# Saying the Inexplicable: Arts-Based Composing With and Beyond Words in the Elementary Literacy Classroom

By

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**Abstract**

While sociocultural theories frame literacy broadly to include the arts, artistic forms of expression remain at the margins of most school literacy curricula. Arts integration offers one solution to increase access to the arts in schools, create spaces where students can flexibly work across compositional modes, and offer opportunities for students to articulate critical perspectives. In this single case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I examined how a fifth grade teacher and her students spoke about and enacted justice in an arts-integrated literacy unit on the thematic topic of natural disasters. Using the three-article dissertation format, I present findings in three standalone yet interrelated articles. In the first article (chapter 2), I focus on students' reinterpretation of their learning about natural disasters through the process of making comics. Drawing on a theory of critical literacies (Vasquez et al., 2019) I show how students redesigned disaster narratives in playful yet critical ways. For instance, students engaged in improvisational play on paper to grapple with loss, created layered portrayals of levity and grief, and used humor to assert agency over disaster within their compositions. In the second article (chapter 3), I switch the focus from comics made by students to comics that I made to represent students' learning. In this methodological analysis, I build upon emergent scholarship in arts-based research, describing comics field notes as a method for data generation. I show how comics field notes can promote justice-centered research by adding complexity to representations of children. I share comics excerpts that disrupt normative assumptions about learning environments, highlight researcher-participant relationality, and frame students as agentic, navigating participation on their own terms. In the third article (chapter 4), I look beyond the focal module to explore how an arts-integrated approach extended beyond literacy classes into other parts of the school day. Specifically, I draw on theories of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and liberatory

feminism (hooks, 2015) to highlight how students created colorful and dimensional crafts, transforming school spaces to be more welcoming and inclusive. Together, these findings highlight how a broadened conception of what counts as valid literacy practices for students, teachers, and researchers alike opens avenues to speak about and enact justice in schools.

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# Table of Contents

**ABSTRACT** .......... **I**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .......... **III**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** .......... **VII**

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** .......... **1**

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW .......... 6
*Describing Key Concepts* .......... *7*
RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS .......... 14
*Research Site* .......... *14*
*Participating Students and Recruitment* .......... *15*
*Participating Teacher: Kristin Pellerin* .......... *17*
*Focal Unit* .......... *18*
*Inhabiting Multiple Roles in the Focal Classroom* .......... *20*
*Data Generation* .......... *21*
*Data Analysis* .......... *22*
CHAPTER OVERVIEW .......... 23
*Chapter Two* .......... *23*
*Chapter Three* .......... *24*
*Chapter Four* .......... *25*
*Chapter Five* .......... *26*

**CHAPTER 2: A "CLOUD GOING TO THE BATHROOM": CRITICALLY AND PLAYFULLY REIMAGINING NATURAL DISASTER NARRATIVES THROUGH COMICS** .......... **36**

WHAT MAKES COMICS PLAYFUL? .......... 37
*Comics making as Improvisational Play* .......... *38*
*Comics making as Lighthearted Play* .......... *39*
*Comics making as Transgressive Play* .......... *40*
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL LITERACIES .......... 42
*A Place for Play in Critical Literacies* .......... *42*
CONTEXT AND METHODS .......... 44
*Context* .......... *45*
*Methods* .......... *47*
FINDINGS .......... 48
*Improvised Play on Paper to Grapple with Vulnerability and Loss* .......... *48*
*Layered Portrayals of Levity and Grief to Complexify Disaster Narratives* .......... *57*
*Reimagining Disaster Narratives through Transgressive Humor* .......... *64*
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .......... 70
CONCLUSION .......... 72

**CHAPTER 3: COMICS-BASED FIELD NOTES AS DATA GENERATION AND EARLY ANALYSIS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN** .......... **80**

ARTS BASED METHODS .......... 81
*Comics Based Research* .......... *84*

CONTEXT AND METHODS ..... 90
*Context* ..... *90*
*Data Collection* ..... *91*
*Data Analysis* ..... *95*
FINDINGS ..... 98
*Bodies in Motion: Comics Diversify Portrayals of Classroom Learning* ..... *98*
*Composing through Time: Comics Highlight Subjectivity and Relationships* ..... *102*
*Enactments of Agency: Comics Highlight Negotiations of (Non)Participation* ..... *106*
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS ..... 112

**CHAPTER 4: MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION WITH MARKERS, SCISSORS, TAPE: THE RHETORICAL WORK OF CHILDREN'S CRAFTS ..... 125**

THINKING WITH SPATIAL JUSTICE AND LIBERATORY FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ..... 126
CONTEXT AND METHODS ..... 127
"GUESS WHAT I'M GONNA DO!": DESIGNING A MENSTRUAL CARE STATION ..... 128
"IT'S OKAY TO LIKE BOTH GENDERS!": ADVOCATING FOR QUEER ACCEPTANCE ..... 130
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS ..... 131
AFTERWORD ..... 132

**CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS ..... 137**

TENSIONS ..... 139
*Navigating Skill Development Across Multiple Compositional Modes* ..... *139*
*Bringing Discussions of Race to Learning About the Natural World* ..... *140*
*Presenting Arts-Based Research Through Academic Writing* ..... *141*
LIMITATIONS ..... 142
A PREVIEW OF FUTURE ANALYSES ..... 144
IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ..... 146
*Implications for Teaching* ..... *146*
*Implications for Teacher Education* ..... *148*
*Implications for Research* ..... *149*
CONCLUSION ..... 151

**APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ..... 157**

**APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ..... 158**

# Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how students speak about and enact justice through the arts. This work is inspired and motivated by my former students, especially my first classes at Dunbar Nelson High School [all school and student names are pseudonyms], a public school in the New Orleans metropolitan area where I began my career. In particular, I think back to my fourth period art class in the 2014-2015 school year, a class was made up of thirty-one students, most of whom were newly arrived from Central America: Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In the first days of school, the principal suggested that I revise the curriculum I had prepared to support English vocabulary acquisition; she recommended quizzes on art-related words. Students groaned. What use were the English words for "paint" and "paintbrush" when the paints and paintbrushes remained on the classroom shelves? I look back on these instructional decisions with regret, which framed English vocabulary as prerequisite knowledge for arts learning. Students invented their own ways of enlivening our class sessions. When I turned my head, erasers bounced across the linoleum floors, never to be seen again. At least one student received a haircut with school scissors. Students refused to participate in lessons that failed to value their interests, skills, and desires. I am so grateful for this refusal, which required that I switch my approach.

I turned to the medium of comics. Despite their unserious connotation (Chute, 2017), I thought the medium might satisfy the administration's prioritization of English word-based learning in my art class. Still, the format also offered opportunities to easily move across languages using dialogue, and to integrate image making alongside word-based literacies. Students each wrote and drew stories about the heroes in their lives. For example, Isla, a teenager from Honduras, wrote about her own heroism in a story titled "Lo mejor de mi vida/ The Best

Thing of My Life." Isla described herself as a hero for giving birth and caring for her infant daughter. In English and Spanish, she wrote and made art about going to the hospital when she went into labor. Beside a self-portrait Isla created that showed her holding her baby for the first time (see Figure 1), Isla wrote, "es algo inexplicable" [it is something inexplicable]. Isla didn't have words to fully describe her experience, but through a combination of drawings and words in Spanish and English, she shared details about this important moment. Isla proudly shared her composition with classmates and school staff at a book release celebration. With drawings from her story projected behind her, she read aloud in English and Spanish in a clear, strong voice that she had carefully rehearsed.

**Figure 1**

*Isla's Drawing of Herself Holding Her Newborn Daughter*

Through her composition, Isla unsettled deficit narratives about herself and other parenting students, centering her love for her daughter. The illustration of Isla's first moment with her daughter shows her smiling broadly, using images to represent a moment that she could not fully explain. Further, her decision to write and share her story across Spanish and English pushed back against "English only" curricula which devalued many of the linguistic resources that emergent bilingual students brought with them to school. My students at Dunbar Nelson

High School worked to disrupt intersecting oppressions like racism, linguicism, and ableism through their projects, oppressions which are endemic to schools (Ladson Billings, 2006; Yang, 2009). This work happened across content areas, but the breadth and variety of the arts in particular offered opportunities for students to communicate beyond words (Eisner, 2002), to draw on funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and to work across their communicative repertoires (Rhymes, 2014), strategically selecting and combining forms of meaningmaking to achieve a wide variety of rhetorical goals.

My experience working with Isla and her classmates set me on a path to investigate how students integrate artmaking and literacy practices in the classroom, and the significance of such practices in the lives of students and their broader communities. Granted, these categories of "artmaking" and "literacy" are far from distinct. Scholarship in the traditions of new literacies (Street, 2011/2020), multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), and critical literacies (Vasquez et al., 2019) considers a wide variety of meaning making practices beyond alphabetic writing. The arts in particular are often framed as an essential part of being literate (Eisner, 2002), with distinct potentials to uphold and disrupt power (Cary, 1998). A robust and varied body of research with youth takes a broad conception of literacies to include the arts, showing how young people work across arts modalities including comics (e.g., Ghiso & Low, 2013), video (e.g., Hull & Katz, 2006/2020), claymaking (e.g., Barajas-López, & Bang, 2018), speculative creative writing (e.g., Toliver, 2022) and mixed media collage (e.g., Gonzales & González Ybarra, 2020) to critique and reimagine their social worlds. Further, young people turn to the arts to accomplish a wide variety of rhetorical goals. Previous scholarship has documented how visual artmaking in particular can articulate troublesome knowledge, that is, "things that were too hard to speak"

(Ravenstahl, 2021, p. 100), to elicit feeling (Eisner, 2002), and to incite change by appealing to emotion (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018, 2021).

Despite these affordances of arts-based meaning making within a broad conception of literacies, art remains at the margins of most school curricula (Winner, 2022). The arts' precarious place in public K-12 schools may be due in part to the sustained emphasis on high-stakes standardizing testing, assessments not well suited to represent arts learning (Gadsden, 2008). A recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts (2024) found that while most public schools (93%) have at least one standalone arts class, time for arts learning is scant. Many students at schools with arts classes receive less than one hour per week of arts instruction across disciplines, with only 13% of students receiving five hours or more of weekly arts instruction. Further, a lack of access to the arts in schools disproportionately affects racially minoritized youth, who more often attend schools with limited budgets and rigid curricula that exclude arts learning (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013). As a result of scarce arts access in schools, most research on arts learning takes place in afterschool, summer, and/or community spaces (Gadsden, 2008); none of the empirical studies cited in the previous paragraph occurred during the traditional school day. When arts learning is investigated as part of the curricular school day, it is often among the youngest learners, including in early childhood programs (Gadsden, 2008). Still, even in early childhood contexts, teachers and students often must advocate for arts learning, as alphabetic literacy "basics" are framed as more important (Dyson, 2013).

Arts integration offers one potential solution to increase access to the arts in schools and create spaces where students can flexibly work across a variety of creative modes. The definition of arts integration is contested and varies across context but generally features arts learning "as a means to connect certain elements of curriculum across content fields" (Burnaford et al., 2007,

p.13). While it is necessary to acknowledge the ways in which learning is segmented into distinct disciplines in schools, a view of arts integration as combining two or more distinctly bounded disciplines may limit possibilities for teaching and learning (Russell & Zembylas, 2007). Instead, a transdisciplinary approach, which highlights interwoven knowledge across disciplines, may be better suited to address real-world problems (Morales, 2017), although the structure of schools do not necessarily support this kind of holistic learning. Still, arts integrations offers possibilities for educators to increase and deepen students' engagement with the arts in a wide variety of disciplinary spaces including in literacy classes (e.g., Dalton, 2020; Whitelaw, 2019) and in the sciences, especially through the conceptualization of integrated science, technology, engineering, arts, and math learning under the umbrella of STEAM (Halverson, 2021).

Arts integration in other disciplinary spaces should not replace dedicated arts classes, but it does offer promise for increasing access to the arts in schools. Still, tensions arise when arts are integrated with other kinds of disciplinary learning during the school day. Because arts are often deemed less essential than other subjects, they may be framed as peripheral, even within an arts-integrated approach (Russell & Zembylas, 2007; Whitelaw, 2019). Frequently, the arts are positioned as a scaffold to promote engagement with alphabetic texts (Missiou & Koukoulas, 2013) or to reinforce other disciplinary learning (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). In these instances, the arts are ancillary, a support designed to fall away as students progress. While these approaches may still support student learning, this logocentric orientation overlooks the value of arts-based forms of knowing and expression in and of themselves. When the arts are integrated meaningfully into the curriculum as more than curricular "hooks," arts learning can help sustain students' cultural knowledge (Paris, 2012), support students critical interpretations of their social worlds (Whitelaw, 2019), and foster diverse forms of thought and knowledge representation

(Hogan, et al, 2018).

