their classroom community. Questions children asked at the start of the year dealt with what they could show me and tell me and why I was there (e.g., Would I want to see their writing? How did I know their teacher?). I shared my excitement to learn with them and understand what they liked about reading and writing and how they worked together in the school year. I also told them they could tell their teacher any time if they wanted me to stop visiting the classroom.

**Data Collection**

Data collected included descriptive field notes (Thomas, 2016), prolonged engagement, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Engaging in extensive data collection methods allowed me to develop a complex representation of literacy and restorative justice across the three sites, spanning 79 visits. I observed 148.5 hours of literacy and community-building instruction.

**Data Sources**

Under an IRB-approved study, I collected video recordings and unstructured field notes across all community-building and literacy events while in the field, capturing the words and actions of participants to not over-rely on my own perceptions. As I expanded my field notes through video reviewing, and I transcribed interactions, including jottings of initial impressions and important events based on participants’ reactions (Emerson et al., 2011).

I facilitated group interviews with children gathering accounts of their experiences, learning preferences, and definition of community. I used open-ended questions and provided opportunities for children to respond orally or through drawing (Gibson, 2012) to prompt thoughtful, creative expression and enjoyment. I also facilitated teacher interviews three times with open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and engaged
in reflective “accounts” (Thomas, 2016) about video clips of their instruction. The accounts allowed teachers to freely reflect on their instruction to communicate “experiences and feelings freely” (Thomas, 2016, p. 190).

**Data Analysis**

I expanded field notes and wrote analytic memos throughout the data collection. At the close of data collection, I wrote thick descriptions (Geertz, 2008) of each instructional block for each classroom. I continued my analysis process with multiple rounds of coding. Using constant comparative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Thomas, 2016), I reviewed data, examining each case before moving to cross-case analysis across six rounds of analysis. Constant comparative analysis allowed me to “study the meanings that people [were] constructing of the situations in which they [found] themselves” (Thomas, 2016, p. 204), in this case enacting relational literacies and restorative justice in their classroom communities.

The first round of coding provided an opportunity to understand each case holistically (Saldaña, 2015). The macro-level analysis allowed me to synthesize extensive observations and identify temporary constructs (Thomas, 2016) in each case. In this first round, codes included general noticings, themes, and wonderings (e.g., community, collaborative writing, student-driven leadership). I then moved to subsequent rounds of inductive coding line by line and created visual displays to organize, reorient, collapse, condense, and expand initial constructs. As I identified moments of connection, meaning-making, and interactions with people/texts within the literacy events, I made analytic memos and open codes. I continued this process with the transcripts of teacher and student interviews. In subsequent rounds of coding and collapsing codes, I generated themes connected to languaging/personhood, tensions, connections, and collaborative or layered meaning-making. The codes progressed from general concepts to the purpose and impact of the practices to alignment of restorative justice core tenets (Winn et al., 2019; Zehr, 2005) and relational literacies (Lysaker, 2018). In the final round of coding, I looked at the nuance of the literacy practice and its integration of reading, writing, and talk. I rewrote individual case profiles using thick descriptions (Geertz, 2008) in response to the posed research question and theoretical frames.

After analyzing the individual cases, I used cross-case analysis to merge findings (Stake, 2005). Through iterative analysis and visual displays, I gathered themes and assertions that contributed to understanding the purpose of the study: restorative justice and relational literacies in early elementary classrooms.

**Findings**

I analyzed how children engaged in literacy practices as connected to restorative justice. As an alternative to individualized and prescriptive literacy practices, the teachers and children prioritized learning through being in relation with texts and one another, which created space to “honor the inherent worth for all” (Evans & Vaandering, 2016, p. 7). The findings present everyday literacies from the classrooms, but analysis reveals how discussions, read-alouds, and writing practices connected to relational literacies and restorative ways of being. In each finding I connect to Lysaker’s (2018) relational literacy
framework of being-in, being-with, and being-for texts and each other.

