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Castle"ing" Whiteness: White Youth and the Racial Imagination

Erin T. Miller, Samuel J. Tanner, & Tommie E. Murray

Abstract: This essay details what we, three White teacher-researchers, learned about how one class of fourth grade children interacted with signs such as castles, forts, and walls through a three-day improvisational workshop aimed at fostering critical literacy skills. Theories and methods of improvisational theatre offer a distinct way to approach critical literacy, especially the racialization of particular signs and symbols. Although we do not explicitly take up race with the children in our study, our work contributes to the broader field of critical Whiteness studies because we conceptualize forts, castles, and walls as symbols of racial power in the imagination. Castles, forts, and walls are pervasive signs for children in the United States and, subsequently, inform the ways children imagine themselves in social hierarchies prevalent in the U.S. Using qualitative methodologies, we collected and analyzed field notes, interviews, and audio/video recordings of the workshop to construct patterns in our data. We present findings of how the children interacted specifically to one symbol at length - the castle - because of its salience in the data. Although our findings are only tentative due the short duration of the study, we believe they will generate new insights for future research in critical literacy.

Keywords: Whiteness, pedagogy, improv, castles, elementary school



Erin T. Miller is an Assistant Professor of language and diversity in the Department of Reading and Elementary Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research interests include investigations of racial identity with young White children and White women. Her work is published in journals such as *The Urban Review*, *Ethnography and Education* and *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*.



Sam Tanner is an Assistant Professor of literacy education in The Pennsylvania State University system. He taught high school English and drama for fifteen years. His research investigates democratic education, especially issues of race and Whiteness and is published in journals such as *The Journal of Literacy Research*, *Curriculum and Pedagogy Journal*, and *English Journal*. Sam is a creative writer and author of two memoirs.



Tommie Murray is the Assistant Principal of Avonworth Primary Center and Elementary Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Kindergarten and Elementary Education at Pennsylvania State University. She taught in the Bellwood-Antis School District for ten years while serving on the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Student Assistance Program committees. She holds a Masters of Education in Educational Leadership.

Introduction¹

“Imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into another. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming”
(Morrison, 1992, p. 4).

This essay details what we learned about how one class of Lewis Woods Elementary² fourth graders interacted with signs such as castles, forts, and walls through a three-day improvisational workshop aimed at fostering critical literacy skills. Our decision to locate our study at Lewis Woods Elementary was, in part, because of the vivid ways children are engaged in the imaginary as part of the curriculum at the school. For example, there is a fort near the school that was originally built in 1778 and was occupied by White European-American settlers until 1780. In 1975, the fort was reconstructed, and since then, students at Lewis Woods – most of whom are White – have visited this fort to learn about colonial life. Until recently, one of the activities they participated in while visiting was a simulation of an attack by Indigenous Peoples. During *Flee to the Fort*, students ran across an open field to seek shelter. Adults told the children to imagine that hostile Native Americans were chasing them and they needed to get behind the walls of the fort to be safe. In this imaginary game, the children were explicitly taught that the walls of the fort would keep them safe from the danger of a racialized Other.

If we apply Toni Morrison’s (1992) ideas about the imaginary that introduced this essay to the *Flee to the Fort* ritual, we can see it is possible that when children participate in such imaginary work, they are not just pretending to be someone they are not.

They are becoming who they are. Further, we believe that in the unique social landscape of America, when one imagines a story about forts —or other fortifications such as castles and walls—one is telling a story about power. And, in the unique social landscape of America, a story about power leads to a story about race. Although we do not explicitly take up race with the children in our study, our work contributes to the broader field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) because we conceptualize forts, castles, and walls as symbols of racial power in the imagination (Tanner & Miller, 2018). As teacher-researchers of language and literacy, we believe that pedagogy in literacy should “include the analysis, interpretation, critique ... of signs” (Lewis, Pyscher, & Stutelberg, 2014, p. 23). Castles, forts, and walls are prevalent signs for children in the U.S. They inform the ways that children imagine themselves in the social hierarchies that are prevalent in the U.S.

Consider:

- Castles are the backdrop for much literature and popular culture, providing a landscape for children to engage in the imaginary that connects them to fortifications from Western Europe. For example, the Cinderella Castle represents an American icon, Walt Disney, who was inspired by the Alcazar Castle of Spain. Much less widely known is that the Alcazar Castle was once home to Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II who are famously known for supporting and financing the voyages of Columbus, leading to the birth of Western European imperialism.

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that

correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

² This is a pseudonym.

- Current public discourse evokes the idea that a wall between Mexico and the United States will provide safety and security from Brown skinned Others who live south of this proposed wall.

These examples of how castles, forts, and walls are evoked in the imaginary are important when considering critical literacy, because they involve ways people make meaning of signs and symbols. Lewis et al. (2014) argued, “Signs are not comprised only of the mediating texts,” but they also “include the constructs—such as race and gender—that mediate life” (p. 23). European castles and their successors, American forts, as well as walls, can be read as signs that are embedded with racial meaning because of their political and historical role in the subjugation of people of Color. Castles (and later forts) were used to enforce a White supremacist agenda in which slaves and Indigenous peoples were exploited to serve global European (and later American) interests and expansion. The castle continues to exist as a sign of racial power in the U.S. imagination. For example, Cinderella’s castle, arguably one of the most recognizable and culturally prevalent signs of U.S. childhood, is representative of beauty, power, and wealth as a White domain (Picker, 2002). Lewis et al. (2014) warned that signs are “socially, culturally, and ideologically motivated,” and meaning is carried through signs by way of “interactional dynamics and textual practices” (p. 23). In other words, children absorb the meanings imbued in signs through interacting with them. Developing an understanding of the nature of power embedded in signs and symbols, to us, is central to developing critical literacy, and although the relationship of those signs and symbols to race and racism may be nuanced for children, our interpretations are informed by a racial lens nonetheless because of our positions as researchers who forefront issues related to racial equity in education. In this study, we wanted to know:

1. What can be inferred about power by examining how children interact with signs and symbols—castles, forts and walls—in the imaginary?
2. How can teachers and researchers use critical literacy to disrupt socially constructed meanings of implied power in symbols of castles, forts and walls?
3. How does improvisation, as pedagogy, inform the field of critical literacy?