This dissertation responds to the tensions that push arts to the margins in traditional public schools, investigating an unusual case (Maxwell, 2013) where creative approaches to knowledge production were centered. I explore arts-integrated literacy learning in one elementary school classroom, a context in which literacies were defined broadly as multimodal meaning making to include the arts. While this perspective aligns with contemporary theories of literacy (New London Group, 1996; Street, 2011/2020; Vasquez et al., 2019) this approach is rare in K-12 classrooms where formal, monolingual, alphabetic writing is typically centered and separated from more expansive forms of meaning making. I examine what forms of making, knowing, and being might become possible when school-based arts learning is critically reimagined as transdisciplinary, an approach that has typically been reserved for out-of-school arts spaces.

## Dissertation Overview

In this qualitative case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) I examine the multimodal composing practices of adults and children in one fifth grade classroom. I focus specifically on meaning making within an arts-integrated literacy module on the topic of natural disasters, a module that I co-designed and co-taught alongside classroom teacher Kristin Pellerin. However, I also looked beyond the focal module to understand students' composing within the context of the broader school day. I frame this analysis around one overarching research question. I ask, *How do students, teachers, and researchers make meaning about and enact justice through multimodal composing in the elementary school classroom?* I explore this broad question through the investigation of three sub-questions, which take different perspectives on justice and examine different compositional processes. I ask:

- How do students take up the playful qualities of comics to grapple with, complexify, and reimagine natural disaster narratives in a fifth grade literacy class?
- How do comics-based fieldnotes represent youth classroom composing practices and offer affordances for justice-centered research?
- How do fifth grade students use crafting to enact spatial justice through transformations of school spaces?

In this three-article dissertation, I present three stand-alone yet interrelated analyses of multimodal composing in one fifth grade classroom. I show how adults and children (variously inhabiting roles of learners, artists, researchers, and teachers) composed about and enacted justice. Each findings chapter is formatted as a discrete article with its own introduction, theoretical framing, literature review, context, and methods. As such, there is some repetition across chapters, as I reiterate details that are important to multiple analyses. Still, most parts of the framing vary significantly across chapters as I focus on different subsets of the data.

In the remainder of this introduction chapter, I set the stage for these analyses by describing several key concepts and briefly introducing the research context, participants, and focal module. I broadly overview the data corpus and the process of data analysis. I end this chapter by previewing each findings chapter and the broader contributions of the dissertation overall.

**Describing Key Concepts**

Early in my relationship with Kristin, this case study's focal teacher, she asked me about my research interests. When I shared that I was interested in *multimodal composing*, Kristin replied plainly, "what's that?" I think back on this moment with slight embarrassment regarding my own over-eagerness to sound like a researcher (or what I *thought* a researcher should sound

like). Most of all though, the moment serves as a reminder to clearly define key terms, for collaborators, readers, and for myself. In the following section, I elaborate on two of the central concepts within my overarching research question: *multimodal composing* and *justice*.

### ***Multimodal Composing in the Elementary School Classroom***

The modes we speak of in *multimodal* are all the physical materials and less-tangible technologies of communication that are used to create meaning (Halverson, 2021). When a writer composes a multimodal ensemble, they combine modes of expression which might include but are not limited to images, music, spoken word, gestures, and alphabetic writing of different genres in one or multiple languages (Kress, 2003). The study of multimodal writing began to garner greater attention and scholarship in response to the New London Group's (1996) multiliteracies framework which sought to broaden conceptions of literacy. Responding to new possibilities for composition and publication afforded by technology and increasing global connectedness across cultures, the New London Group asserted that monolingual reading and alphabetic writing did not encompass the breadth of meaning making used by students and writers of all kinds.

Alphabetic writing and other compositional forms included in this broad conception of literacy (e.g., drawing a portrait or composing a song) share key aspects in common; each balances process and product while attending to a particular audience and rhetorical function (Machado et al., 2023). Despite these similarities across composing processes, there are also key distinctions in process and product depending on the selected compositional modes (Eisner, 2002). For example, the affordances of watercolor painting for meaning making are different from those of spoken word poetry, black and white photography, or a scientific lab report. The

concept of multimodality (Kress, 2003) focuses on how composers combine multiple forms of meaning making and switch among modes to accomplish various rhetorical aims.

One question that arises within the study of multimodal composing are the boundaries of the category. What compositions are decidedly *not* multimodal, if any? After all, even the most conventional forms of writing communicate meaning in multiple ways. For example, a reader's interpretation of an alphabetic text might change based on the writing's aesthetic aspects like typeface and lettering (Canagarajah, 2013/2020). As a result, I assert that multimodality is not a static category but instead, a lens that can be looked through to examine *any* writing practice. The multimodal lens attunes audiences to the variety of tools used by a writer (including physical materials, genres, and technologies) and the possibilities for negotiating meaning among the multiple modes. Of course, some writing practices are more clearly multimodal than others. Across this dissertation, I focus specifically on comics, which combine a distinctive visual grammar (McCloud, 1992) with words in different forms (e.g., narration, dialogue), and images. I also examine crafts, a compositional category that emphasizes the use and combination of visual arts materials, especially of three-dimensional objects that occupy space (e.g., classroom decorations, friendship bracelets, key chains).

While multimodality in and of itself does not make literacy practices more accessible, "flexibly shifting between modes" (Miller, 2019, p.223) can promote communicative access and expand notions of who can write, especially among individuals with barriers to communication. Skilled writers and composers consider the distinct potentials and limitations of each material and technology that they employ (Kress, 2003). If effective, the combination of modes can "express something that is more than its parts" (Dalton, 2020, p. 160). Multimodal storytelling is an especially valuable extension of bilingual literacies, highlighting the breadth of knowledge

production among multilingual communities as they write across linguistic and modal borders (Gonzales & González Ybarra, 2020).

Multimodal composing has been unevenly implemented in United States curricula, at least within the school day. While some learning standards make space for explicitly multimodal composing within literacy instruction (Dalton, 2020), high stakes testing generally assesses much more limited writing practices (Ghiso & Low, 2013). School-based literacy instruction in the elementary classroom is often designed to *do* very little beyond demonstrating the mastery of narrowly-conceived reading and writing skills by students to their teacher (Dyson, 2013). Recent trends in elementary literacy instruction offer scant opportunities for explicitly multimodal composing, positioning the decoding and encoding of alphabetic text as the most (or even only) important literacy task (Durán & Hikida, 2022). Narrowly conceived literacy curricula claim a commitment to educational equity while overlooking and perpetuating structural inequalities in schooling that systemically disadvantage racially minoritized students. Despite these institutional challenges, multimodal literacies are sometimes taught in elementary school classrooms. Prior scholarship documents how students use multimodal composing to strengthen relationships of mutual support (Whitmore & Wilson, 2016), negotiate belonging (Dyson, 2018/2020), and analyze and critique their social worlds (Lewison & Heffernan 2008) among many other roles.

The acts of multimodal composing represented throughout this dissertation are transdisciplinary activities of creative expression, which I understand to be practices of both *art* and *literacy* broadly defined. Because of my own experiences as a visual artist and visual art teacher, I am particularly interested in and attuned to visual-arts based composing, but the broader module was framed as emphasizing the arts (plural), and I investigated a wide variety of curricular and extracurricular artmaking practices from poetry to gymnastics routines, songs, and

acted video performances. I refer to composing practices throughout as literacies *and* as artmaking, seeking to disrupt disciplinary silos that create divides between the arts and literacy in K-12 schools and in academia.

***Justice in the Elementary School Classroom***

While justice has sometimes been defined simply as a fair distribution of tangible and social goods, many scholars argue that this conception on its own is incomplete (Ladson Billings, 2023). When justice is defined as fairness and is explored only theoretically, the lived atrocities of violence that occur within systems of oppression are often minimized or overlooked (Walton et al., 2019). Thus, for justice to be more than a "buzzword" without transformational potential (Ladson Billings, 2023, p.7) the concept of justice must be expanded to encompass democratic values beyond fairness, including freedom and civil rights (Soja, 2010).

Responding to this concern, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) define three interrelated conceptions of justice in education. While they start with a conception of justice as fairness, they extend their theorization to include justice as care. They assert that a care justice perspective moves beyond the "equitable distribution of material resources" (p.12) to center the experiences and personhood of those living and learning within educational systems. For example, while busing programs have sought to enact justice through the desegregation of white schools, did students of color most impacted by policy implementation feel cared for? A conception of justice as care extends beyond material equity.

In addition to justice as fairness and care, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) also conceptualize justice as transformation. Here, they highlight how institutionalized racism is reproduced through schooling, drawing on scholarship that investigates the education system's entanglement with systems of surveillance and incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Ladson Billings, 2023). Thus, a

commitment to the transformation of schooling is crucial to pursuits of justice in education (Yang, 2009). Together, a theorization of justice as fairness, care, *and* transformation centers the experiences of students and communities while insisting that efforts towards justice recognize and work to actively dismantle structural racism. This conception of justice responds to Ladson Billings' (2023) concerns about social justice education: that the term is not sufficiently expansive and does not necessarily contend with racialized systems that perpetuate injustice in schools.

Given the expansive nature of justice, the concept can be taken up in all aspects of education including teaching, learning, administration, and education policy, but art education can play a particularly critical role in enacting justice. As hooks (1995) writes, "the creation and public sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom" (p.4). Dewhurst (2023) describes the principles of social justice art education, a practice through which students and teachers "redistribute power toward collective community equity" (p.3) through the arts. They describe social justice art education as 1) interdependent rather than solitary, 2) addressing systemic issues, 3) connecting reflection to action, and 4) considering both the what and how of arts instruction. Through these principles, arts educators can support students in not only making art *about* issues of in/justice but in enacting transformation. Through "justice-infused" (p. 27) processes of making and sharing art, students and teachers can impact their worlds, within and beyond the classroom (Dewhurst, 2023). Importantly, scholars caution that the arts can also be used to perpetuate *in*justice, working in service of capitalism to maintain the status quo (Lambert & Duncombe, 2018) or used as propaganda to control the spread of ideas (Dewhurst, 2023). Thus, the arts are not inherently just, but instead are compositional modalities that can be used to liberate or oppress and that operate differently depending on context.

In the articles that comprise this dissertation, I take up three distinct but aligned conceptions of justice. First, I employ critical literacies, a theoretical perspective that draws attention to the ways that acts of meaning making analyze, redistribute, or solidify power (Vasquez et al., 2019). This perspective builds on the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2020), that frames literacy practices as transformative acts of cultural creation, enacting justice through collective action. Through a theory of critical literacies, I explore how students enacted justice by redesigning curricular narratives. Second, I draw on methodological scholarship that seeks justice in educational research methods (Paris & Winn, 2014). Using arts-based methods, I investigate what justice-centered data generation in research with children could look like. I acknowledge a troubling lineage of damage-centered research that has brought deficit lenses to the study of racially minoritized communities in particular (Tuck, 2009). I seek to disrupt extractive, essentializing, and deficit-oriented research traditions, bringing nuance and complexity to representations of teaching and learning in the elementary school classroom. Finally, I draw on Soja's (2010) conception of spatial justice–the idea that justice and injustice are constructed and enacted across multiscalar geographies. Soja argues that an analysis and transformation of spaces big and small offer one approach to amplify and extend justice efforts, including social, environmental and economic justice. I use a theory of spatial justice to investigate student-driven transformations of school spaces.

Across the dissertation, I conceptualize justice as fairness, care, and transformation through multiple theoretical perspectives, investigating how these concepts are enacted through the compositional processes of students, their classroom teacher, and myself. I emphasize the transformative potentials of students' composing, examining artifacts that speak about justice and practices that enact justice in the classroom.

## Research Context and Methods

In the following sections, I describe the research site, the participating students and focal teacher, the focal unit, and my role in the classroom before overviewing the processes of data generation and analysis.

### Research Site

In this qualitative, single-case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I investigated multimodal composing among one fifth grade class at Woodlawn Elementary School, a public elementary school serving students in pre-kindergarten through 5th grade in a mid-sized Midwestern city. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), Woodlawn Elementary had a total student population of 410 students in the year of data generation. Students' racial demographics across the school were reported as follows: 5% Asian, 14% Black, 49% Hispanic, 19% white, and 13% classified as two or more races. 57% of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch.

Woodlawn Elementary was known locally as a school that emphasized the arts, culture, and project-based learning. The school included a large dual language immersion program in Spanish and English, and students participated in a variety of arts classes. For instance, Kristin's fifth grade students attended visual art class weekly and went to music class multiple times per week where they learned to play stringed instruments like cello and violin. Further, the school had a history of partnering with community-based arts organizations including a local program that brought teaching artists into classrooms to teach playwriting and performing. In an interview, Kristin described choosing to work at Woodlawn because of opportunities for creative and project-based learning. She said, "I called it the unicorn school," emphasizing how special the learning opportunities at Woodlawn had felt when she arrived.