Amplified and Dialogic Learning

Across the classrooms, children had opportunities to establish a sense of self through meaning-making during read-alouds and discussions. The teachers facilitated amplified read-alouds and dialogue discussions daily. Drawing on Lysaker and colleagues’ (2011, p. 553) idea that “reading changes us,” the sense of self children enacted through meaning-making spanned relational domains. Read-alouds occupied tremendous space, affording layered discussion in that children readily constructed meaning through overlapping talk, referencing each other’s ideas, and integrating their own words with the words of the texts. Read-alouds were also opportunities for children to position themselves and others as knowledgeable. Knowledge was not a single way of knowing or being but interactions between self-knowledge, each other, and texts. Although teachers selected texts that solicited multiple meanings and invitations to engage relationally, the children took ownership of meaning-making.

Read-Alouds in and for Community

In many elementary classrooms, read-aloud privileges enjoyment of a text or serves the purpose of teaching comprehension skills. In these classrooms, the purpose also included deconstructing and reconstructing meaning through dialogue and discourse. Discussions often stretched up to an hour as children engaged in embodied emotional responses to story narratives, assuming agency and leadership in driving the flow of the text, talk, and purpose for reading. In the kindergarten and first-grade communities, children directed text interactions, announcing, “Go back! We have to talk about that!” or incredulously interjected, “Wait! Did you see what happened?” In each learning community, learners advocated for choice seating, comfortably and closely positioning themselves in a shared physical space, mirroring the closeness in how they learned with and through the text together (Lysaker, 2000). Third-graders explained, “Reading is how we show community because we all do it together. We make sure we are all staying together” (Samir, interview). Children enacted notions of togetherness in conversation with characters within and across texts—telling the characters what to do, declaring what was fair or unfair, and rewriting and imagining alternative outcomes. The teachers skillfully selected diverse and responsive texts (Bishop, 1997) and texts about critical social issues and social-emotional development to provoke dialogue. Still, the children led in making the texts relevant and meaningful in their current community, personal experiences, and future imaginations. For example, as will be elaborated later, in first grade, led by a student, the class and Mrs. Lara explored Dreamers (Morales, 2018) together. A stance of making things right, rather than being right about the purpose and meaning of the text, was well established and embedded in the classroom cultures.

Relational Literacies in Shared Read-Alouds

In the following example, the third-grade community—Third-Grade Champions, as they called themselves—engaged in a read-aloud of One (Otoshi, 2008). Prior to the read-aloud children talked about the meaning of focal words (e.g., bullying, bystander, upstander, victim), often disagreeing with one another, voicing uncertainty, and using
nonverbal signals to indicate they had the same thought, which they referred to emphatically as “brain matches.” Children situated themselves as individually and collectively capable of engaging with the text. Aligned to restorative justice, the work prioritized being relationally in a community together, though in this case also incorporated being in community with the text and characters. As Ms. Kelly read, children demonstrated emotional responses and being-in and being-with the text (e.g., gasping at events in the text, showing brain matches to the character’s actions, speaking back—“no!”, “that’s mean!”). Interjecting, Lamar paused the read-aloud to interact with the characters and each other:¹

**Lamar:** I have a question for the other colors [the characters in the text].

**Ms. Kelly:** You have a question for them, like readers’ theater style?

**Lamar:** [nods] Like I want to know if they are going to stand up too.

**Multiple children:** [rapid indication of brain-match signal] Me too!

**Kelesy:** That was my question. They should, because, because it is mean of red, and everyone should be nice.

**Lamar:** [nods]

**Easton:** I would do it. I would stand up.

**Faith:** I don’t know if they will. They *should* be friends.

**Samir:** I think they are going to stand up so they can’t bully them. Band together.

**Kelesy:** But when I go to after-school people are mean. . . . Like they say things and make it so they leave people out. When they are doing things they will play . . . and . . . and they will not have other people and me play. And they say things that are mean and it’s not nice. So, I think someone needs to do something. I try to.