We present findings specific to one symbol at length—the castle—because of its salience to the research study described here. Our findings are organized to encourage consideration of how the participants used the symbol of the castle to 1) imagine the inside of power, 2) imagine the outside of power, and 3) reflect introspectively on their place in power structures. While our findings are only tentative due to the short duration of the study, we believe they will generate new insights for future research in critical literacy.

Critical Literacy and Critical Literacy Pedagogy

We leaned on foundational ideas derived from the field of critical literacy and critical literacy pedagogy to frame our theoretical lens. In a primer on the evolution of critical literacy, Luke (2012) situated critical literacy under the broad project of critical pedagogies (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Shor & Freire, 1987). Critical pedagogies aim to teach students to critique the world as it is commonly portrayed in a multitude of texts, media, and literature. The overarching goal in such critiques is an analysis of systems of oppression, such as racism, capitalism and colonialism. Through “dialogic exchange,” (Luke, p. 7) learners are taught to question hegemonic understandings of class, race, and gender. Critical literacy, then, is an extension of critical pedagogy that fosters the “capacity to use

texts to analyze social fields and their systems of exchange – with an eye to transforming social relations and material conditions” (Luke, p. 9).

Despite some ambiguity and variation on what exactly constitutes critical literacy in classroom practice (Comer & Simpson, 2001), we draw on four commonly accepted assumptions outlined by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) as a pedagogical framework: a) critical literacy disrupts commonplace understandings, b) critical literacy interrogates multiple viewpoints, c) critical literacy focuses on social and political issues, and d) critical literacy promotes social justice through action. Most commonly, these aspects of critical literacy tend to be enacted in classrooms around literature studies. For example, Swach (2001) worked with 11th grade students to critically examine a canonical text, *The Great Gatsby*. His students generated their own discussion questions using Bloom’s higher order thinking domains, developed prompts evoking multiple perspectives around social issues explored in the book such as economic wealth/poverty and class-based ideologies, and they engaged as a community to conduct further research on social issues about which they educated one another. Critical literacy practices in elementary classrooms

have included pedagogies organized around reader’s theater, diary entries, and writing letters to construct and deconstruct multi-cultural texts and take action to participate in social reforms (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). Providing a useful framework for critical text analysis, Comer and Simpson (2001) recommended that educators direct readers to look at what is taken for granted in texts and propose a set of guiding questions to lead analyses (see Table 1).

Despite traditional foci on text analysis in literature, critical literacy is an approach to making unbalanced power relations visible beyond books. In offering a different pedagogical example of learning critical literacy than through books alone, Bell (2009) advocated using popular films to teach skill-sets associated with critical literacy. Bell found that “popular films can be powerful bridging devices between everyday experiences and critically meaningful understandings of these experiences” (p. 231). In another pedagogical approach, Luke (2012) suggested studying local communities as one way to begin to develop skill sets in criticality. In our work, we turn to the practice of theatrical improvisation pedagogy as a rich way to foster a community with the capacity to facilitate a critical analysis of power.

Table 1

Guiding Questions to Critically Examine Texts

- What (or whose) view of the world, or kinds of behaviors are presented as normal by the text?
- Why is the text written that way? How else could it have been written?
- What assumptions does the text make about age, gender, and culture (including the age, gender and culture of its readers)?
- Who is silenced/heard here?
- Whose interests might best be served by the text?
- What ideological positions can you identify?
- What are the possible readings of this situation/event/character? How did you get to that reading?
- What moral or political position does a reading support? How do particular cultural and social context make particular readings available? (e.g., who could you not say that to?) How might it be challenged?

Improvisational Pedagogy

We approach improvisation as a critical response to standardized pedagogy that leaves little room for uncertainty, flexibility, and nuance in learning. Specifically, we see improvisation as a response to the ways in which design discourses have shaped learning—especially learning about social justice, race, and Whiteness—as a domain of activity that is directed toward entirely known endpoints and is therefore fundamentally non-emergent (see Boldt, Lewis, & Leander, 2015 for examples of how learning can be more generative when it is open to emergence).

Sociocultural theorists such as Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001) and Lave and Wenger (1991) have written at length about the social nature of improvisation and emergence in literacy and social practices. Holland et al. (2001) described improvisations as “the impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as habitus, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response” (p. 18). In fact, the artifice of both short and long form theatrical improvisation demands that participants *learn* how to respond when they have no set response, and, from this process, unexpected text emerges. The concept of “yes, and” is drawn from theatrical improvisation and teaches participants to affirm the affective, intellectual, and embodied offerings of others. Simply put, people learn how to accept and build onto whatever is put forward in a particular time and space. This doesn't mean they always agree with that offering, but they are challenged to work with it in a generative, practical way.

“In our work, we turn to the practice of theatrical improvisation pedagogy as an especially rich way to foster a community with the capacity to facilitate a critical analysis of power.”

We believe that critical educators have not yet discovered an agreed upon set of responses in teaching and learning contexts that inherently address issues of power. Heble and Caines (2015), Nachmanovich (1991), and Sawyer (2011) have documented and theorized the intellectual and practical traditions of improvisation and its subsequent relevancy to a variety of academic fields. Still, we are interested in how improvisation can be used to contribute to second-wave critical Whiteness studies.

Second Wave Critical Whiteness Studies

Moving away from the stronghold of White privilege pedagogy (McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre; 1997), current research in Critical Whiteness Studies attempts to better address the complexities of White identifications (Jupp, 2013; Jupp & Slattery, 2012; Lowenstein, 2009), rather than over-rely on individual categorizations of White people as resistant, stable, and race-evasive. This shift represents an important transfer, or wave (Jupp, 2013; Jupp, Berry & Lensmire, 2016; Lensmire, 2008; Tanner, 2018) in the literature because Whiteness is not monolithic. Pigeonholing White people in essentializing ways does little to alter the racist frameworks that structure society. In addition, Whiteness is both constructed and resisted in particular contexts and related to education, within particular pedagogies (Berchini, 2016) as a *process* of becoming that is not always steady or singularly defined (Jupp 2013; Lensmire, 2017; Mason, 2016; Miller, 2017; Shim, 2018). Critical Whiteness Studies *de jure* wrestle with the ways White people “transgress” (Crowley, 2016, p. 1019) commonly espoused paradigms of racialized knowledge (for example, color blindness) to work toward anti-

racism. Boucher (2016) explained that these moves can be interpreted as attempts to work in solidarity with people of Color. Further, these transgressions are not necessarily dramatic, abrupt actions. Rather, they are comprised of a long process of small steps with an attention to the ways in which racial consciousness is formed “as part of a larger life habitus of interaction with racialized others rather than through abrupt consciousness raising events or critical consciousness conversations” (Jupp et al. 2016, p. 1170). Mason (2016), drawing on Britzman (2000), described a kind of destructive learning that occurs as White people make sense of their experiences (past, present and future) as White people.