I frame the study as an unusual case selected through a purposive sampling strategy (Maxwell, 2013) because of the school and focal teacher's overall commitment to broad conceptions of literacy that draw upon arts-integrated approaches. I chose this site in part because it was a data outcropping (Luker, 2010), a place where multimodal composing that includes artmaking was encouraged and therefore happened often. The focal, arts-integrated unit that students participated in during this study was just one part of their broader engagement with the arts which was fostered within and beyond the school day.

**Participating Students and Recruitment**

In the 2023-2024 school year, Kristin's class was made up of approximately twenty-two fifth-grade students, with several students joining or leaving the class over the course of the year. Students in Kristin's class identified as: 32% Black, 27% two or more races, 22% white, and 18% Asian. Notably, the racial demographics of the class differed from those of the school overall as Kristin's class was taught entirely in English, and families of Latinx children opted into the school's Spanish and English dual language immersion program at higher rates. Still, Kristin encouraged students to bring knowledge of heritage languages to their classroom learning, and students in her class spoke a wide variety of languages including French, Hmong, and Gujarati. As the oldest students in the building, many of the fifth graders had attended Woodlawn Elementary for multiple years and had deep relationships with staff and students across grades. More than once, student interviews in the hallway outside the focal classroom were interrupted by passersby who waved hello or asked what we were up to. Sometimes younger students wordlessly stuck out their arms for a quick hug from a fifth grade friend as they passed on their way to or from recess.

All students in Kristin's class were invited to participate in the study. In accordance with the project's IRB guidelines, I solicited parental consent through paper forms sent home with students, provided at teacher conferences, and presented to parents at one school event in March of 2024. Twelve parents provided consent for their students to participate in the study. Once parents completed the consent process, students provided assent through the completion of a paper assent form. I explained the research process to students in age-appropriate language and offered options regarding how students could choose to participate. The twelve student participants of the study are described briefly in the chart below (see Table 1). Regardless of whether students and their families choose to participate in the research, I engaged with all students as a friendly visitor and co-teacher, joining them in activities, answering questions, and responding to their creative work.

**Table 1**

*Student Participants*

| **Name** | **Age (May 2024)** | **Gender** | **Racial and/or Ethnic Identity (Self Report)** | **Students' Optional Self-Description** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Allie | 10 | female | African American with some Mexican ancestry | N/A |
| Jackson | 11 | male | African American | loves food, anime, tv, soccer, sports, sleep, art, books, fashion |
| Sutton | 11 | male | white | N/A |
| Quinn | 11 | male | Asian | creative and resilient |
| Ryan | 11 | male | Hmong (Asian) | funny, creative. And always energetic |
| Logan | 11 | female | white | nice, flexible, and gymnast |

| Jasmine | 11 | female | mixed; white and Black | short, dyed hair, dark brown eyes, likes to help people |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sienna | 11 | female | Black | short, dark skinned, likes football |
| Morgan | 11 | female | Chinese American | N/A |
| Deshawn | 10 | male | white and Black | N/A |
| Aiden | 10 | male | white | likes sports, tall, creative |
| Elias | 11 | male | white (European ancestry) | in fifth grade, has a little sister in fourth grade |

**Participating Teacher: Kristin Pellerin**

At the time of data generation, Kristin Pellerin was a fifth-grade teacher at Woodlawn Elementary, a forty-two-year-old white woman with twenty years of K-12 teaching experience. I met Kristin while working as a research assistant on a previous project and immediately noticed the ways that she adjusted her instruction to respond to student interests. For instance, Kristin made time for and seriously considered student questions; as a result, students' hands would shoot up eagerly when she introduced a new concept. When a student asked a question that Kristin did not know the answer to, she regularly invited students to respond to one another, drawing on personal experience or searching for answers on laptop computers and reporting findings to the class.

When I asked Kristin about her teaching philosophy in an interview, she emphasized a particular passion for project-based learning. She described excitement in scaffolding thematic projects where "all the kids are doing something a little bit different, but they're doing it in a way that makes them feel confident and using their strengths to continue to grow." Kristin understood the arts as aligning with her interest in a project-based approach, offering flexibility and freedom to students as they decided how to represent their learning. Kristin also described an emphasis on

social justice as central to her pedagogical approach. She explained, “What I like the most about teaching is social justice. I love love love igniting a passion for kids, getting them to care about things that are happening in the world and injustices that have happened in the past.” Across content areas, Kristin prompted students to question dominant narratives and to critique power relationships. She positioned students as both artists and changemakers in their own rights.

In January of 2024, I asked Kristin if she would be interested in collaborating on an arts-integrated unit in her classroom. After reviewing her curriculum, Kristin suggested that we might collaboratively build upon her fourth quarter literacy module on the topic of natural disasters. In an email, Kristin explained this choice, writing “I wonder if you have any valuable experiences that could make this more personal because of experiences you have had with hurricanes.” Just as Kristin encouraged students to contribute to the curriculum, she invited me to share experiences from my own life growing up in New Orleans and living through storm preparation and recovery.

**Focal Unit**

Across the last eight weeks of the 2023-2024 school year, Kristin’s students engaged in daily lessons on the topic of natural disaster as part of their afternoon English Language Arts class. These lessons were adapted from the district-provided literacy curriculum, which featured a module called *The Impact of Natural Disasters* (EL Education, 2013). The module included a variety of focal texts and activities. For example, there were multiple lessons examining an illustrated book titled *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* (Danticat, 2010) about a child trapped under his home after a catastrophic earthquake and scaffolded instructions for a performance task in which students recorded themselves sharing safety information in the form of a public service announcement (PSA). Kristin shared that she liked the materials in the EL curriculum but felt

that there were not enough resources. She explained, "they expect you to go with one particular book for so long, and the kids are done with it." As such, Kristin and I collaboratively added to the curriculum with multimodal texts and arts activities. For example, we prompted students to analyze images of artworks created about hurricane Katrina and led students in creating comics representing natural disaster narratives. While these activities generally took place during the hourlong language arts class, at times, Kristin brought students' arts and literacy learning about disaster to other times of the school day. For example, she drew connections during science class as students learned about earth systems like the rain cycle.

Notably missing from district-provided curricular resources on natural disaster was an explicit discussion of climate change. No where in the provided curriculum or instructional materials was climate change mentioned. However, students explored the connection between climate change and natural disaster throughout the module. A discussion of climate change within a broader lesson on natural disasters also surfaced tensions. For example, in one lesson, student Aiden asked, "Why is climate change a natural disaster?" Kristin replied, "That's a great point, like, why is it natural when humans are the reason for it?" In conversations like this one and through their compositions, students brought critical perspectives to their learning and contextualized discrete weather events within larger social and environmental systems. Students talked about and created compositions that addressed the ways that climate change can precipitate severe weather events like hurricanes and fires.

Further, students connected their learning about weather events throughout the unit to broader social phenomena. The module's learning goals state that through their curricular engagement "students work to contribute to a better world by putting their learning to use to improve communities" (EL Education, 2013). For example, one assignment in the curriculum

prompted students to make informational presentations to teach peers which supplies they might need to prepare for severe weather events. However, students also extended their efforts to contribute to a better world from actions of individual preparedness to discussions of potential systemic change by critically examining power in the contexts that they learned about. For instance, when discussing evacuation protocols, students raised concerns about how situations might be unsafe and inequitable for families without cars. These kinds of systemic discussions of in/justice were *not* often present in curricular materials and became part of the learning through contributions of the classroom community. In an interview, Kristin explained that previous modules in the literacy curriculum taught earlier that school year had dealt more directly with issues of justice (e.g., a module on human rights), which she credited as preparing students to bring critical perspectives to their learning in later modules. As we discussed the theme of justice that ran throughout the module, Kristin explained, “I think that the curriculum was trying to get kids to think in that way.” Kristin’s own openness to students’ inquiries and passion for social justice education undoubtedly also fostered critical curricular discussion.

**Inhabiting Multiple Roles in the Focal Classroom**

I participated in the fifth grade classroom community as both a researcher and co-teacher. Kristin expressed interest in a co-teaching model, especially around implementing art, and we took turns leading instruction during English Language Arts class across the focal module. During work time, Kristin and I each circulated the classroom, asking questions and offering support. This co-teaching model took advantage of our distinct areas of expertise and resources, allowing for a more dynamic and more fully arts-centered focal unit. At times, I encountered tensions while inhabiting multiple roles in the classroom. What should I say if a student asked me to go to the bathroom? Should I redirect off-task behavior during work time? I turned to

Kristin when I had questions about classroom policies and strove to help facilitate a productive and collaborative classroom environment, drawing on my own experiences as a classroom teacher. An additional tension of this researcher/co-teacher model was a scarcity of time. Kristin's full time teaching schedule allowed for limited time to prepare lessons together. However, we developed strong rapport through a previous project and were able to collaborate in real time without much synchronous planning. We created collaborative slide presentations asynchronously, communicated via email throughout the unit, and touched base briefly during lunchtime or after school.

**Data Generation**

I generated data using qualitative and arts-based methods. First, I audio recorded class sessions (n=26). I especially relied on these recordings because I took very few written fieldnotes in real time due to the nature of my active participation in the site. I fully transcribed all audible talk in the months following the period of observation (26 hours and 26 minutes of audio recorded class sessions). I also wrote ethnographic fieldnotes, (Lareau, 2021) in the hours following each site visit while the day's activities were still fresh in my mind. Each day, I wrote a list of activities, moments, and interactions that I observed chronologically. I wrote about these interactions out of order, prioritizing those that were most relevant to my research questions. I often included descriptions of events with important non-verbal components and moments that were otherwise not documented via audio recording. I collected artifacts (n=408) including photographs of student work in progress, completed compositions, and curricular resources. For sustained projects that extended over multiple class periods, I documented in-progress work at multiple stages. I also took screenshots of digital compositions and used the history feature in Google docs to examine the evolution of compositions.

I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) with students about their learning (n=14), which lasted between six and twenty minutes and were conducted in the hallway outside of their classroom. These interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed. In addition to these more formal interviews, I engaged in shoulder-to-shoulder interviews (Griffin et al., 2014), that is, more informal conversations about process and product with students as they worked. I interviewed classroom teacher Kristin Pellerin at the conclusion of the module (one interview, sixty-five minutes) using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B).

I also created comics-based fieldnotes (Flowers, 2017) as a method of data generation and early analysis. I used a black pen to create drawings by hand in a composition notebook, adding narration or dialogue from memory or from audio transcripts. I brought my notebook with me each day to the focal classroom, and while I had limited time to draw, I sometimes created quick drawings or shared artworks with students. I describe the relevant subsets of data in more detail in each of the three subsequent articles that comprise this dissertation.

**Data Analysis**

As I transcribed observations and interviews, I engaged in the first stages of analysis. After each transcription, I wrote reflective memos (Laureau, 2021), noting interesting moments, emergent themes, questions, and tensions that arose in the data. I wrote one hundred and eleven pages of single-spaced memos; as the analysis progressed this document also became an important analytic trail to document my decision making, including adjustments to my research questions. I created data matrices (spreadsheets of data excerpts) and qualitatively coded the data using descriptive, process, and in vivo coding methods (Saldaña, 2016). I developed a codebook that included etic codes from theory and literature and emic codes taken directly from transcripts (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Finding visual data more difficult to segment into discrete codes, I

printed copies of select student compositions and comics-based fieldnotes and annotated them by hand, memoing to draw connections across data sources. My process varied across analyses; the chapters feature additional details about the processes of data analysis used to respond to each research sub-question. To enhance trustworthiness, I triangulated data across methods (Maxwell, 2013) and actively looked for disconfirming data (Adler & Adler, 1994). I also considered the ways that my identities informed the analysis, seeking to interrogate my own biases (Peshkin, 1988). I also wrote explicitly about my positionality across the dissertation. Still, aspects of my identity inevitably inform my work in ways that are unknown to me or that I am unable to accurately represent to my readers. This limitation is an inextricable part of qualitative research.

## Chapter Overview

The findings chapters of this dissertation are formatted as three discrete articles. Each includes engagement with theory, a review of relevant literature, an analysis of a subset of the generated data, and implications for teaching and/or research.