**A few children:** [brain-match signal]

**Ms. Kelly:** [continues reading on in the text]

Children fluidly moved through emotional connections to the text, positioned themselves in response to characters, and bridged relational perspectives to their lives, employing all three dimensions of relational literacy (Lysaker, 2018). For example, children enacted being-in the text, when Lamar paused the story to ask questions of the characters. He was a leader, a director, and a navigator. There was nuance in how he phrased his question, “I want to know if they are going to stand up too,” indicating the agency he envisioned for the characters. Children were immersed in the narrative and were drivers of how they explored concepts and narrative structures. Additionally, children demonstrated being-with the text, in how Faith announced the colors *should* stand up as upstanders, and meaning-making extended from this when Easton boldly positioned himself as being-for when he took up a moral imperative of what he would do if he were
in that situation. Aligned to most read-alouds across the three classrooms, children also comfortably disagreed with one another, as is seen with Easton and Faith, as they debated what should happen in the text and moved between levels of relational understanding. Across classrooms, children embraced disagreement as a way to expand their knowledge. Jordan, a first-grade reader, explained, “We call it respectfully disagreeing because when we disagree, we’re first listening and hearing, then finding our way!” (interview). Across contexts and observations, children frequently built understanding through layered and divergent meaning-making. Layered meaning in this example is connected to their dialogic talk about the text and is connected and integrated with experiences in their own lives.

**Relational Literacies in Readers’ Responses**

In the example above, Kelesy shared a narrative of her experiences where a moral imperative was not met. Kelesy, who given the time she spent one on one and in small groups with specialists outside of the classroom, was often separated from children in the community and continued to face these feelings of isolation in the after-school program. She entered the conversation through relational literacies and belonging with her peers. Narratives such as Kelesy’s occurred often, adding to the textual meaning-making and relationally extending from the read aloud to expose harms in their own lives. Aligned with proactive views of restorative justice, Kelesy’s narrative allowed for a “culture of connectivity” (Davis, 2019, p. 25). Although children did not verbally respond to Kelesy, they validated her narrative and experience, connecting through I-thou responses using eye contact, nodding, and empathetic facial expressions. This excerpt does not end with a resolution, but Kelesy created space to surface emotional responses with the text and in their lives.

After the read-aloud, children spent time in response journals thinking about the lessons of the text, puzzling around the idea of “counting” as a person in a community and engaging in being-for the text of their learned moral imperatives to their own lives.²

**Ms. Kelly:** What does it mean when it says to count?

**Tyree:** Like, you in . too.

**Celia and Isabela:** (nod and signal brain match)

**Faith:** You count as a friend.

**Shahla:** You change.

**Justin:** You’re together.

**Ms. Kelly:** We’re going to take time in our readers’ response journal about the characters. Who did you relate to the most? What might have happened if 1 [the first upstander character] hadn’t shown up? What does it mean to count? You can think about these questions when you are using your notebooks. We will come back to this again in the afternoon.
Children brainstormed definitions of what it means to “count” before moving to write. Tyree announced that it was when “you in, too.” The notion of being in was particularly meaningful for this community as they often sat in circles on the carpet or worked in groups together. Being in equated to being included and valued. Faith and Justin built on Tyree’s ideas that counting was being together or counting as friends. Separately, Shahla diverted from this in regard to “changing.” She implicitly connected this to being-with the characters as they changed over time from bystanders to upstanders. Using the general “you” connected her moral imperative of how the characters changed in the text to their own actions.

Children continued conversations in their writing. Kelesy wrote connections to characters in the text (see Table 2), establishing a sense of self and building a complex understanding of the multidimensionality of characters (i.e., that individuals could be bullies and feel bullied at the same time). Her connection to Green and Red highlighted her awareness of her identities (i.e., smart, excluded, not a bully). Relatedly, through Nicole’s meaning-making of the text (see Table 2), she connected to the final scene and saw herself as counting because she plays with others. When asked to share more by a peer, Nicole elaborated, “Like when Kelesy said people are mean, I don’t do that. I ask them to play.” Nicole’s written response extended from Kelesy’s comments during read-aloud, and she took a moral imperative of belonging with peers (Lysaker, 2018). As Nicole did in this example, children often returned to previous conversations to language the worth of personal narratives, experiences, and individuals in the classroom community. There was not an urgency to conclude ideas at the end of a book, because, in each class, they expanded discussions within and across literacy events and days. Children languaged positions with characters and in their lives, establishing their literate belonging as meaning-makers and people.

**Collaborative Talk in Reading Discussions**

Data collected across three classrooms pointed to the importance of collaborative talk as a participation structure in how children engaged as a community with texts. Children engaged in meaning-making by engaging in overlapping talk, frequent turn-and-talks, and nonverbal participation. Collaborative talk also indicated the way that children merged their perspectives, schema, and personal experiences into and onto the texts. This signaled the value of collaborative meaning-making and a blurring between storied and lived narratives. Aligned to restorative perspectives, there was an accountability to the community to share knowledge and hear knowledge from everyone.