In our work here, we aim to address recommendations for research with an explicit focus on the pedagogical contexts (Berchini, 2016; Lensmire, 2017; Raible & Irizarry, 2007; Tanner, 2018) within which racialized stories are told in classrooms. Jupp (2013) and Jupp et al. (2016) have encouraged better understandings of “context, detail, complexity and nuance” (p. 1169) when employing Whiteness studies. We took up these pedagogies under the assumption there would be “intricate missteps and advancements that accompany teaching and learning about race, Whiteness and White identity” (p. 1177). Improvisation facilitates the creation of local community and, in this way, honors the call second-wave CWS makes for a focus on nuance and diversity across different contexts as we imagine critical literacy pedagogy. Improvisation never positions participants as monolithically anything, and instead assumes complexity in what people are and how they contribute to the group.

Method

Under the umbrella of qualitative methodology, our study draws from the rich methodological traditions

of ethnography with its reliance on participant observations as a primary data collection tool, and an explicit attention to culture as a framing lens. Our work is also about advocacy through teacher-research (see Lensmire, 1994). Drawing on central tenets of critical ethnography outlined by Creswell (2007), without claiming an ethnographic study, we hold a value-laden orientation toward our research, and actively seek to challenge the status quo, particularly concerning the hegemonic racial attitudes among White youth.

As is the case in any critical study, our position as researchers matters. Positionality is important in all research, but especially true for White critical researchers studying Whiteness, because of the inherent problems with attempting to identify, objectify, and speak for other White people as we qualify their process of becoming raced. The fact that our participants were nine- and ten-year-olds further jeopardizes the trustworthiness of our story because of the power dynamics of adult-children relationships. And, an even further complicating concern related to power differentials in our research design comes from the fact that our research took place in a school setting, a context that typically assumes adult power and control. As an attempt to address these complexities head-on, we use several strategies.

First, we foreground our identities as researchers. As Gordon (2005) explained, “Researcher identity is part and parcel of any investigation (whether or not it is recognized) and knowledge of it through reflexivity and disclosure makes qualitative work richer and more complex for researcher and reader” (p. 280). Our roles as White teacher-researchers interpreting Whiteness can potentially be laden with pitfalls that Gordon outlines as logics, and they include: color-blindness, selective attribution, avoidance, containment and White-washing. These strategies pivot researchers away from race and

racism, a dangerous move that would undermine the criticality of our work as Whiteness scholars.

But it also is important to note that our identities as White people are not static or monolithic and, although we do share a racial identification with the fourth graders and each other, we possess a multitude of identifications that are not shared with those of the students and that distinguish us as researchers from one another. Thus, the ways our collective identities as White researchers overlap with other identifications such as class, gender, job positions related to the research (i.e., teacher, university professor), and ideology are considered below. We continually allowed these identifications to haunt our interpretations of our data, and the retelling of the stories we share here. Our reflexivity was coupled with the careful way we used questioning techniques to ask the children to verify or contradict our understandings.

Furthermore, it is important to note that we facilitated improvisation as pedagogy to create a generative, expressive place to work out and work through issues of power. This feature is important: rather than a controlled or scripted design, we opened the space for the children to playfully imagine worlds where rules could be bent, rearranged, and/or reconstituted. In designing pedagogy that trusted our participants' lead, we relinquished some control over the data generation. Finally, we constantly negotiated and re-negotiated meanings of the data as a research team, which added a level of rigor to our methodology. Although it would be impossible for any of these strategies to completely eliminate our subjectivity, we believe we at least partially accounted for it in our work.

Researchers

Erin has studied the construction of White identities among youth for nearly ten years and is committed to an approach to Critical Whiteness Studies that accounts for the ways White children become White. She is a middle-aged, middle-class White woman who was raised in a rural area in the Southern United States. Sam theorizes improvisational pedagogy. His conceptualization grows out of nearly fifteen years of experience as both a high school English and drama teacher, as well as a director of long form improv. He is middle-aged and was raised in an urban area in the Midwest. Tommie, a middle-aged White woman, has been working on issues of social justice in her fourth-grade classrooms for over ten years in central Pennsylvania.

Study Context: Lewis Woods Elementary

Lewis Woods Elementary is located in Driftwood, Pennsylvania³. Driftwood is a rural community of nearly 2,000 people in central Pennsylvania. 97.7% of the population self-identified as White in 2015 (citydata.com). The estimated median income in 2015 was below the state average at \$48,583 with the majority of the residents working in manufacturing, retail, construction, and warehousing. The context of the study is important because we not only use race as a factor to analyze our data, but we also complicate our interpretations by considering how children from a rural, working-class area during the time of a divisive presidential election matters in our racial analysis as well.

³ Driftwood, PA is a pseudonym

The Improvisational Workshop

The improvisational workshop happened over the course of three days for two hours each afternoon⁴. Sam's experience directing long-form improvisation with high school students informed the design of the workshop, but all three teacher-researchers facilitated various aspects. Table 2 describes the components of the workshop and their purpose toward the workshop goals. We describe the sequence of events that occurred in the workshop in our description of our audit trail below.