### Chapter Two

In chapter two, I examine students' compositional processes and products during one particular arts-integrated assignment within the broader module: a comics project. In this chapter, I explore comics as a particularly playful compositional mode. For instance, I explore how comics are commonly associated with humor, have a reputation as extracurricular reading, and are often created in improvisationally playful ways. I take up a theory of critical literacies and argue for the importance of play as part of that theoretical frame. Through an analysis of six focal students' composing processes, examination of their completed comics, and semi-structured interview reflections on their work, I show how students playfully and rigorously redesigned (Vasquez et al., 2019) more nuanced and agentic representations of disaster and

recovery through the medium of comics. Through this analysis, my aim is to frame the potential of comicsmaking in the elementary literacy classroom as more than a fun or funny "hook" (Walner & Barajas, 2020) to boost engagement or interest reluctant writers. Instead, I argue that paradoxically, the playful qualities of comics make the medium particularly well suited to support the exploration of difficult content in the elementary literacy classroom. More broadly, the analysis asserts a place for playful composing within a critical literacies framework and urges researchers to consider the changemaking possibilities and nuanced social function of student compositions that might at first appear inscrutable or off putting to adult sensibilities. I intend to submit this chapter for publication in the Journal of *Research in the Teaching of English*.

**Chapter Three**

While chapter two highlights how students took up the affordances of comics to articulate nuance and contradiction, I explore some of these same dimensions of comics making myself as a researcher *and* artist in the focal classroom. In chapter three, I engage in a methodological inquiry. I explore how comics-based field notes represent youth classroom composing practices and consider the affordances and limitations of comics making for data generation and analysis. In this chapter, I introduce literature on arts-based methods and highlight the tensions and possibilities of integrating artistic production within social-scientific research. More specifically, I analyze my own comics-based field notes to highlight the affordances of comics making-as-method in justice-centered educational research with children, showing how comics might represent interactions and artifacts that are otherwise absent in the data record. For instance, I discuss how comics can depict students in motion to expand what counts as an effective learning environment. I also show how comics can represent perceived time through visual space,

emphasizing compositional process over product. Further, I explore how comics can represent student agency as children negotiate participation in the research process.

Through this analysis, I hope to demystify the creation of comics-based field notes. I provide a detailed explanation in the context and methods section that might be taken up by future researchers, articulating the affordances and limitations of my approach. Through doing so, I seek to fill what I see as a critical gap in comics-based methodologies. Existing scholarship generally prompts participants to create comics (overlooking opportunities for researcher artmaking) or takes up comics for data dissemination once data generation and analysis are complete. Instead, I highlight researcher-created comics as a method for data generation and early analysis and argue that these methods offer important parallelism in studies about participants' artmaking. I intend to submit this chapter for publication in the Journal of *Qualitative Inquiry.*

**Chapter Four**

In chapter four, I look beyond the focal literacy module to explore how an arts-integrated approach to meaningmaking extended beyond the English Language Arts class and into many parts of the school day. In particular, I focus on student-driven crafts, that is, multimodal compositions with a material presence and authentic, rhetorical purpose beyond completing a class assignment. The focus on student-driven crafts as part of this dissertation was unplanned. However, I noticed that many students in Kristin's class created colorful and dimensional signage, decorations, and gifts during lunch, free time, and even covertly in their laps across class periods. I intended to investigate a broad range of student composing practices within the dissertation and thus, included student crafting in my data generation and analysis. I generated representations of students' crafts by taking photographs, audio recording conversations about

student crafting, and creating comics-based fieldnotes to represent craft practices and products. Through a lens of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and liberatory feminist perspectives (hooks, 2015) I examine how students enact justice by transforming school spaces through their crafts. In doing so, my aim is to extend research on children's multimodal composing for social justice by emphasizing an under-considered aspect of crafts: they occupy space and thus hold potentials to transform environments. This chapter also points to implications for elementary classroom teachers. While Kristin did not necessarily prompt the crafting practices students engaged in, she quite literally *made space* for student-driven creations and allowed them to remain in the classroom across significant time. This chapter suggests possibilities for how teachers might extend commitments to social justice by supporting student transformations of school spaces. This analysis has been published in a special issue of the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* focused on composing at the intersections of queer, trans, and feminist multimodal rhetorics. This chapter is by far the shortest of the three findings chapters as the editors required that submissions adhere to a two-thousand-word limit. A full citation for that article is included here:

Bullington, T. (2026). Material Transformation with Markers, Scissors, Tape: The Rhetorical Work of Children's Crafts. *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics, 10*(1). https://journalofmultimodalrhetorics.com/10-1-bullington

**Chapter Five**

Finally, in the fifth chapter I conclude the dissertation by discussing tensions, limitations, implications, and directions for future work. In particular, I describe aspects of the data corpus that are not represented in the dissertation and explore potential analytic directions as I continue to write about this project in the coming months and years.

While each of these findings chapters are distinct, they are also interrelated. Across chapters, I define literacies broadly to include a wide variety of meaningmaking practices–a perspective not uncommon among literacy scholars but much more rare in elementary school teaching and learning. I consider the affordances and limitations of specific arts-based literacy practices–namely comics making and crafts–for researchers, teachers, and students alike. I suggest how teachers and scholars might think critically about the communicative possibilities of various compositional modes especially when seeking to speak about and enact justice. Finally, I intentionally move across interrelated identities of teacher, researcher, artist, and learner between and among the chapters presented here. Through sustained collaboration and co-teaching with Kristin, I offer a model for community-engaged research that responds to participants' interests and desires. Through my generation of data as both a researcher and artist, I bring nuance and complexity to representations of children's classroom literacy practices.

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## Chapter 2: A "Cloud Going to the Bathroom": Critically and Playfully Reimagining Natural Disaster Narratives Through Comics

On the ninth day of a literacy module on natural disasters in Ms. Pellerin's fifth grade class, students sat at their desks listening to an introduction about their summative project: the creation of comics to tell natural disaster stories in words and images. As a guest instructor leading class that afternoon, I asked students a series of brainstorming questions to generate story ideas, starting with "What's an example of a character you could include?"

"Donky Kong!" a student called out as soon as I had finished speaking. The class laughed. Of course, Donkey Kong, the cartoon ape familiar to students from a popular video game franchise, was not the most serious choice for a narrative about natural disaster, but I wrote the contribution on the board, starting a list of potential characters. Other students excitedly waved their hands in the air, offering additional suggestions from pop culture. "Tom and Jerry," "Marilyn Monroe," and "Big Brain Megamind" students called out, eliciting recognition and amusing their peers. I scribed each name on the board but struggled to write fast enough as suggestions poured in. Morgan, a student in the class, popped up from her desk and took over the role of scribe. Later in the class session, students created a collaborative comics narrative about the causes and impacts of electricity outages due to severe weather. The content of the story was serious, for example, students explored what might happen to vulnerable populations in the hospital if left without power. However, the story also retained elements of absurdist humor: students referred to the character list we had generated together and playfully chose Marylin Monroe as one of the story's protagonists.

While the introduction of comics as a composing modality created openings for joyful play in Kristin's classroom, comics were more than a superficially playful "hook" to promote participation. Instead, the playful qualities of comics afforded opportunities for deep engagement

with the emotionally heavy content of the unit. As students worked to represent their learning about natural disasters, they explored grief and loss that many communities experience. Paradoxically, humor, joy, and the playfulness of comics helped make that work possible.

Distress about climate change is a daily presence in the lives of young people that poses a significant risk to mental health and is exacerbated by perceptions that youth themselves have little power to intervene (Hickman et al., 2021). Play through comics offers one avenue for students to process and share these emotional responses within and beyond the classroom. In this chapter I ask: How do students take up the playful qualities of comics to grapple with, complexify, and reimagine natural disaster narratives in a fifth grade literacy class? I start by offering an overview of comics as an especially playful composing modality. Then, I frame the analysis through a critical literacies lens (Vasquez et al., 2019), asserting a place for play within the theoretical perspective. Next, I explore three ways that students played through comicsmaking to redesign more nuanced and agentic representations of disaster and recovery. Students a) engaged in improvisational play on paper to grapple with vulnerability and loss, b) complexified tidy narratives through layered portrayals of levity and grief, and c) used transgressive humor to reimagine disaster narratives. Finally, I conclude with discussion and implications for teaching and research that underscore the value of play through comics to respond to serious issues, even when student composing initially appears unserious.

## What Makes Comics Playful?

Defining comics as a playful medium is a slippery enterprise since play itself is difficult to define and takes many forms (Kim & Rosenheck, 2020). Still, researchers generally agree on some key features of play, several of which are central to comicsmaking and were foregrounded in the focal classroom. In the following sections, I describe how comics, like play, are associated

with improvisation, lightheartedness, and are often framed as distinct from the “work” of the formal curriculum (Zosh et al., 2018).

**Comics making as Improvisational Play**

During artmaking processes, makers explore, responding to their creative work in ways that are not entirely premeditated and sometimes defy cerebral logic (Eisner, 2002). Indeed, artmaking shares much in common with young children’s play, especially forms of play that evolve organically and operate on levels that resist rationalization (Templeton, 2024). Play takes many forms, but one way that children play is through textual composing. When young children play on paper, they mix and integrate varied symbols (e.g., words, drawing) while talking aloud about their compositions; speech, drawing, writing, and movement all interact as children represent worlds and transform these representations improvisationally (Dyson, 2020). As children get older, this kind of “symbol weaving” (Dyson, 2020, p.5) becomes more rare as compositional modes are more often used discreetly or combined in predetermined ways. As canonical comics theorist Scott McCloud (1993) explains, “It’s considered normal in this society for children to combine words and pictures so long as they grow out of it” (p.139). An additional deterrent for mixing words and drawings beyond early childhood is that many students believe that they do not have innate artistic talent necessary to make things “look professional,” and thus, they abandon drawing (Cary, 1998). Comics circumvent this problem because comicsmaking is often about “condensation,” that is, communication of visual information through sparse and simple lines (Chute, 2017) that do not require realistic drawing skills.

Through the arts, older children and adults are sometimes afforded a spaciousness to make things improvisationally in ways that connect back to the play of early childhood (Halverson, 2021). For some artists who combine drawing and words, drawing is a particularly playful part of composing; ethnographer Michael Taussig (2011) described the drawings that

accompany his field notes “as play, to be contrasted with the text, which is work” (p.73). For others, it is the interaction *between* writing and drawing where improvised play emerges. Because drawings need not illustrate written narration in comics and words need not describe accompanying drawings, makers engage in a negotiation between the two modes (Chute, 2017), deciding as a story unfolds which details are said with words versus shown through images. Additionally, comics makers consider what aspects of a story will go unrepresented, described through neither words nor drawing. Artists make use of the spaces between panels (called gutters) as moments of absence in their narratives. Despite being empty, gutters “speak” within a composition through what they conceal (Ghiso & Low, 2013). In the focal classroom, students created stories through the spontaneous negotiation of words, drawings, gutters, and talk. Comics’ affordance for improvisational play allowed for surprising and less prescriptive meaning making as students considered the experiences of their characters at each turn and imagined what might happen next.

**Comics making as Lighthearted Play**

Comics, like play, are also associated with positive affect. This statement is perhaps self-evident; after all, the word *comics* (at least in English, although not the case in many other languages (Chute, 2017)), implies levity (Low, 2017). While a broad range of emotional responses can be elicited from both comics (Chute, 2017) and play (Trammell, 2023), the comics medium retains strong associations with humor and lightheartedness. Common associations include the “funnies,” shorthand for the comics printed in newspapers, and humorous graphic novels like the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, a series popular among students in Kristin’s class and worldwide.

While any communicative modality can be funny, the arts have a particular ability to prompt emotion (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018) including humor. Specifically, drawings made by

hand have especially humorous potential. Crooked lines and uneven facial features on a drawn portrait sometimes make viewers laugh as they respond to a “strangeness that can’t be faked” (Barry, 2019, p.51). Further, opportunities to elicit humorous responses are created when drawings are considered together with the text that often accompanies them in the comics medium. Authors sometimes create intentional and surprising mismatches between words and images (hooks, 1995); these nonsensical or absurd pairings can cultivate humor through their incongruity (Low, 2024).

Comics reputation as a humorous and fun medium is sometimes used as rationale for its inclusion as part of formal curricula in schools. In a study on boys’ attitudes towards literacy, Maliszewski (2013) found that comics were considered “fun” by students and boosted literacy engagement. This study is consistent with a larger trend: in an integrative review of literature on comics in K-9 classrooms, Walner and Barajas (2020) concluded that educators most commonly used comics in their classrooms “on the basis that they are meant to be funny” (p.47). Building on this scholarship, I explored how students embraced the “funniness” associated with comics and how the medium’s lighthearted qualities not only promoted engagement but also created openings to articulate critical perspectives in response to difficult content.