In one example, Ms. Ryan stopped reading and asked the children to turn and talk about the text. Ali and Darnell paired up, but at the end of the turn-and-talk, Ms. Ryan noticed Darnell crying. She asked him what happened, and Darnell sobbed, “I didn’t get to hear Ali. I really wanted to hear him.” Children valued the meaning-making of their peers. In first grade, Grayson commented on needing to check with Jacob about a text-to-text connection of a book they had both read, and children frequently jumped in offering answers and serving as resources for one another to respond to and layer talk around generated questions. In each class children positioned themselves as knowledgeable teammates during reading, offering word meanings, adding cultural and historical
Table 2

Kelesy’s and Nicole’s Reading Response Excerpts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kelesy’s entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I relate to green because he is bright (smart)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like red girls and form a clique last year and this year but not a bully</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nicole’s entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes because they want to play and I say yes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

knowledge, or responding to each other’s questions. It became normalized for children to ask others to respond directly to questions during read-alouds. This positioning languaged children into positions of expert and knowledgeable other, serving as models for how others could try on these roles.
Below, I provide an analysis of how children communicated about texts, as individuals and in a collective community. In first grade they prepared for a read-aloud of *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018). Children relaxed in comfortable spots, lounging with pillows cozy and close to one another. Consistent with the other classrooms, as readers they eagerly noticed and named meaning gathered from the cover and made predictions to what the book might be about. In this read-aloud, Liliana brought her own copy to share with the class as part of their learning around books as windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1997).

**Liliana:** So why this book is important to me is that I wanted to share it with you because it’s about something you should always do all of the time and only do it by never giving up, and we know about that. And I’ve only read it once, and I really wanted to read it again with everyone here. And the book was from my grandpa, who works at a school too. And he said this book is like some of my family because I’m half-Mexican.

**Mrs. Lara** [while scribing Liliana’s words]: Okay, I want to be sure that I get all of your words. You started saying it is about something we should do all of the time?

**Reed:** Yeah, and she said you should never give up!

**Mrs. Lara:** [continues to scribe]

**Jordan:** And we’ve read other books like that too.

**Layla:** Like with *Little Leaders*.

**Jacob:** And *Amazing Grace*.

**Reed:** But she also said her grandpa gave her the book and she’s half-Mexican.

**Mrs. Lara:** Okay, thank you for helping me with all of that. Liliana, will you check as we reread what I wrote to make sure we got everything? [rereads chart paper]

**Liliana:** [nods] Yeah! I wanted to share it with everyone.

**Jordan:** You got it! that’s it!!

**Mrs. Lara:** Okay! Let’s keep thinking about never giving up as we read.

Liliana shared why she brought the book related to their exploration of texts as mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990), and named moral imperatives and positioning of and with the text. The learners expected to be heard and seen in the curriculum and by
one another. By affirming her contributions, children languaged the importance and value of her and her words as well as of themselves belonging to the classroom community. For example, Reed said, “Yeah, she said you should never give up!” amplifying Liliana’s talk and affirming her value while holding Mrs. Lara accountable for recording Liliana’s thoughts publicly. Mrs. Lara, and both other teachers, selected many culturally responsive and inclusive texts that provided hospitable spaces for multiple perspectives, ownership, and agency of how the text discussion was enacted. Although both Prosser and Roosevelt served primarily children of color, and Wheelock predominantly white children, children read diverse texts to represent the identities and cultures of children within and beyond all three classrooms.

In this brief discussion, Liliana modeled being-for the text, naming the moral imperative of “never giving up” and “something we should always do.” The class was familiar with these ideas from previous texts they had read and readily made connections. Liliana also recognized her ethnic and cultural background as “half-Mexican” to be-with the characters and revoiced a connection she made with her grandfather about her own family history. She elaborated during the subsequent read-aloud. Mrs. Lara validated and storied Liliana’s connections and relations to the text by scribing them as an anchor to revisit as they read. Children readily engaged, added connections, and ensured that Liliana’s voice was heard.