Participant Observation

We used participant observation as our primary source of data collection. As researchers, we took part in the activities in each of the workshops, taking turns leading various segments and participating in the segments when we were not leading. As the regular teacher of the class for three months before the workshop, Tommie was a key "gatekeeper" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 180) of the research, and moved in and out of the teacher/researcher role to direct the students in particular ways as needed. The strengths of using participant observation methods were the insight we gained from paying detailed attention to context, relationships, and behaviors as they manifested among the participants. Our main goal was to understand the social world from the participants' perceptions, and an important aspect of our data collection was to interact informally with the students during the workshop and use everyday conversation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) as an interviewing technique during the workshops. Since participant observation lends itself to subjectivity because it relies on the perspectives and the memory of the researcher, we each agreed to make a

conscious effort to focus on particular aspects of the workshop for our most intense observations and agreed to write both descriptive and reflective field notes. Our field notes captured the details of what occurred using thick descriptions (Carspecken & Apple, 1992) of specific events and conversations. As reflective, we recorded our assumptions, initial impressions, and ideas (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Other Data Sources

While our participant observation field notes were our primary and most systematically collected data, we also videotaped the workshops with Tommie's digital tablet. We collected all student artifacts that were generated during the workshop and uploaded those to a shared Google Drive folder. Our most valuable sources of data, beyond our field notes, were the reflection/debriefing meetings that we held after each day of the workshop where we looked through artifact data and described to one another what we noticed and what we wondered. These meetings were audiotaped and transcribed and uploaded to our Google Drive folder. The transcriptions were instrumental in helping us probe more deeply into initial findings as the workshop unfolded.

Data Analysis

To organize the data we collected each day, we created an audit trail (see Vasquez, 2014) that showcased sample artifacts and pictures we took of the events of the workshop (see Figure 1).

This visual display of our data in chronological order helped us establish a sense of how the children negotiated meanings during the workshop. Vasquez (2014) has found that audit trails can be useful tools

⁴ The study received IRB approval on 8/12/16. Prior to the workshop, Tommie acquired signed permission forms from families of the children to participate in all aspects

of the workshop and to be videotaped. 26/28 of the families of the students in Tommie's class agreed to allow their child to participate in the study.

Table 2

Components of the Workshop and their Purpose Toward the Workshop Goals

Activity	Description	Purpose
Decoding Sign and Symbols	Children evaluated images such as flags, buildings, walls, etc. by ranking them in terms of how powerful they were.	Children practice analyzing signs and symbols in relation to power, in order to evaluate the final image of the castle.
Improv warm-ups	Children participated in a variety of improv exercises that involved breathing, creating and expressing characters, and working together to create theatrical moments.	Children were introduced to basic elements of theatrical improvisation in order to learn how to improvise with the sign of the castle.
Collaborative storytelling	Children participated in collaborative storytelling using the improvisation ethos of “yes, and” to drive narratives forward. Each participant practiced agreeing with and adding onto a collective story that was told in a circle.	Children engaged in improvisational storytelling prompted by the suggestion of a castle, in order to explore how they imagined the sign of the castle.
Image theatre	Children created frozen theatrical scenes that were inspired by suggestions. Each participant was asked to play a fictional character in these dramatic moments.	Children used image theatre to create scenes prompted by the suggestion of a castle, in order to explore how they imagined the sign of the castle.
Final discussion	Children drew pictures, wrote reflections, and then sat in a circle on the carpet to discuss the three-day workshop. Author 3 facilitated a discussion about castles, power, and race.	Children reflected on the ways they embodied power in relationship to the castle through literacy practices such as journaling, drawing, and discussion.

for teachers, children, and researchers as a way to reread, analyze, and re-consider topics and issues.

Probing more deeply after the workshop was over, we collected, transcribed, and uploaded data to our Google Drive folder. Using a constant comparison approach (see Grbich, 2004), we wrote codes and memos in the margins using comment boxes as a safe place to “open up the present and past and to create alternative futures” (Inayatullah, 1998, p. 815). Once this individual work was complete, we debriefed in two data analysis sessions using a process of sharing our individual codes and memos, and negotiating potential meanings. Once we felt as if we had identified important patterns, we revisited our data for further organization into those patterns. In this essay, we focus on one major finding that was constructed during the image theater work during day two and day three of the workshop: Imagining the Inside and Outside of Power. Before we describe this finding, we provide a brief description of our audit trail to demonstrate how we drew conclusions from multiple sources of data. Negotiating possible

meanings and interpretations of each portion of the workshop through the audit trail also gave us confidence in the major findings we describe later.

Establishing an Audit Trail

To begin the workshop, we launched a group discussion with the students around the notions of power/powerfulness/powerlessness. The discussion was open-ended, and we recorded the major themes of the children’s experiences on chart paper (for example, Erin checked with each child before recording, “Am I summarizing this right?” or “Would it get what you are saying if I put it this way on our chart?”). We took pictures of our class brainstorming and added to the audit trail. We asked the children to draw and write about times they felt powerful or powerless. In our analysis of the stories and drawings, we thematically coded each narrative based on the major ideas around power (i.e., “getting to tell people what to do”) and found that 24 of the 26 participating children drew and told stories where dominance over others,