**Comics making as Transgressive Play**

Despite comics’ growing prevalence within formal school curricula (Wallner & Barajas, 2020), comics maintains a partial reputation as a “lowbrow” medium of art and writing (Chute, 2017). This is due in part to the history of the medium. Comic books, from their inception in the 1920s through the 1950s, were viewed as a decidedly antiacademic part of youth culture. As such, comics were derided by psychiatric experts for promoting juvenile delinquency and references to violence and sexuality were subsequently censored through application of the Comics Magazine of America’s “Comics Code.” Some artists responded to this censorship by

creating even more vulgar, provocative, and political comics as part of the underground "comix" scene (Chute, 2017). Even if contemporary readers, writers, and educators are not aware of comics history, this lineage informs connotations of the medium. While comics have enjoyed greater acceptance within classrooms in recent decades, especially since mainstream publishers began releasing full length works in the early 2000s under the more literary-sounding categorization of "graphic novels" (Chute, 2017), a less sophisticated and more provocative reputation still lingers. This tension has been famously described as a "tug of war between the vulgar and genteel" (Mitchell & Spiegelman, 2014, p.21).

Comics' characterization as partially "vulgar" and thus, necessarily extracurricular, has created tensions for some educators seeking to integrate comics into their pedagogy. For instance, Carter (2013) documented how flyers for his graphic novel literacy class were torn down on a college campus, which he interpreted as resistance to the assertion that comics are indeed literature. In another study, Noel (2015) explored comics making with seventh grade students, noting that the creation of multimodal texts like comics was not part of local literacy standards, thereby communicating that comics were not academic texts worthy of study. Despite the challenges of comics' reputation as transgressive and only peripherally academic, this status also creates potential affordances. Comics can disrupt boundaries between academic and extracurricular literacies, providing students a medium through which to articulate less formal and perhaps more transgressive critical perspectives within their compositions. This study extends existing literature by examining how students cultivated transgressive humor through their compositions, embracing the "vulgar" qualities of comics and pushing the boundaries of "appropriate" school composing while disrupting power relationships.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Literacies

I examined students composing practices through a critical literacies lens, a theoretical perspective that analyzes power and explores future possibilities made possible through engagement with texts, within and far beyond the literacy classroom (Vasquez et al., 2019). Through a critical literacies perspective, texts are broadly defined (Caffee, 2005) to include written compositions in addition to images, objects, and performances (Blackburn, 2003/2020). These various forms can all be interpreted and redesigned (Vasquez et al., 2019) through a process of reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 2005). Critical literacies assert that literacy is never neutral and is instead ideologically constructed (Street, 2020/2011). Thus, acts of cultural creation are inherently political activities of transformation (Freire, 2020/1970). In the classroom, teachers and students can take up critical literacies through practices that interrogate and strategically make use of the technical characteristics, social functions, and varied contexts of the texts that they engage with (Luke 2020/2000).

In this study, I engaged specifically with three principles of critical literacies. First, I drew upon notions of writing as an activity with revolutionary power–both in and of itself and in combination with other activities to create social change (Morrell, 2008). Second, I drew upon notions of text as multimodal and broadly defined that call for the interrogation of the contextual social functions and communicative possibilities of different kinds of composing (Luke 2020/2000). Finally, I assert that a playful disposition to writing offers possibilities to interrogate power and imagine future possibilities. I connect critical literacies to play in the following section.

### A Place for Play in Critical Literacies

Through a critical literacies lens, writing and reading texts is serious work. Still, a critical literacies perspective holds space for playfulness and attunes writers and readers to the

transformative potentials of playful composing. For example, Machado et al. (2025) examined the compositional play of children in a virtual art/writing workshop in 2020 who critiqued adults' pandemic-era rituals and priorities, engaging in silliness while rigorously processing current events and speaking back to social crises. The role of fantasy was crucial in this work, as that which is "make believe" mixed with real events and issues. In another study, Toliver and Miller (2019) explored science fiction as a genre lens for truth-telling in community writing workshops with high school students. Through science fiction, students (re)wrote their worlds and responded to real social problems, even though details in the stories came from students' imaginations. Further, while emotions in the classroom, especially those with lighthearted tenors like joy and pleasure, have not often been examined through a critical literacies lens, a small body of critical literacies scholarship has examined wide-ranging emotions in the classroom, calling for further exploration (Janks, 2002). For instance, Hendrix-Soto (2021) documented the joyful critical literacies of Black and Latinx highschoolers as they highlighted the assets of their high school and dreamed about changes to the physical architecture, asserting that positive affective sensations supported healing in the face of persistent racism. Similarly, Materson et al. (2023) asserted that literacies of joy provide "spaces of respite and creativity" (p.562) for BIPOC youth while simultaneously resisting control in schools. Emotions that accompany composing practices–even joy, lightheartedness and play–were not framed as impediments to critical literacies nor reactions to be harnessed towards more logocentric work (Thein et. al., 2015), but instead as "contain[ing] deep insights in their own right" (Simon et al., 2022, p.404) that helped to preserve the humanity and dignity of marginalized students (Materson et al., 2023).

In this analysis, critical literacies helped make visible the transformational potential of students' comics and the ways that students strategically combined different kinds of alphabetic

writing, drawing, and talk to tell stories. Importantly, their work was critical both despite and *because of* its playful qualities.

## Context and Methods

This paper presents findings from a broader study examining how a teacher and her fifth grade students used multimodal composing–including drawing, crafts, writing, orality, and more–to enact justice in and beyond the formal curriculum. In this analysis, I specifically examined students' comicmaking, one part of an arts-integrated module on the topic of natural disasters which students engaged in during English language arts class in the fourth quarter of their school year. I co-designed and co-taught the focal module with Kristin Pellerin, the classroom's lead teacher. We first met in 2023 through prior research in her classroom, and Kristin suggested partnering on the aforementioned literacy module, extending our collaboration. I was particularly excited about the focal module given my own identities and life histories: as a visual artist and former K–12 art teacher, I was eager to contribute experience in designing and teaching artmaking. Further, natural disaster is a topic of personal significance to me–I grew up in New Orleans and as a teenager, lived through hurricane Katrina and the years of subsequent recovery. I shared aspects of these identities with students in the study, for example, answering questions about the ways that hurricane Katrina impacted my life during a class Q&A session. Further, I continually reflected on the ways that other aspects of my identity informed my engagement with students, data generation, and analysis. As a white, nondisabled, adult woman, I sought to interrogate and disrupt power that these privileged identities afforded, guided by the principles of critical literacies. In particular, I worked to decenter the authority conferred upon me as an adult in the classroom while also recognizing the ways that my identities inevitably impacted my engagement with Kristin and her students.

**Context**

The study took place at a public PK–5 school serving approximately 411 students in a mid-sized Midwestern U.S. city. During the 2023-2024 school year, Kristin, a white woman in her early forties, was in her eighth year of teaching at the school with nineteen years of K–12 teaching experience overall. Her class was made up of a racially, culturally, and economically diverse group of twenty-two students. All students were invited to participate in the study, and twelve students completed the consent and assent process. This analysis features the compositions of six focal students whose names and self-reported racial/ethnic identities are included in the table below (see Table 2).

As part of her daily English Language Arts instruction, Kristin taught from an online literacy curriculum used throughout the district, which included a module titled "The Impact of Natural Disaster." The eight-week scope and sequence included a variety of focal texts and performance tasks, including analysis of a text about an earthquake in Haiti and an assignment to create a video-recorded public service announcement to share disaster safety practices. In addition to using the provided curricular plans, Kristin and I added to the curriculum with additional texts and activities. As we collaborated, we centered two of Kristin's pedagogical priorities: integration of arts and foregrounding of critical perspectives. Kristin incorporated the arts wherever possible in her broader curriculum, noting students' enthusiastic engagement in prior arts-based learning and her desire to offer multiple modalities for students to share their knowledge. Further, Kristin prioritized activities that supported students in articulating critical perspectives and advocating for social justice, positioning students as potential changemakers. Kristin's priorities of arts and justice were frequently mutually reinforcing as students often composed about social justice *through* the arts.

Starting in the third week of the module, students began participation in the focal comics project. Students each selected whether to tell a story based on real events or in a speculative future. In either case, students were required to incorporate learning from the broader module and had access to laptop computers to do individual research. Students participated in group brainstorming and writing activities and completed brainstorm worksheets to generate ideas for their compositions. Students were offered comics templates featuring blank frames on which to write, draw, and glue in collaged elements. Once students' comics were completed, I scanned and compiled the compositions and printed a class comics anthology. Students received bound copies of the anthology in the eighth week of the unit and participated in a read-aloud and book-release celebration in their classroom.

**Table 2**

*Featured Students*

| Student's Name [all names are pseudonyms] | Age | Gender | Summarized response to the question "how would you describe your race or ethnicity?" |
|---|---|---|---|
| DeShawn | 10 | male | white and Black |
| Morgan | 11 | female | Chinese American |
| Allie | 10 | female | African American with some Mexican ancestry |
| Jasmine | 11 | female | mixed; white and Black |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sutton | 11 | male | white |
| Quinn | 11 | male | Asian |

**Methods**

Throughout the eight-week focal unit, I attended and co-taught Kristin's English Language Arts class and at times, also observed and participated in other aspects of the school day. I generated data using qualitative case study methods (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) including participant observation of class sessions (n=26), interviews (n=15), artifact collection (n=408), and the creation of visual arts based field notes (Flowers, 2017). While my role as co-teacher limited my ability to take notes in real time, all interviews and literacy class sessions were audio recorded. I also recorded "head notes" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010) which I transcribed after each day of data generation.

After transcribing all interviews and audiorecorded class sessions, I engaged in multiple cycles of qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2021). I coded the entire data corpus using descriptive (e.g., pop culture), process (e.g., collaborating), and in vivo codes (e.g., "don't know how"). For visual data including students' comics, I annotated photocopies by hand and triangulated the data (Maxwell, 2013), analyzing artifacts alongside observational and interview data related to student composing. Next, I collapsed the initial codes into fifteen categories including *play* and *tensions across composing modalities*. Surprised by the range and volume of data excerpts in the *play* category, especially while engaging with serious content, I narrowed my analytic focus. Specifically, I examined the ways that students played with/through comics as distinct from other modalities and noted the co-occurrence of play with other codes including *pushing boundaries*

and *loss*. I wrote memos (Lareau, 2021) throughout the analytic process, particularly to connect emergent findings with a theory of critical literacies and with literature on comics. I looked for discrepant data and "opportunities to prove my hunches wrong" (Lareau, 2021, p.200). Ultimately, I constructed three themes exploring how students used the playful qualities of comics to grapple with, complexify, and reimagine disaster narratives.

## Findings

In the following sections I examine how students a) engaged in improvised play on paper to grapple with vulnerability and loss, b) layered playful lightheartedness with solemnity and grief to complexify natural disaster narratives, and c) used transgressive humor to assert agency over natural phenomena by reimagining climate events as non-threatening.

### Improvised Play on Paper to Grapple with Vulnerability and Loss

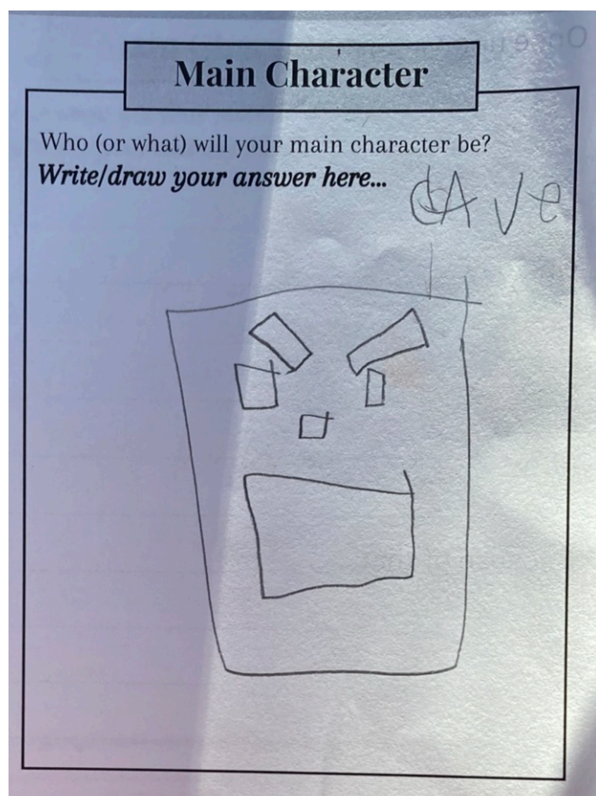
During the comics project, students engaged in compositional play, an improvisational approach to comicsmaking in which narratives emerged and evolved as students talked and composed on paper. While processes of play on paper mixed multiple modalities including alphabetic writing and collaborative talk, the approach often centered drawing as a means of propelling stories forward (Barry, 2019). Through drawing, students conjured far-fetched fantasy worlds, contexts where they grappled with vulnerability and loss due to natural disaster while circumventing the despair that might accompany stories of realistic tragedy. While students' comics did not fully represent their factual learning in the broader unit, visual connections between students' stories and the unit's themes illuminated ways that students drew upon their learning in their compositions.