Active learning in the classrooms emphasized the multifaceted and dialogic nature of interacting with texts, with personal contexts and past experiences (i.e., self-activities and social imagination), and shared and co-constructed realities in the learning community. The vulnerability that individuals enacted in these communities allowed for transformation of self while also privileging what it meant to read and write far beyond the individualized skills and strategies taught. Children bridged storied and lived realities as they applied moral learnings from narratives to their lives (Bertua, 2014; Lysaker, 2018).

Belonging Through Composition

This finding explores how children engaged in doing literacy through composition (Yagelski, 2012) as a means for cementing their literate abilities, self-positioning, and engaging in relations with one another. Although the previous finding also shared examples of writing in response to reading, these themes highlighted writing as a place of accountability, connection, and pride. Children authored texts, their ways of being, and their belonging as writers within and beyond the classroom space. Echoing previous examples, though looking through the lens of composition, there was accountability for the teachers and the community to ensure that the learning was responsive and inclusive of their curiosities, interests, and strengths. Unlike many prescriptive programs, the relational component of literacies were centralized in learning. They also validated and languaged each other as authors with stories to tell. This exploration of doing literacy through composition bridged an emphasis on the social nature of learning and an orientation of “human beingness” (Lysaker, 2018, p. 66) in how children wrote themselves into the community and their ideas and stories into the pages of their texts.

The composition was inclusive but not contained to writers’ workshop and often included writing in response to reading, collaborative and creative writing to express
ideas, and learner-generated writing tasks (e.g., asking for writing options to literacy studio such as creating posters for the school, gratitude notes for peers/teachers, or get-well cards for children out sick) and written goal-setting in a collective community. As restorative justice was foregrounded by teachers, children engaged in relational literacies and languaging through composition by writing for authentic and relational purposes to those in their class, school, and broader community.

**Integrations of Self and Community Through Composing**

Teachers explained in interviews that they designed literacy events to be tools that were “humanizing,” “community-based and collective,” and considered “every person as a whole person.” These notions surfaced through composition where children wrote to demonstrate their agency and who they were. Children fluidly expressed emotions, preferences, religious beliefs and affiliations, and their racial identity (often as represented through skin color though typically involving discussions that expanded much deeper). Children were creators, illustrators, and authors able to determine how they, and the characters they created, were perceived in writing.

Often, children created collective compositions. For example, kindergarteners composed posters advocating for school clean-up, first graders created surveys to learn more about their peers, and third graders posted reminders for the campus community to prevent unnecessary conflict with staff and children in the cafeteria. These publications provided opportunities for students as authors to design their environment. Writing meant not only sounding out words and using sight words and peer tools, but also establishing a purpose that framed their vision of the classroom and school community. As Ms. Kelly elaborated, “There’s no agency without high self-expectations. If you know you deserve something better and expect something better from people around you, you work together and ask for it” (interview). Drawing on Ms. Kelly’s beliefs, third graders sedimented ownership of purpose writing by frequently requesting additional opportunities to compose letters, posters, or write together. In kindergarten and first grade, children often cheered when the writers’ workshop began and explained they liked it because they could “write anything!” while sharing their stories and feelings.

Writers recognized the value of their own identities in their writing and in composing their own relevant and purposeful texts in the following example:

**Mrs. Lara:** When we are writing stories in our journals, I am noticing that some people are writing stories that are real, and other people are writing stories that are made up, or fiction. And I noticed something about our crayons that doesn’t add up in either of these stories and doesn’t make sense. As you are writing your stories, you have been using these crayon boxes [shows traditional crayons]. I decided to buy more colors. Because look around you. There is not one person in this room that has the same skin color. I would not use the same colors for me, or Mr. Lara, or my two [biracial] daughters. And we want to have choices that make our stories feel real.

**Children:** [chime in while looking at their arms] Mine’s like peachy! Or like coffee color! Mine’s like some of those mixed together! I’m blonde.
Mrs. Lara: These are called people colors and will help us focus on details as writers. And you’re right, we can mix them because we are all different and not all the people colors are in here [gestures to the box].

Jordan: And like everyone has different colors.

[discussion continues]

Jacob: What if you want to draw a friend and their skin color, but you don’t know which one?

Mrs. Lara: What can we do? What should we do as writers?

Zayn: We could ask someone.

Mrs. Lara: So, we could ask someone what they prefer?