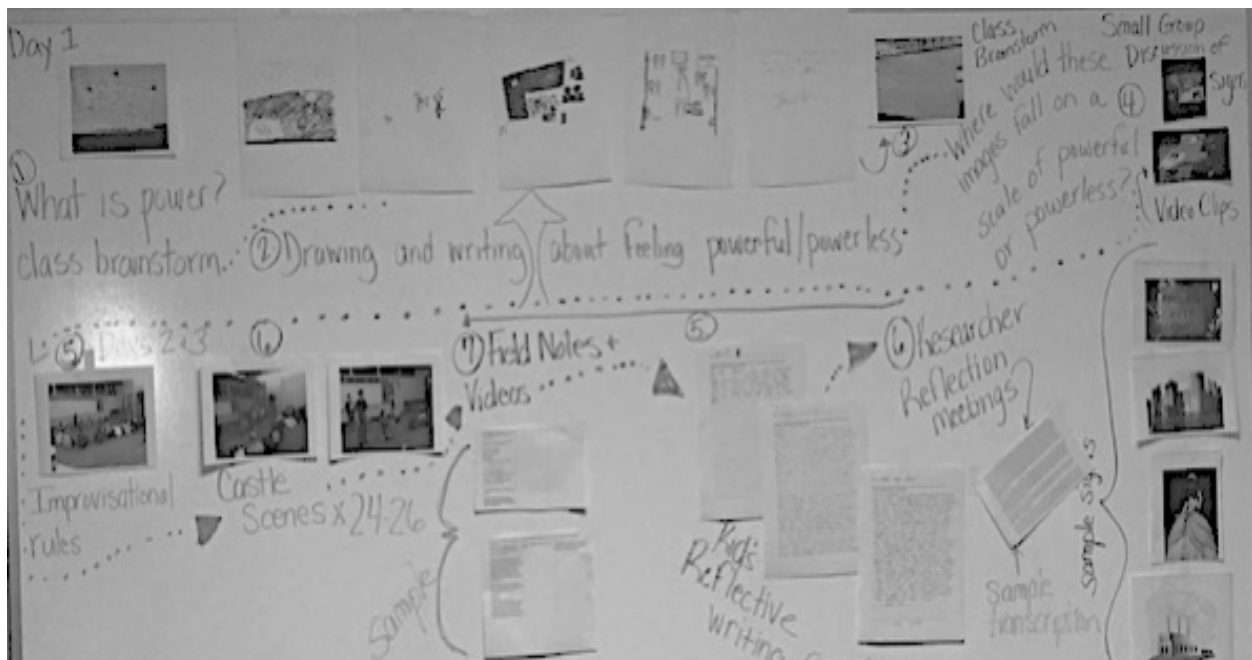


Figure 1. Audit Trail of Data

either physically or by way of a perceived social order (such as birth order), indicated a manifestation of power. For example, Trina⁵ imagined a time when she would be old enough to “be the boss” of her cousins, describing that she would feel “really powerful because I am the oldest.” Julie also used imagination to pretend to have enough power to get the things certain members of her family had but she did not, like a rabbit. As the children drew and wrote their stories, we informally interviewed them about their work. We were particularly interested in the fact that so many of the children *imagined* themselves with power, getting the things they wanted and bossing other people

around. To them, the imaginary was a place in which they could feel powerful. In Trina’s drawing, the elaborate picture of herself being “in charge” of her cousins while her aunt rested was drawn inside of a thought bubble (see Figure 2).

Julie’s power also came when she imagined having the things she could not and did not have, things other people in her family had. To clarify that feeling powerful was an imagined energy, Tommie asked her specifically about her vision during an informal interview:



Figure 2. Trina Imagines “Being the Boss” of Her Younger Cousins

⁵ All children’s names are pseudonyms

Julie: I feel kind of sad I can't be a part of [what my family has], so I imagine I use magic to get what I want.

Tommie: So you used your imagination to feel powerful?

Julie: Mmmhmm

As we laid our data trail, we wondered about how children – often positioned in our society as not having as much power as adults—may imagine themselves as powerful in order to feel control over their lives. We wondered too about how being from working class backgrounds might influence the way they imagined themselves. These were White children from low-income backgrounds and, especially with our focus on the multiple ways race and class can intersect, we felt that their racialized socioeconomic status mattered.

In a subsequent part of day one of the workshop, we asked the children to decide, in small groups, if particular images we brought to the workshop represented powerfulness or powerlessness and why. We wrote the words *powerful* and *powerless* on two sides of a large whiteboard and asked each group to tell us where in the spectrum their signs fell. We wanted to understand the meanings that certain signs held for the children related to power, so we asked for extensive discussion or debate each time a sign was placed. While we took copious field notes, we also indicated in our field notes the running time so we could go back to the videos for further analysis and verification. Upon analysis, we noticed that although the children entertained some lively debate about images like factories and No Smoking signs representing or not representing power, they *unanimously* concluded that the images of walls represented power. They explained that walls were “definitely powerful” because they kept the “bad guys” and “ISIS” out. They elaborated that Trump’s wall “would keep us safe.” Abigail further explained, “The wall will keep Mexicans out.” When asked to

place the castle in relation to the rest of the images on the power spectrum, the children again unanimously agreed that the castle was the most powerful *and* prestigious sign and that the castle should be placed *behind* the wall. Not only was the castle powerful as a protective shelter, the children explained, but it also housed important people. Thus, the children agreed it should be placed behind the wall as further insurance that “the bad people won’t get in.”

Our thoughts after the first day of the workshop were that the children overwhelmingly described their own interpretations of and relationship to power, in the imaginary. In the imaginary, children who described not feeling very powerful in real life were able to exert dominance over people and get the material things they wanted, things that other people had that they did not have. We also concluded that certain signs held debatable meanings of power for the children (e.g., factories) and certain signs (like walls and castles) represented the power in concrete ways because they protected good guys from bad guys in the imaginary. The good guys and bad guys were explicitly racialized. One can assume that if the bad guys were Mexican and members of ISIS in the children’s imagination, the good guys would be imagined as White people. We wondered then, how the children would imagine *themselves* in improvisational stories about castles. Our analysis of the events of the following days helped us better understand our query.

Imagining the Inside and Outside of Power

In what follows, we share a portion of the data collected during the image theater work on the second and third day of the workshop to consider how these White children used the castle to 1) imagine the inside of power, 2) imagine the outside of power, and 3) reflect introspectively on their place in power structures. Further, we offer our own

reflection on the workshop in the third finding. We are not suggesting that our interpretations are the *right* way to understand the students' improvisations. In fact, we do not believe there is a *right* interpretation of improv. Still, the children provoked our thinking and our analysis, in terms of the frames we have described above, and might contribute to our understanding of how the castle works as a sign of power in the imagination.

“Castles are very powerful, so being inside one makes you powerful”: Imagining the Inside of Power

During the image theater work portion of the workshop, Sam instructed the students to practice improv using the suggestions of castles or walls. Suggestions are words that improvisers usually elicit from an audience, and are used to inspire the content of a scene. It is important to understand that the role of improv is not to act out an already existing script. Thus, Sam did not cue the children in any way other than by providing a suggestion. Over and over, the children imagined and told stories where they positioned themselves as *inside* the castle or behind the wall in a position of power (i.e., a king or princess). The positions the children took as insiders were constructed because of outsiders: giants, bad people, ghosts, terrorists, etc. who threatened the safe status of the insiders. The following was a typical castle creation that we coded as the *inside of power*. It was constructed during a group activity where two boys and four girls were each responsible for adding a sentence to a story about castles to create a scene.