For example, on the first day of the comics project, DeShawn played with shapes on paper to slowly conjure a story. Responding to questions on a brainstorm worksheet, DeShawn decided that his story would feature a character named Dave, but he was not sure who Dave was

or what he would experience. I wandered over to DeShawn's workspace as he stared down at his mostly-blank worksheet and began asking questions about how he envisioned the physical form of his character. I asked, "Do you want their head to be a circle? A rectangle? a triangle? A square?" He responded, "a square," and finally picked up his pencil to draw a square on his brainstorm sheet. I continued, "What next? What shape eyes?" and again, DeShawn selected "square" and drew two four-sided shapes within the larger square he had drawn for the face. I went on asking questions, and DeShawn continued adding rectangular shapes to his drawing until Kristin prompted students to clean up (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*DeShawn's drawing of Dave*



DeShawn's process of drawing simple shapes soon prompted narrative inspiration. At the beginning of class the next day, DeShawn approached me as I finished passing out students' folders to talk about the character he had created the day before:

> DeShawn: So I want to tell you like how he got so square. I got like an idea. So like he was so round, and the earthquake hit, and then he turned all blocky.
>
> Tracey: And that's how he turned into that guy with all the rectangles?
>
> DeShawn: [smiling] yes!

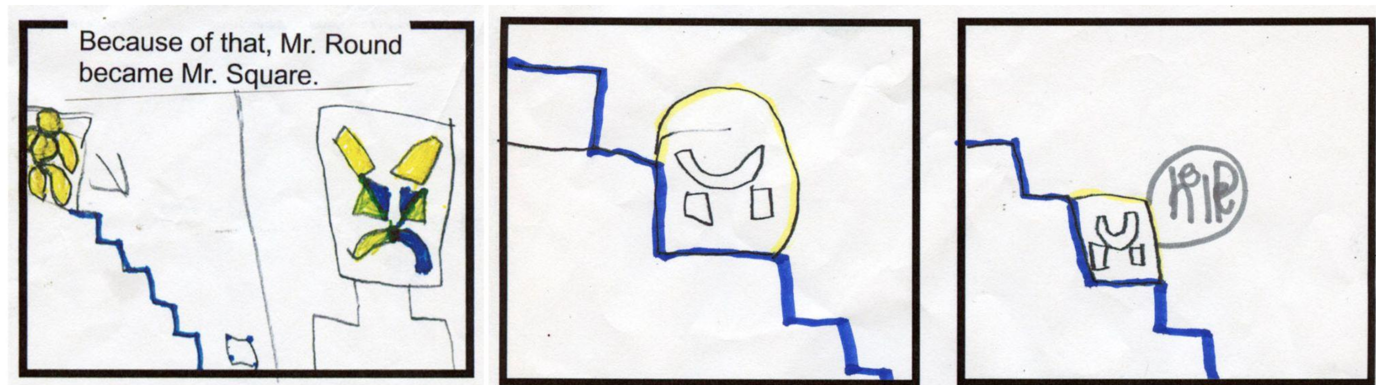
Inspired by the unusual rectangular qualities of his character, DeShawn had invented a narrative about Dave, a character whose physical form was altered and became "all blocky" as the result of an earthquake. While drawing shapes, DeShawn engaged in a process of improvisation, designing a composition bit by bit rather than following a plan decided upon ahead of time (Halverson, 2021). DeShawn played on paper (Dyson, 2020) as he accepted my collaborative prompting as part of his creative process, drew a series of rectangles to make a face, and then wondered to himself and engaged in conversation to explore why Dave might have come to look the way that he did.

In the following days, DeShawn created a comics composition titled *Earth Q* which used words and images to show and tell of Dave's physical transformation. In the story, the protagonist (whose name was changed from "Dave" to "Mr. Round/Square" to emphasize his physical qualities) experienced an earthquake at his home in Mexico in the year 3034. The earthquake caused Mr. Round to fall down a set of stairs and become square. In panel six of his story, DeShawn drew the silhouette of a rounded yellow figure at the top of a staircase and indicated that the figure fell down the stairs through his inclusion of an arrow pointed downwards. Then, he showed the figure wedged within a step of the staircase (see Figure 3).

DeShawn visually portrayed the transformation of Mr. Round into Mr. Square when he fell down as the result of the ground shaking during an earthquake.

**Figure 3**

*Excerpt from DeShawn's comics (panels 6–8)*

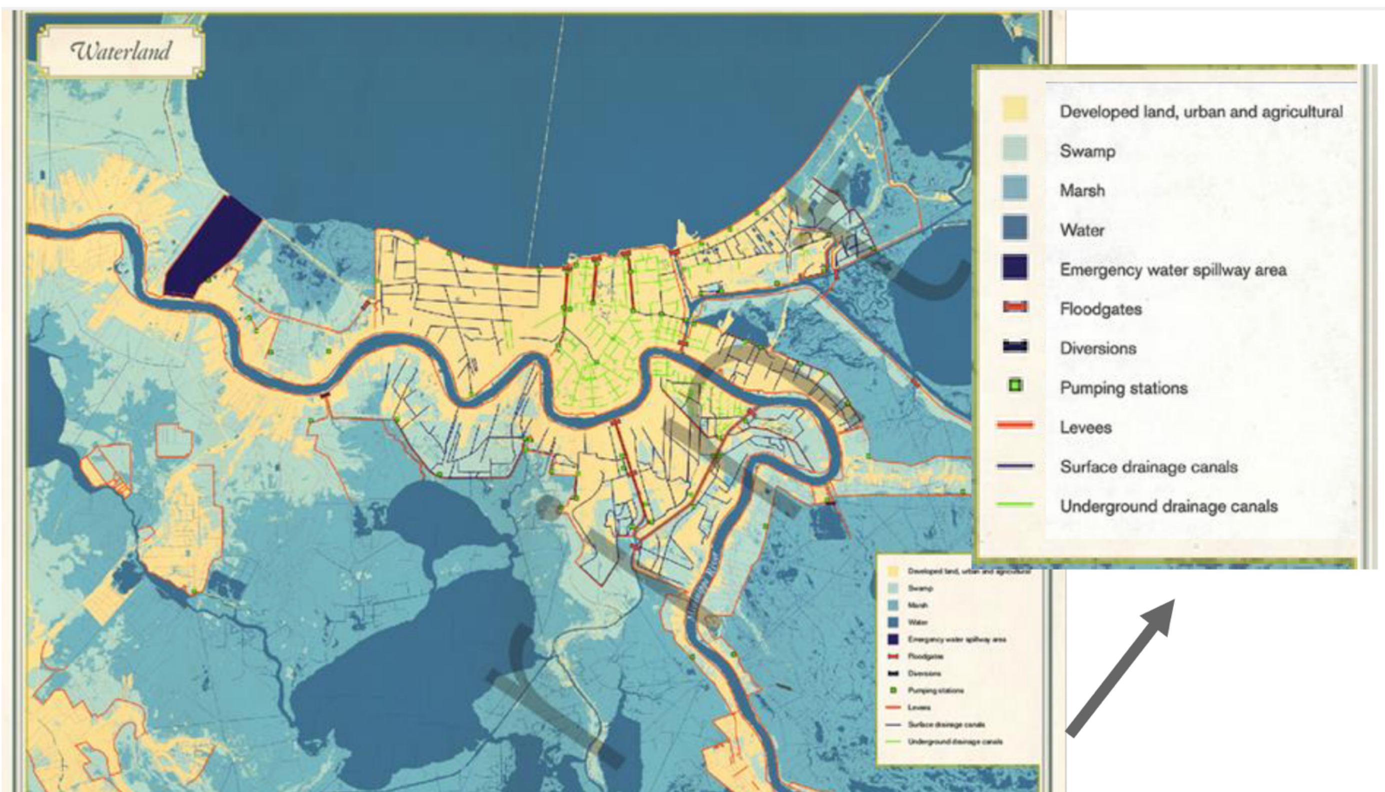



DeShawn's story *Earth Q* was not only fictional but fantastical. Only in an alternate reality would a character's form be transformed from round to square upon losing one's balance. Still, despite its fantastical features, DeShawn's story–and particularly his drawing–engaged with themes from his factual learning about natural disaster in the broader unit. Days earlier, students had participated in a lesson about New Orleans and hurricane Katrina. The lesson began with an examination of a map of New Orleans (see Figure 4) and a discussion of levees as a strategy, albeit an imperfect one, for preventing flooding. As students shared noticings about the sheer volume of water surrounding the city, DeShawn raised his hand and asked, "Can you put a big dam on your house just in case the levee doesn't protect the house? Can you make that around your house to make it safe?" After revoicing his question I replied, "I've never seen that." DeShawn and his classmates went on to ask additional questions about levees, grappling with the vulnerability of this flawed flood prevention strategy and hypothesizing about levees' increased importance in the future as floods become more prevalent due to changing climate. "If I was president, I would already get ready," added Elias, another student in the class, suggesting that

national leaders should do more to “get ready,” that is, create infrastructure to protect against flooding.

**Figure 4**

*Powerpoint Slide Featuring a Map of New Orleans*




The theme of vulnerability, that is, not always being able to make oneself “safe” from disaster, carried through the New Orleans lesson and into DeShawn’s comics composing. Instead of levees, with their ability to break or be insufficiently high, DeShawn created a story in which the character’s susceptibility to harm during disaster was his roundness, and thus, physical unsteadiness, a vulnerability that could be depicted clearly through drawing. During work time, DeShawn told me more about his protagonist’s vulnerability, explaining that his character lost his balance and fell, “because he’s too round…That’s his only kryptonite.” DeShawn explained this plot point using the playful concept of kryptonite, the fictional weakness of Superman in the

Marvel comics universe, but the underlying sentiment was serious: even someone prepared for natural disaster might have susceptibility to danger. The close up on Mr. Round/Square's face in panel eight emphasized this theme (see Figure 3). The figure's head, now having become square, appears nestled within a foothold of a staircase atop a completely blank background with no sources of support in sight. Adding to his depiction as vulnerable, Mr. Round/Square is portrayed upside down with an intensely unhappy downturned mouth, a speech bubble reading "help," and no arms or legs with which to right himself.

DeShawn played his way through the compositional process, improvising narrative details as he collaborated with adults in the classroom and responding to his own drawings as they took shape on the page. While his story took place in a far-fetched alternate reality, this setting was a context for playfully processing themes of vulnerability in disaster with real-life parallels as discussed in the broader module. The unspeakable truth of being unable to make oneself impervious to disaster was made speakable and even humorous when explored through cartoons in the distant future.

For other students in the class, drawing was an improvisational process that not only revealed a story but cultivated continually shifting narratives. For instance, Morgan depicted a girl who experienced unexpected chaos and became trapped in her neighborhood mall (see Figure 5). While Morgan started composing with a plan, many of the details of her story changed as she worked: her protagonist Penelope was eventually switched for a girl named Kya and the central plot point of a flood was swapped for an earthquake. In response to the changing details I noticed in Morgan's story, I asked about her process during class one afternoon, wondering aloud, "Do you know how your story is going to end?" Morgan replied, "I'm figuring it out because if I draw it, I'm able to compromise what's going to happen." Morgan described the story making process as one of "compromise," that is, an active negotiation between herself and

the images she drew on the page. To “compromise what’s going to happen” meant first creating a drawing that combined various ideas and then looking at the drawing and negotiating about where the plot of her story was headed, allowing the drawn image to prompt accompanying handwritten narration, subsequent drawing, and revisions to each. Unlike DeShawn, who collaborated with adults who prompted his storymaking, Morgan’s improvisational artmaking was not usually a collaboration with others (although she sometimes solicited feedback from teachers and peers). However, she consistently collaborated with her artwork itself, compromising *with her drawings* about where the story was headed. Morgan described her drawing as an improvisational partner, using conversational verbs like “compromise” and “agree” throughout her talk about comicsmaking, attributing a sense of aliveness to her drawings beyond her own control.

Morgan explained that the “compromise” central to her process worked differently through drawing compared to other composing modalities. She started each frame of her story with drawing rather than writing and explained this preference in an interview. She said, “If you write what happens [first], it (the drawing) doesn't always turn out that way that you wrote it.” For Morgan, the process of drawing was less controlled–and thus, a more playful– experience than the process of writing. When she began a panel of her comics with drawing, the drawing often turned out differently than she expected, but Morgan was then able to respond through the addition of words, creating a rightness of fit (Eisner, 2002) between the words and images. On the other hand, when Morgan started a composition with words and then added drawing, her drawn images, being less controllable, did not always align with what she had written in the way that she intended, creating a disjuncture that she sought to avoid.