Jordan: Yeah! Like I know mine is different from my best friend, Reed! Mine’s brown!

Owen: And I could tell them which one I use and show them.

The conversation continued and children excitedly explained how they would draw themselves and their peers. Throughout this planning event, Mrs. Lara presented tools to children as people and writers to represent themselves and be seen authentically in their texts. Relationally, children demonstrated being-in their experiences as authors fully engaged in decision-making. Jacob indicated his comfortability in posing his question to the group of being-for one another to authentically represent their preferences and representation. Being-for texts in this regard was a representation and moral imperative as authors to honor the identities of themselves and one another. The children also recognized the value of being-with one another and their texts by actively connecting their writing to reality, for example, when Jordan elaborated, “Yeah! Like I know mine is different from my best friend, Reed! Mine’s brown!” Here he languaged himself and one dimension of his racial identity to the class as well as his skill and decision making as an author and in relation to Reed. Mrs. Lara languaged the class as writers and problem-solvers in a shared community by revoicing Jacob’s question with the pronoun “we.” The children echoed this collective ownership; they recognized the power and knowledge of working with and honoring the decisions of individuals in their writing community.

Relational Literacies in Writing Communities

This subtheme examines how children languaged and positioned each other as writers and authors in a collective space. The teachers structured opportunities for children to learn from one another as writers. In third-grade Laila explained peer coaching, for example, meant “you help someone with their work, and they help you with yours, and you both get better.” Across class communities, children embraced the multidirectional work of growing together through compositions. Kindergarteners readily referred to this as co-authoring and “learn[ing] from writers” in their class. Relation-
ally, children engaged with text creations, building their own capacities by identifying and learning from the strengths of their peers. Children languaged a sense of belonging through experiences of doing literacy. During writing children made comments on one another’s strengths, such as when Leigh reflected, “If Javi was here it would be really helpful because he’s really good at the main idea.” These statements emphasized that children viewed their peers as capable writers. Ms. Ryan reflected that children came to understand that “we’re part of something bigger and as big as the collective” (interview). Their composition provided space to be with peers in a community and see themselves as important writers and contributors.

Composition provided an opportunity to engage relationally as members of a responsible and accountable community. In connection to restorative perspectives, children languaged their humanity: by believing in the strengths of themselves and others, they too were becoming more human (Vaandering, 2016). In a discussion during a unit on Spooky Stories in Kindergarten, children languaged each other through relational ways of being.

Zara: Ms. Ryan! Ms. Ryan! We are done and Keyla was so great. Her story was so spooky scary as a writer. Like Creepy Carrots! I was like, Oh! [covers mouth and jumps back] the whole time!

Ms. Ryan: So, she was really thinking about reading her story in a way that scared the reader?

Zara: Oh yeah. Oh. Yeah!

Ms. Ryan: Jenna, what did you notice?

Zara: Well, like she was holding her book and then flipping it to scare me! Oh! [jumps up and down]

Ms. Ryan: I’m noticing that you’re noticing all of the things she did as a writer and reader today. I think we should ask a question, and really ask Keyla. Should she share her work at the end of the writer’s workshop?

Zara: YES! YES! YES! [jumps up and down while shouting]

Ms. Ryan: Okay, Keyla, what do you think?

Keyla: [smiles] Yeah.

When Zara announced Keyla’s successes as a writer, she languaged Keyla and her strengths by equating her work to a published author and text. In turn, Ms. Ryan centered both Jenna and Keyla as important members of the community by noticing and reflecting on their shared experiences. Zara retold her engagement and emotional responses to Keyla’s story depicting how she enacted being-in the text. The exchange referenced that children saw one another, through their literacy practices and events, as “worthy and relational” (Vaandering, 2016, p. 63). Convening on the carpet later, Ms. Ryan revoiced the conversation. Keyla then performed her spooky story, and Zara proudly beamed in the
front row, nodding and dutifully responding to the content of the story. Children followed her lead and their own embodied reactions of being-in the text, gasping, scooting back as Keyla revealed the pages, and hugging each other as if for protection from the story. The lived world embraced emotional responses to texts, and the storied world drew on Keyla’s creative abilities to be an author. Although the children did not discuss being-for or being-in the texts in terms of their relation or moral imperatives, they enacted these on a broader scale in how they bridged meaning-making and verbally and nonverbally committed to a moral imperative of the story of their classroom—seeing each other as capable, creative, and innovative authors and people.