The castle was empty. And then a dog came up and peed. People found the castle and went inside. And giants came from the sky. A Bean beanstalk crushed the castle. And all of the people were afraid of the ghosts. And then giant laid on top and everyone's head. And a knight slayed giant and then giant killed the knight. I'm a big giant and I'm going to sit on you. I live in this haunted castle. I slay giants. The knight killed me.

This story includes some of the puerility that first-time improv tends to allow for. Performers can draw on content that is typically repressed in ordinary

“Bakhtin (1981) offered, ‘during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom’ (p. 198). Certainly, improv creates spaces that allow such freedom. Still, there is much to learn about how the children see themselves in relation to power in their story.”

life. The mention of bodily functions of pets creates a carnivalesque space that welcomes subjects not often explored in everyday situations. Bakhtin (1981) offered, “during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (p. 198). Certainly, improv creates spaces that allow such freedom. Still, there is much to learn about how the children see themselves in relation to power in their story. In it, a structure that represented European wealth and dominance used by

powerful White people—castles—was positioned as open and available for the actors to claim. They described this latitude when they started the story by saying the castle was empty. The narrators did not include to whom the castle belonged or upon whose land the castle may have been located. As they saw it, it was theirs for the taking. So, the “people” who found it went inside. This notion of finding and taking is all too familiar in the American Whiteness project: White colonials finding land, White pioneers finding gold, both finding people to enslave, eradicate. The *movement of occupation* into

what is found is pivotal in understanding the ways that White people have, from early colonization to modern day gentrification, assumed dominance through physical occupation, usually without regard to the people(s) who were there before.

Once inside the castle they claimed, the children imagined a physical threat. In this story, the threat was by way of giants. Drawing on content, we presume, from fairy tales learned in childhood about a boy named Jack and a beanstalk, giants, and ghosts became synonymous. The important note here is that giants, ghosts, terrorists, bad guys, and robbers (all described in later stories by the children) were constructed in their stories in less than one minute, and they all shared a common characteristic: They were an enemy force to fear. The people inside the castle included a knight who fought to his death to defend the castle that he had only recently occupied. Despite the knight's own death, in the end, he killed an enemy, and we presume that this conclusion also saved the people within. With the castle, the children found a structure they claimed, occupied, and ultimately defended from the outsiders they constructed as a force to be feared.

We wondered if the children always saw castles, walls and forts – these signs - as powerful, protective structures. In other words, we wondered if they would always, given dozens of opportunities to create and recreate castle scenes and stories, see these structures as representing something positive and protective, and position themselves on the inside in positions of power in their imaginary worlds.

Despite hours of work with improv and many opportunities to construct different or disruptive narratives, the children consistently positioned themselves on the inside or aligned with the benefactors of castles, walls, and forts. Outside forces were a threat to their security. This content

emerged so often that we could not help but notice it. Later, we did tally the number of times the children positioned themselves and found 15 of the children positioned themselves as holding power inside the castles during their work and seven positioned or experimented with embodying a character outside of the castle they claimed did not have power.

When we asked the children why they wanted to play people *in* the castle during a reflective circle, John responded for the class, “Most people in a castle are powerful.”

Will reiterated, “Castles are powerful because it's big and it's royalty.”

We asked the children to list all of the things they included in the castle scenes. The students' list included: gladiators, people in love, knights, kings, queens, princesses, princes, maids, guards, servant to the queen, and gold/crowns. Sam asked the students what they noticed about their list after they had created it. Johanna noticed that they had created more people supporting or protecting the castle (on the inside) than they had people who were attacking it (one the outside). Cain explained further, “Castles are very powerful, so being inside one makes you powerful, because you are living in something very powerful.”

The castle was powerful to the children because, unless it could be destroyed, it would stabilize their power. We don't believe they considered that in order to build or live in the castle dominance was already created—through genocide, cultural destruction, slavery, etc.—with White people being on the top of the hierarchy of power. They positioned themselves on the side of dominance and from that point it became necessary to protect their power by constructing a narrative of fear of those who lived beyond the walls. Power, perhaps, was

essentially about being able to hold on to, stabilize, and protect their Whiteness.

We want to make it clear that the children did not name themselves racially in these stories. They did not need to. We rest our analysis on the assumption that the White children, in imagining themselves in positions of power, took on a White racial identity at this point in the workshop because Whiteness requires *not* naming themselves, because they are “the people.” The people are White and human, and therefore have access to the castle where the not-people are giants, monsters, people of Color, etc. This is how Thandeka’s (1999) “vanishing point” (p. 86) functions: Whiteness, of course, is rendered invisible as it is the norm, the human, “the people.” Therefore, the children never see that their relationships with walls and castles, and the “helpfulness” they might provide, depends on whether or not they are included in “the people.” They just assume that they are, and that is how power comes to exist, in a way that is rendered invisible to them.

“We are Down Here Fighting for Their Entertainment”: Imagining the Outside of Power

When the children played or imagined characters in their improv who did not have power, characters that represented the opposite of Whiteness or who were positioned on the outside of walls, castles, and forts, they did so in dehumanizing ways. It is necessary, in the creation of power hierarchies, to imagine those outside of power: servants and slaves and not-quite human figures who are serviceable forces to help White people establish and work out their Whiteness. Although the children feared giants, terrorists, ghosts, and ISIS on the outside of the walls of the castles they imagined, they also used non-powerful characters - in the form of servants, jokers, and maids - for their own amusement,

service, and entertainment within. Sam named this observation for the children afterwards, and Rayanne spoke first: “Everybody else wanted to be more important than a servant. Everybody wanted to be a king or a queen or gladiator or guard because they have more powerful things to do than a servant.”

Lonnie agreed, “People wanted to be better than other people that aren’t as great as them. In the past, some people might want to be better than other people, because they are weaker than maybe, um, the person who you want to be better than now. We’re not thinking about that, that’s just what some of us might do to pick to be powerful.”