Through a process of improvised play on paper that centered drawing, Morgan more fully considered the experience of her character Kya, a fictional earthquake victim. In a conversation

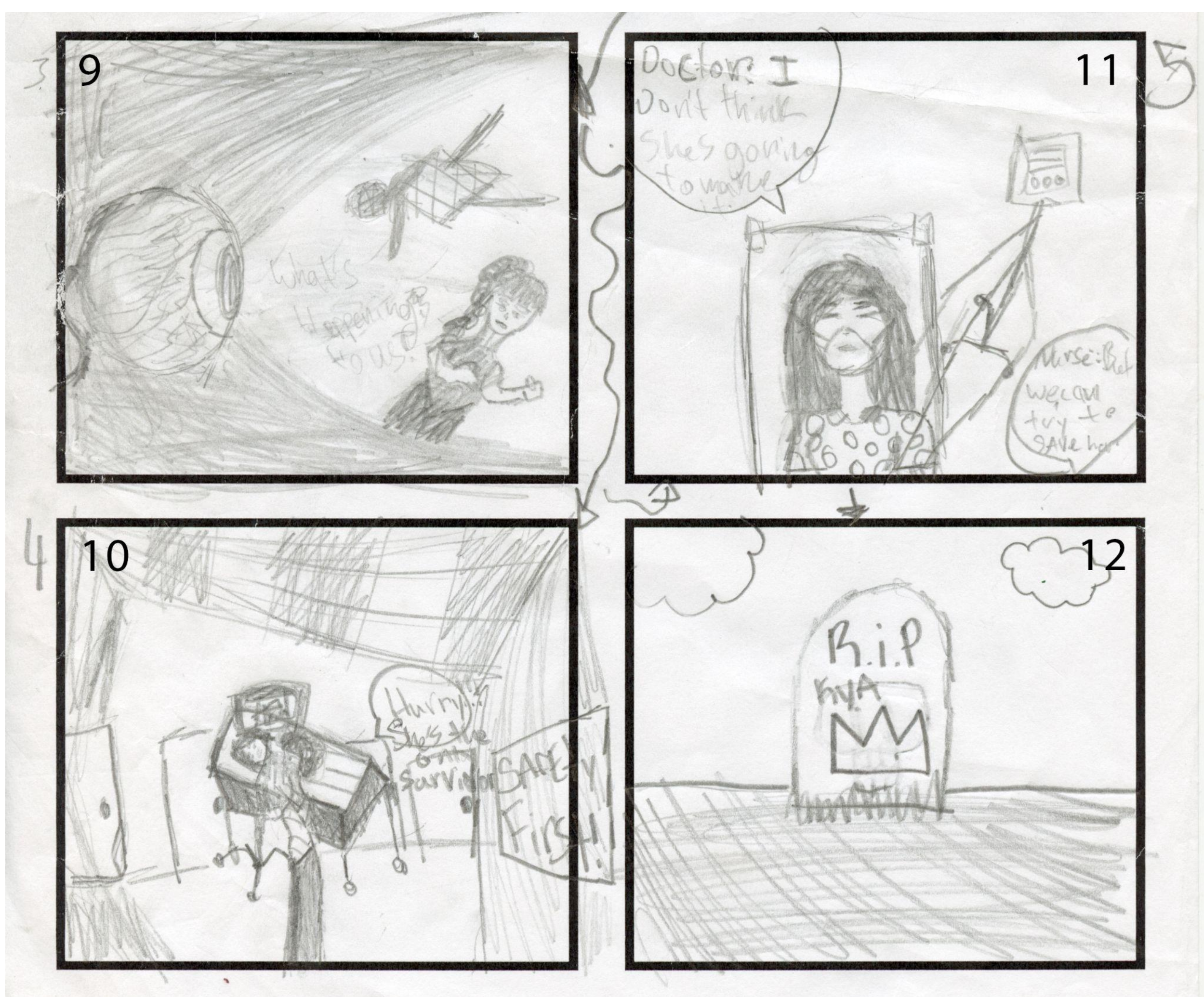
about the ending of her story (see Figure 5), Morgan explained that it was through the process of drawing Kya that she imagined what the character might be experiencing and thus, made decisions about what would happen next. As we looked at a drawing of Kya depicted from above on a gurney wearing an oxygen mask at the hospital (see Figure 5), Morgan explained more about her process:

> Morgan: I was like, what if she made it out of the hospital? But I was like, if things fell on top of you, I don't think you'd really survive. So I thought about it and decided to switch it (the ending of the story).
>
> Tracey: So when you were drawing…you were trying to figure out if she was going to survive or not?
>
> Morgan: yeah
>
> Tracey: That's really cool.
>
> Morgan: And I decided that she should end up dying [evil laugh].

In this exchange, Morgan emphasized that the ending to her story was not predetermined. While she originally considered ending the story by showing Kya's survival, Morgan changed her mind after reviewing panel nine of her story, a panel that showed the destruction caused by the earthquake-in-progress from Kya's point of view. While drawing panel nine, which featured a large eyeball on the left side of the frame to emphasize that the reader was seeing the scene from Kya's perspective, Morgan imagined what Kya might have seen and felt in her final moments at the mall. Morgan imagined that Kya saw a mall worker, drawn at a slanted angle, falling to the ground, and a "little piece of the ceiling" falling towards her from above, depicted as a jagged shape towards the top of the frame. Imagining the severity of destruction that Kya experienced prompted Morgan to end her story with Kya's death, implied through a drawn gravestone in the comic's final panel (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Excerpt of Morgan's Story*




*Note*. Morgan used arrows to rearrange this sequence of panels after drawing them. The typed numbers were added for clarity and reflect Morgan's intended sequence.

Improvisational play through drawing allowed Morgan to take on the perspective of her character Kya. Morgan imagined what Kya might have seen across several distinct moments of crisis, each depicted as a separate panel within the larger composition. As she composed, Morgan undoubtedly drew upon images and descriptions from the module that emphasized the

severity of disaster, leading her to determine that her character would not survive. While adults might read Morgan's tragic ending and laughter regarding Kya's death as inappropriate, Morgan assured me that the story was "not too sad because it's not real." The invented narrative offered emotional distance through which to grapple with the tragic effects of disaster events and permission to respond irreverently since the characters experiencing harm were fictional.

Together, DeShawn and Morgan's composing demonstrate how improvisational drawing processes facilitated the exploration of vulnerability and loss through story making. Drawing processes inspired unexpected narrative turns, guiding students' in imagining difficult realities of disaster to the extent they chose to do so. Rather than being stuck in despair in response to the module's difficult content, drawing propelled forward student's exploration of key themes. The choice among these students to explore fictional realities also served a social function (Luke, 2020/2000) as students explored tragedy more freely, grappling with while enjoying distance from difficult realities.

**Layered Portrayals of Levity and Grief to Complexify Disaster Narratives**

In Kristin's classroom, "playful" described not only *how* students composed but also *what*–that is, the content students chose to discuss. Students integrated playful content in their stories through the inclusion of silly pop culture characters (e.g., children's television character Peppa Pig) and goofy or aspirational scenarios (e.g., receiving "free merch" at a Taylor Swift concert) among other strategies. Interestingly, key passages in students' comics were often simultaneously lighthearted *and* sorrowful. By pairing content with vastly different tones, students created depictions of natural disasters that disrupted genre conventions and complicated linear narratives of recovery.

For example, during the first project work session Allie quickly decided on a topic for her story and wrote a draft entitled *The Girls who Survived a Tornado* in handwritten print (see Figure 6). With conventional spelling and punctuation, her composition reads:

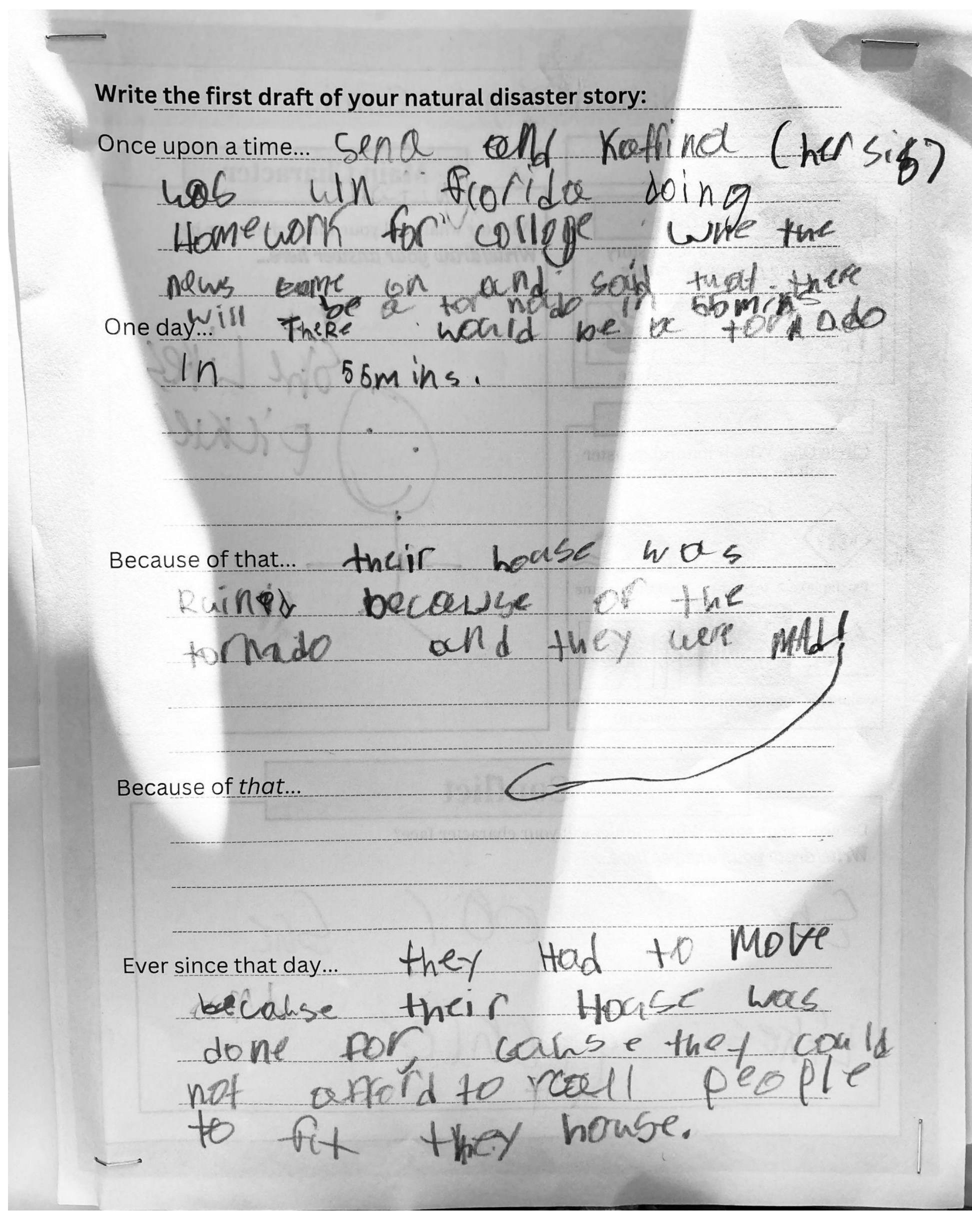
> Once upon a time, Sena and Katrina (her sis) was in Florida doing homework for college when the news came on and said that there will be a tornado in 55 mins. There would be a tornado in 55 mins. Because of that, their house was ruined because of the tornado, and they were mad! Ever since that day, they had to move because their house was done for cause they could not afford to call people to fix they house.

This first draft of her story emphasized the struggles and anger of two protagonists, sisters named Katrina and Sena, who were doing their homework when they were abruptly interrupted by a tornado that destroyed their house and forced them to move when they could not afford the necessary repairs. Allie's story-in-words was emotional, articulating an injustice from the module that she and her classmates had explored: what happens when survivors of natural disasters do not have the resources to rebuild? In the following days, Allie typed her story and pasted it as narration on a comics template with blank panels. Then, she added drawings. In the penultimate frame of her story, Allie showed what happened in the lives of her two protagonists after the destruction of their home. She created a drawing of the girls standing on either side of a building labeled "new house" (see Figure 7) with exaggerated smiles and a speech bubble reading "woww" above one of their heads. Compared to her scribed text and other images, the drawing was playful and lighthearted. When viewed in isolation, this panel seemed to end the story on a playfully happy note: the girls had found an impressive new home after their old one could not be repaired. However in context, the tone of apparent lightheartedness is part of a more nuanced story. In the final panel of her composition, Allie drew Sena and Katrina in their new home. They appear as just two circles representing the backs of their heads poking up from

above a rectangle suggesting the cushion of a sofa. Speech bubbles emanate from the two figures. One girl says, "still miss our old house." The other replies, "same." Despite moving into their new house, the characters' dialogue articulates longing. Readers cannot see the facial expressions of the girls, adding to the complexity of portrayed emotion as the characters long for an aspect of their past together.