**Discussion**

Equity issues manifest in early elementary learning through restrictive literacies and controlling discipline practices that disproportionately impact Black children, Indigenous children, and children of color. Privileging literacies as a social practice, recognizing the agency of young children, and enacting restorative justice in schools have been ways to address intersectional inequities in schools. Exploring early elementary classroom communities committed to restorative justice allowed for an analysis of the relational ways they engaged in reading and writing. Scholarship has highlighted the dynamism of social and co-constructed literacy learning (e.g., Brownell, 2017; Dyson, 2013, 2018, 2020) and how young children have tremendous capacities to make meaning through relations with texts and themselves (i.e., Lysaker, 2006). Viewing relational literacy practices alongside restorative justice (Winn, 2018b) illuminated how children and teachers engaged side by side to ensure they were seen, heard, and valued through meaning-making.

The events described in this study were everyday occurrences in early elementary classrooms. Many early elementary classrooms include read-alouds and choice writing in the day. However, through a relational literacy perspective, analysis demonstrated how children attached to texts through being-in, being-with, and being-for, spanning relational domains and expansive comprehension practices. In theory, relational literacies center “human beingness” as the core of reading and writing, and prioritize “experiencing the relatingness that forms who we are and how we understand ourselves and others, both with and within texts, as well as outside of, and because of, texts” (Lysaker, 2018, p. 81). Through extended read-alouds and dialogic discussions, children had opportunities as leaders, facilitators, and meaning-makers—bridging texts to their lives and identities. In composition, children established themselves as whole people through writing and were positioned alongside published authors. Literacy practices originated with texts—read-alouds and children’s compositions—but relationally those practices extended beyond the experience and production of literacies to who the children were as people with the texts, with each other, and with themselves. Children used literacies to validate, value, and honor themselves and their peers in classrooms.

The classroom communities were unique. In kindergarten and third grade, the relational literacies spoke against the harmful practices in schools serving Black children, Indigenous children, and children of color and the alternative ways of being through literacy that they co-created together. The focus was on the children, their creativity, and their abilities to learn with and for each other. Although the first-grade community served primarily children who identified as White, their literacies explored the diversity of experi-
ence and racial identities in their classrooms. Relational literacies validated children who, in that White-dominated space, might have traditionally been pushed to the periphery and addressed larger endemics in education of surveillance and control. In doing so, children affirmed their identities through literacy events and learned about themselves, their peers, and their worlds. Through languaging and relational literacy practices, everyday events became remarkable sites of community, belonging, and literacy knowledge. Through relational learning, a sense of belonging allowed children to take risks in their learning (e.g., Comber, 2015; Comber & Woods, 2018; Worthy et al., 2012). Belonging was a “constant negotiation” and interplay of each individual in a collective community (Comber et al., 2017, p. 115). Belonging ensured children and teachers were embraced fully in the contexts of the community, through learning discourses (Holyoke, 2021) and the curricula itself.

Centering values such as the worth of all people, equity, and justice, teachers facilitated literacy learning through a focus on communal and collective meaning-making and knowledge. Children blurred their lived realities, the narrative storied worlds, and moral imperatives, as we saw when the children supported Liliana in her framing of *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018). Aligned with previous scholarship, Liliana engaged in self-positioning as a reader (Lysaker, 2018) through her response to and recontextualization of herself in and with the text. Extending her work and self-positioning, children validated and echoed her sentiments, and identities, and amplified her reality and positioning in their community. Layered talk, respectful disagreements, and seeing reading as a way to stay together provided relational skills supporting meaning-making and literacy ownership alongside being in a community as learners. Aligned to their core values, children and teachers emphasized people and their knowledge as worthy and valuable. Children and teachers in these early elementary classrooms committed to relational views of literacy and a commitment to restorative justice; together, these offered attention not only to skills and strategies but to how we relate to each other and with texts daily in a collaborative community.