Lonnie’s comment about the historical location of his thinking is worth exploring. Lonnie has some vague sense of the history that resulted in the ways in which students at Lewis Woods explored walls and castles. For Lonnie, there were people who might want to be better than other people. Still, Lonnie is unable to actually name what this positioning involves; power is best served for Lonnie if he is unable to articulate history. In some ways, Lonnie is making a dangerous move here. He is acknowledging that dominance is not fixed, normalized, or status quo. Lonnie is thinking through the ways in which identity was a historical *construction* that was used to serve certain agendas. Lonnie acknowledges that the children were not thinking about that past: They were just living it out. The historical momentum of power—as we have traced it through the images of castles and walls in the imaginary—continues to roll on, even though the actual history of it was not acknowledged. At times these essential non-White characters fought for the powerful kings and queens.

“We’re gladiators,” Cain told Tommie during one frozen castle scene. He pointed to actors that were meant to represent a king and a queen. “We’re down

here fighting for their entertainment. They're looking down on us."

Cain said that he got to be in the castle as a gladiator entertaining the king or queen. He was conditionally accepted in the castle depending on his behavior. At any moment, the elites in the castle could have cast him out of the security of the social order.

Therefore, Cain was compelled, Thandeka (1999) might argue, to adhere to a White ideal that, in this instance, suggested a willingness to fight for the amusement of those with more power, privilege, and wealth than he. Being a slave to such autocrats was, for Cain, preferable to losing his conditional place within the castle. Cain's place in the social order was arbitrary at best. Even when it might have benefited him or when it was more reasonable to escape the castle, he was compelled by an internal, almost compulsive logic to remain in the castle, to stayed fixed.

Later, in reflecting on his choice to play a gladiator, Cain told Tommie: "Lots of things in castles are powerful, but there might be some people who are poor, like a gladiator ... I changed my mind, I don't think gladiators are powerful, wait wait wait, no, I don't change my mind, gladiators are powerful."

At first, Cain made the argument that being in the castle, regardless of a person's role, makes them powerful. Then he thought about how gladiators are poor, and do not have much money or, perhaps, power. Cain had proudly played a gladiator during the image theatre. For a moment Cain wanted to change his answer to Tommie's earlier question. He began to argue that he had not played a powerful character. Suddenly, seemingly impulsively, he

decided *not* to change his mind. For Cain, even though there had been a moment of doubt, being in the castle – even as a poor gladiator – was preferable to being outside it.

Cain appeared to be aware of the different degrees of power within the castle. Gladiators are allowed a place in the castle, but only to entertain the king and queen. This dichotomy suggests the nature of Whiteness in terms of the mythology of the castle. Not all White people have the same privilege and power in White supremacy. Instead, White people learn to serve the elite—like the gladiators entertaining the monarchs by fighting—in order to secure a place within the social order. The less

powerful Whites exist to serve the more powerful ones, and they risk expulsion from the security of the status quo if they do not submit to the elites.

A few times, the children did play characters whom they perceived to be weak within the castle—servants, animals, slaves. Sam asked them later, "Why did you choose weaker characters?" Samantha, who

played a jester of sorts for the royals in the castle, said, "It was funny. I liked people laughing."

Samantha's comment suggests that performing powerlessness can be entertaining or amusing to an audience. White people can laugh at weaker characters – especially in these fictional worlds—because "they" are not "us." Weak characters affirm the power of the audience. Performers enjoy the laughter of their audience, and therefore they can act out weakness, especially in a world so readily accepted (and shared) as that of castles and, in our reading, of power.

"Cain is compelled, Thandeka (1999) might argue, to adhere to a White ideal which, in this instance, is a willingness to fight for the amusement of those with more power, privilege, and wealth than him."

In this vein, Lensmire (2008) wrote about his performance—as a White high school student—of a Black folk tale to a mostly White audience. Like us, he was interested in exploring how White people use racialized Others to work out their own Whiteness. Lensmire acknowledged that making sense of his use of racialized Others in his storytelling was complex. On one hand, Lensmire wrote that he told a “good story” and his rural and largely working-class audience could be expected to “enjoy a story about outsmarting the powerful” (p. 304). On the other hand, Lensmire reflected on the problematic nature of his performance:

Blacks from Georgia plantations may have been whispering softly to me and my audience, but much louder, much more insistent, were the white folk, North and South, past and present, who, like those sitting in front of me, worked too hard, too long, for little gain, save some pride in their survival. And unfortunately, they, we, instead of standing with, identifying with others who have endured generations of horrors and worked too hard, too long, in a country that cared little whether they lived or died, as long as someone did the work—instead of standing with them, we took pride and comfort in not being them, in not being black (p. 318).

Lensmire’s (2008) analysis reveals the use of weak characters by the children in two ways. First, it was funny for them to create vibrant characters in rich, storied worlds that did not fit into normalized social conventions. Next, this process was enjoyable for the audience because the children could take pride and comfort in *not being* these weak characters. They could laugh because they saw themselves as being inside the castle and could laugh at those who were outside or on the margins. The children imagined they were powerful, and the weak characters were

not, and this positioning, they showed us, was funny and solidifying to them.

Introspective Interruption

At the end of the second day of the workshop sequence, we sat in “the softness of the room” (Erin, field notes, 11/3/16) for our debriefing session and felt emotionally exhausted and disturbed with all that we had unearthed in the workshop. Erin and Sam turned to the classroom teacher, Tommie, for help. Erin and Sam expressed feelings of unease with what the children had shown us during the improv workshops, knowing that their primary roles as university faculty meant they would be leaving the field site. It wasn’t that, as Critical Whiteness scholars and teacher-researchers, there were surprises in our initial findings. However, we did not want to allow the children to enact narratives of power without confronting and challenging them, a major goal of the workshop. We carefully thought about how to structure the improv for the following day and what strategies would best help the deconstruction we wanted the children to learn.

As we talked, it seemed essential to us that the students realize that their position in relation to symbols of power affected how they understood those symbols. For instance, a White descendent of a Confederate soldier and an African American descendent of an enslaved African might have very different understandings of the Confederate flag as a symbol. We wondered if the students could begin to be critical of how they were conceptualizing castles and walls. Indeed, it seemed to us as though these children seemed mostly to see themselves as inside the castle, as opposed to outside of it. Could they see how that seemingly implicit assumption affected the way that they understood the symbol of the castle itself? We agreed the goal of the reflective seminar (which would follow another segment of improv) on Day Three was that we wanted the children to be

able to empathize or understand that they very well could be in positions where they are on the outside of the castle.

Sam said, “I want them to see and understand that they could have that perspective in life... and in fact, some of them already do.” Specifically, Tommie decided she would engage the children in an analysis of the castle narratives they had built the days before. As a starting point, she would ask the children whose point of view their improv work was from and what other points of view should have been considered.

By responding to a series of carefully calculated questions including, “How many of you pretended to be outside the castle, *not* protected by it?” the children began to notice the moves they had made over the last three days. Perhaps the most profound discursive move Tommie made in that reflective seminar was when, as the children were mulling over the aforementioned question, she said, “What does that say about *us*?”

At first, the children were silent. Through a carefully scaffolded discussion, the children came to the conclusion that feeling powerful resides where they locate themselves within power. After a discussion of how some people (i.e., slaves) may not feel powerful, Gabe said, “We are not going through it, we are not in slavery, we don’t think about.”

Cain responded, “If we were slaves, the first thing I would do when I woke up is to think about the powerful people.” Cain’s statement is, in some ways, profound. Powerful people do not necessarily think about power, powerless people do. Cain even said, “We weren’t thinking. We just did.” These children—most of whom saw themselves as being *inside the castle* in their improvisations—were beginning to imagine that people *outside the castle* have to think about the world differently.

After the third day, we met again as a research team to debrief. We felt as though improvisation *did* offer the children a critical tool to disrupt the sorts of formations we have outlined here, namely their understanding of their place inside (and outside) castles. Overall, Sam saw similarities between the ways the children at Lewis Woods were learning to improvise, and the teenagers and adults he worked with during his career as a director. Learning to improvise well requires time. New improvisers often reaffirm the status quo by gravitating to stock characters or stories. Over time, they learn how to begin deconstructing commonplace themes and characters through more sophisticated improvisations. Therefore, improv does *not* provide a quick fix for the sorts of issues we have outlined in this piece. The children made progress learning to work collaboratively and affirmatively, but they did not have the opportunity to master the practice of improv as a way to disrupt the status quo. A commitment to improvisational practice, though, would provide a generative way for children to both articulate and disrupt the things that come to live in their imaginations.

Discussion

Theories and methods of improvisational theatre offer a distinct way to approach critical literacy. Learning how to embrace spontaneity, difference, and the unexpected, and to suspend disbelief and take on the offerings and actions of another in a responsive way, provide particular ways to work against increasing standardization in teaching and learning. Indeed, improvisation offers a joyful way to engage people in the collective and critical work of embracing difference in order understand and act on or against symbols of power.

Esposito (2016) wrote that the “the appeal of improvisational acting” is the “the promise of creating something from nothing with others” (p.

42). We contend that applying improvisational acting to theories of teaching and learning offers a way to engage students and teachers in working with and against systems of oppression in school and society. Esposito argued that improvisation emerges “from the input of an entire group, drawing on the collective talents, strengths, and imaginations of its members” (p. 42). To perform successfully, participants have to consent to following the lead of the other, adopting the other’s point of view, accepting the veracity of what the other proposes. Taking seriously Phillips Sheesley, Pfeffer, and Barish’s (2016) contention that “the psychological, intellectual, relational, social, and even economic benefits of practicing improv appear vast” (p. 159), we propose that improv can be taken up in our work as educators to imagine pedagogy that works toward addressing power, especially that which is invested in Whiteness, in our classrooms. In relation to critical literacy, however, the most powerful part of the improvisational pedagogy workshop came during the discussions that followed the improvisations. When we asked students to reflect on their theater work. Although the improvisational exercises helped us see how students used the castle in relation to issues of power, it was the reflective dialogue that followed those exercises that helped the *students* see their participation in those conceptualizations of power.

During the critical dialogue the children learned to disrupt commonplace understandings, as a critical literacy perspective would anticipate (Lewison et al., 2002). For example, Cain struggled to make sense of the power hierarchies within the castle as he debated with himself about whether a poor gladiator was or was not powerful. Although a poor gladiator was poor (and therefore perhaps not seen widely as being powerful), he was still a part of the system of power embedded in the castle. Cain struggled to make sense of this seeming paradox, paving the way, we believe, to a place of understanding how poor

White people still benefit from the system of White supremacy.

In reflective discussions, the students also interrogated multiple viewpoints, best articulated when students began to think about how their positionality influenced ways they imagined characterizations of those inside and outside the castle. Gabe’s comment, “We are not going through it, we are not in slavery, we don’t think about” demonstrates a powerful example of critical literacy. Although Gabe considered multiple perspectives--enslaving and being enslaved--he also spoke to Thandeka’s “vanishing point” (p.86) of whiteness, or the capacity for those in power to forget they have power. Ultimately, then, our study suggests that both the improvisational theater work *and* the dialogic reflection on that work facilitated the critical literacy of the workshop.

Conclusion

Although Sam’s experience with improv informed and guided this study, general ideas of improvisation can be of use to all educators imagining how to connect with their students. A few simple questions to ask to get started are: 1) How might teachers say “yes, and” to students? 2) How might teachers imagine their students as being complex? 3) How might teachers create spaces that support and facilitate the exchange of diverse perspectives and thinking? Teachers could look to improvisational games that might aid a lesson in their classroom. They could even seek out improvisational classes or workshops as ways to reimagine how they might carry themselves in their classrooms. So much critical literacy pedagogy is rooted in intellectual or literal discussion. Maybe improvisational play—an imaginary, embodied practice, coupled with reflective dialogic inquiry about those practices—an suggest how to facilitate

new sorts of dispositional transformations for students, teachers, and teacher educators.

Improvisational play engages the emotional and psychological as well as the intellectual and, in this

way, creates an access point to the imagination where the work of “becoming” (Morrison, 1992, p. 4) can address critical issues of power.

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