Relational literacy engagement was about children being seen through their storied contributions and their literate abilities. In writing, children validated their own and others’ literacies through relations, dialogue, and languaging. When discussing people crayons, children noted the importance of “mak[ing] our stories feel real,” demonstrating an understanding that honored their friend’s identities and representation. Zayn posed a solution to “ask someone [what color they prefer],” indicating the collective understanding that each child’s voice and identity mattered. Engaging in a relational mindset about learning and teaching required trust and flexibility to extend specific learning blocks of the day and prioritize learning that saw connections, personal meaning-making, and layered talk as paths for literacy learning. It was not acceptable in these rooms for only some children to have access to high-quality literacy learning. Children agentically embraced their roles as designers to embrace culturally relevant texts making them personally meaningful. As writers, children wrote their identities and belonging through relational perspectives in their texts. Each individual was seen not only as valued in the classroom, but also needed for the learning and expansion of collective knowledge.

This study evolved from the premise that restorative justice manifests in schools not only in relation to discipline but as a way of being connected to both academic and relational literacies (Winn et al., 2019). Understanding how children do literacy with this lens shifts away from what individuals achieve and exposes the collective work of
moving toward equity and justice. The impact of literacy learning is made from being immersed in texts, working responsively together, and being and becoming within a community. Literacy is not about getting it right, but instead about being present, engaged, and involved with peers, with texts, and with lived narratives. If we look at literacy, relationships, and languaging as always working together (Beauchemin, 2019), we can see “we’re part of something bigger and as big as the collective” (Ms. Ryan).

Implications

This study has implications for teachers interested in a framework of relational, restorative literacies. Early elementary teachers might embrace the stance of facilitator and actively position children as designers of the learning community. Book discussions and composing can be spaces for immersion, engagement in, with, and for texts, and with each other to expand the worlds we inhabit. Teachers can use the examples to imagine new ways to guide children’s connections as opportunities to make meaning relationally with texts and others and seek out literacy learning that validates each child and their knowledge. These implications were reinforced by teachers in this study in interviews, as they made recommendations for engaging with relational literacies and restorative justice in literacy teaching. They spoke to the value of transparency and of embracing the tensions and humanizing moments where learners see themselves and each other through their literacy learning.

For decision-makers, this study provides a view of comprehending and composing that becomes more human. We are forced to see not only the product or outcome of learning but the brilliance in how young learners establish and expand their identities. It demands urgent recognition of the time needed to engage in authentic dialogic discourse. Teachers and children must be given flexibility and autonomy to make things right instead of being right (Winn, 2018b) about their literacy learning that is specific to each classroom community. Supporting flexible scheduling for teachers and trusting their capacities to be responsive allows the classroom community to organically expand learning together. Professional communities where teachers innovate and provide high-quality learning as drawn from children’s knowledge require careful thought and leadership. Leaders must prioritize literacy practices that build a strong sense of self, advocacy, ownership, and empathy toward others within and beyond texts.

The implications of this study for young learners mean seeing them, their abilities, vulnerabilities, tensions, curiosities, and emotional responses as invaluable to designing their own learning. In many schools, young children are seen as less than or needing heavily scaffolded teacher direction. However, in these rooms, we follow the children to see the power of their agency, their ability to know what they need, how they will reach those goals, and the innovations of building meaning together. As researchers continue learning from powerful imaginations that young learners engage with in their meaning-making, we can ask questions not of what is in schools, but what could be. Being in a community alongside young learners and amplifying their capacities to design provoking learning requires building trust and relationships. Understanding how teachers take up strong instruction and weave it with restorative justice demands thoughtful listening with and alongside teachers and young children. As we focus on examining relational literacies alongside other forms of reading knowledge, it is critical to explore the context and knowledge that happens and is developed within a community.
About the Author

Erica Holyoke is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver in responsive literacy education, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate literacy methods courses. Her research centers on equitable and inclusive teaching through relational literacies in elementary school and preservice teacher preparation. She also explores enactments of activism and environmental justice in interdisciplinary learning.

References


1 The excerpts are written in play script format for ease of readability. Participant names are bolded, indicating their verbal and nonverbal participation. Nonverbal and gestural communication are in brackets [ ], and pauses are noted (.) with a period, with each period signaling a second. The punctuation is added to mimic the spoken discourse of the participants. When I add additional words/context, it is indicated with square brackets [ ] for context only.

2 In the text, One (Otoshi, 2008), the colors/numbers navigate bullying through the lens of the bully, victim, and bystanders. In the end the characters shout, “Everyone counts.”