**Figure 6**

*Allie's Rough Draft in Words of her Story Titled The Girls Who Survived the Tornado*



Write the first draft of your natural disaster story:

Once upon a time... Sena and Kaffina (her sis) was win florida doing Homework for college while the news came on and said that there will be a tornado in 55mins

One day... There would be a tornado in 55mins.

Because of that... their house was Ruined because of the tornado and they were MAD!

Because of *that*...

Ever since that day... they Had to Move because their House was done for, cause they could not afford to reall people to fit they house.

**Figure 7**

*The Final Two Panels of Allie's Comics Composition*

Allie's comics composition complicated expectations for a linear emotional trajectory. Through juxtaposition across the gutter separating her comics' final panels, Allie created an ending to her story that was at once both lighthearted *and* sorrowful, a tragi-comic tension (Simon et al., 2022). She used the fragmented nature of the comics medium (McCloud, 1993) to her advantage, fast forwarding through time and switching the emotional tenor of her story in the space between frames. The narrative space created by the gutter allowed Allie to present conflicting affects beside one another (Simon et. al, 2022). In doing so, Allie complicated tidy genre categories of "tragedy" and "happy ending," creating an emotionally complex story that encompassed contradiction, representing the non-linearity of recovery from disaster.

Other students also co-constructed tragic-comic tensions and used additional compositional strategies to do so, including contrasting dissonant words and images in a single comics panel. For instance, Jasmine created *The Story of Among Us Cat 64*, which featured an alien cat named Amongus Cat 64 (inspired in part by the popular video game *Among Us*) who

inadvertently caused a flood in her community. While the text that Jasmine penned was an unequivocal tragedy focused on the death of several cats and the community's response, Jasmine infused her storymaking process with levity from the beginning. She visually referenced the video game *Among Us* through naming, and more subtly, through depiction of characters in brightly colored space suits that mimicked the game's visuals.

Jasmine juxtaposed playfulness and sorrow throughout her composition, but this affective tension was most evident in the story's final panel. After telling of how four "amongus cats" died in a flood and were buried and mourned, the narration in the final frame takes an abruptly joyful turn. She wrote, "1 month later it was amongus cat 64's B day!!!" (see Figure 8). This typed text is accompanied by a drawing of two cats in a colorful landscape. Jasmine also added a final line of handwritten text to the bottom of the panel reading, "thay [they] forgot the dead kids." This pairing of words and image cultivated dark humor, as Jasmine seemed to be making light of the deceased cats' passing by ending her story with a birthday party and writing that the cats were forgotten.

**Figure 8**

*Final Page of Jasmine's Comics Composition*

Despite the seemingly irreverent portrayal of death at the end of her story, Jasmine's temperament switched from playful to serious as she described her comics' real-life inspiration in an interview:

Tracey: How did you get the idea for this amazing story?

Jasmine: I remembered my cat.

Tracey: Tell me more.

Jasmine: Well my cat Misty…jumped out the window and got ran over by a car.

Tracey: Oh my gosh. That's so sad.

Jasmine went on to describe how her experience losing her cat had specifically inspired the final panel of her story. She explained, "The reason I said that they forgot about the dead kids is because basically everyone forgot about [my deceased cat] Misty." In her composition, Jasmine contrasted the playful symbolism of a buoyant balloon with ominous text referring to "dead kids" to reference a tension of celebrating, and thus, seeming to move on from loss in the wake of disaster. Jasmine's story created a tragi-comic tension that juxtaposed conflicting affects by using comics' multimodal features to her advantage. While her drawing expressed the levity of a birthday celebration, the accompanying text communicated a very different emotional tenor that at first glance seemed entirely unrelated. The dissonant "textual collision" (Chute, 2016, p. 34) afforded through the multiple modes of meaningmaking in her comics operated beyond rationality (Janks, 2002), requiring Jasmine's readers to connect disparate aspects. Apart, words and drawing in the final comics panel conveyed two separate sentiments that, when interpreted together, communicated the messiness of grief. Through the combination of words and images, Jasmine conveyed a tension she had felt in the aftermath of her own cat's death and used her personal experience to inform a complex portrayal of life after disaster.

Like other students in the study, Allie and Jasmine created comics which mixed playful and somber content. This work was made possible in part by the affordances of comics as a multimodal and fragmented medium (McCloud, 1993) well suited to convey contradiction. Students redesigned (Vasquez et al., 2019) simplistically happy or sad endings of tidy disaster narratives, simultaneously communicating lightheartedness *and* grief. Rather than resulting in incongruity, the cacophony of tones and sources of inspiration brought nuance to students' narratives, reflecting the jarring combination of emotions experienced during crisis.

**Reimagining Disaster Narratives through Transgressive Humor**

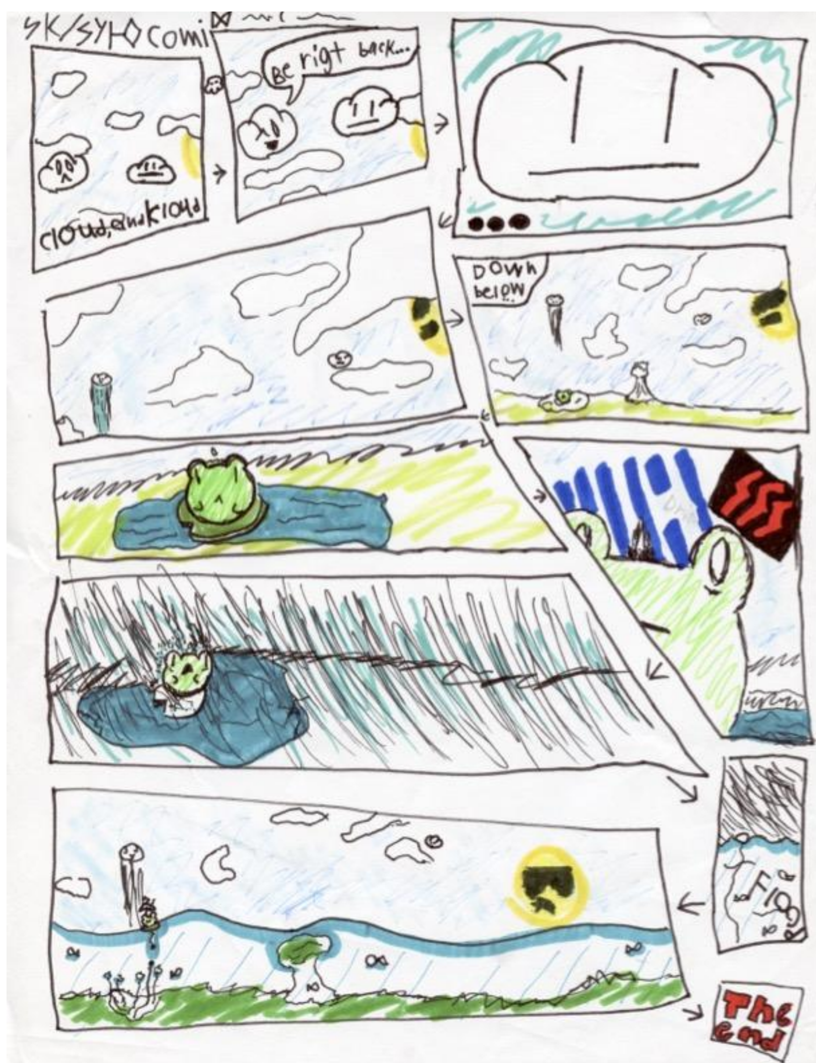
In many of their comics, students used transgressive humor, that is, humor that pushed the boundaries (Janks, 2002) of what was deemed "appropriate" content for a school composition. Students made their classmates (and sometimes teachers) laugh through their use of irreverent references to the body and bodily functions (e.g., farts, urination, toilets). Sometimes, these references were designed exclusively to amuse; for example, students erupted in laughter when they noticed a depiction of snack food labeled "deez nuts" in a friends' drawing, an expression from pop culture referencing testicles. In other cases, transgressive humor not only amused readers but also playfully critiqued and reimagined power structures. Students used transgressive humor to *punch up* (Low, 2024), making light of, and thus asserting agency over disaster phenomena.

For example, Sutton used one of drawings' affordances to his advantage: the ability to succinctly depict body language and bodily phenomena (Mitchell & Spiegelman, 2014). In his composition *Cloud and Kloud*, he used drawings within narrationless panels to tell a story about flooding. In the story, a cloud excuses himself from a hangout with a friend and urinates/rains upon a frog down on earth, causing a flood (see Figure 9). In an interview, Sutton succinctly summarized the plot as a "cloud going to the bathroom." While the plot was simple, Sutton

cultivated humor through incongruity (Low, 2024), surprising the reader with cloud urination as the unexpected and nonsensical cause of the story's flood. Sutton extended the visual punch line in his story to build humor, first showing the cloud urinating/raining, then revealing a frog below the downpour in the subsequent panel, and finally, offering multiple close-up depictions of the frog's displeased expressions. In the final frame of the story, Sutton once again showed a zoomed-out version of the scene: flooding has rendered the landscape totally underwater as the cloud continues to urinate on the frog with a frowning sun looking on from a distance.

**Figure 9**

*Sutton's Comics Composition Titled Cloud and Kloud*



Through the transgressive depiction of flooding as cloud urination, Sutton made light of floods as something to laugh at, or in the face of. His narrative stood in stark contrast to many of the harrowing depictions of flooding that students engaged with as part of the natural disasters unit, including a video montage featured in the English Language Arts curriculum of flood waters violently surging through doors and windows. Throughout the unit, floods were depicted as deadly and deadly serious. Sutton undermined the scary and perhaps even paralyzing power of these depictions through mockery. In his story, flooding was far from scary and no one was harmed. Instead, Sutton's frog character reacted playfully, floating to the water's surface on a lily pad and covering himself with a tiny umbrella (see Figure 9, bottom left panel).

Additionally, Sutton's story assigned a concrete cause to flooding, pushing back on notions of disaster as mysterious and inexplicable. While students learned the scientific causes of various natural phenomena (hurricanes that often cause floods were described technically by one student as "warm air [that] goes on top of cold air"), natural disaster maintained an air of mystery across the module as something that occurred randomly with little advance warning. For example, during an interview Jasmine recounted the experience of her friend who witnessed a tornado form outside her house "all of a sudden," emphasizing the spontaneousness as she described the disaster. In Sutton's story, however, disaster was no longer inexplicable and could be explained as a subversive prank. Sutton emphasized the triviality of the flood's source through the cloud's winking expression in the second panel (see Figure 9), rendering floods less mysterious and thus, less powerful.

As a student passionate about social and environmental justice, Sutton was unsatisfied with *Cloud and Kloud* for its lack of an explicit message. In an interview about his comics, Sutton criticized his work:

Sutton: [*Cloud and Kloud*] is pretty bad.

Tracey: Why is it bad?

Sutton: Uh, it doesn't really have to do with anything?... It didn't have much content.

While Sutton rejected his work as not having "much content," it was precisely the lack of serious messaging that facilitated the mockery of flooding, a phenomenon which other depictions constructed as fearsome. Through transgressive humor, Sutton asserted agency over seemingly-all powerful natural forces, reimagining floods as a trivial and controlled bodily act. In doing so, Sutton cultivated humor that punched up (Low, 2024), disrupting uncritical depictions of natural phenomena as forces beyond humans' understanding or control.

Other students not only reimagined disaster by concretizing natural phenomena through transgressive humor but also envisioned safety from disaster, narrating the humorous defeat of natural forces. For example, Quinn depicted an earthquake as an embodied villainous toilet character in his story *The Disaster of Skibidi*. His character drew inspiration from *Skibidi Toilet*, an animated Youtube series. Quinn approximated Skibidi's particularly grotesque form, drawing the character's menacing face and elongated fleshy neck rising from the center of a grey toilet bowl. In the story, a group of protagonists, including King Leo, Princess Dianne, and a man named CameraMan with a camera for a head, feel an earthquake and begin noticing "pictures falling off the walls." However, the story soon takes a transgressive turn as Quinn depicted Skibidi's larger-than-life toilet body causing the earthquake by shaking the earth and breaking trees and buildings by crashing into them (see Figure 10). Similar to Sutton, Quinn used absurdist toilet humor to concretize the cause of natural disaster and deflate its power. The earthquake was not caused by moving tectonic plates as students had learned in class but instead by a character whose embodied form could be the recipient of readers' humorous disdain. When Quinn read his description of the earthquake at the end-of-module book release party, both students and Kristin laughed out loud, belittling the threat through joyful exuberance.

**Figure 10**

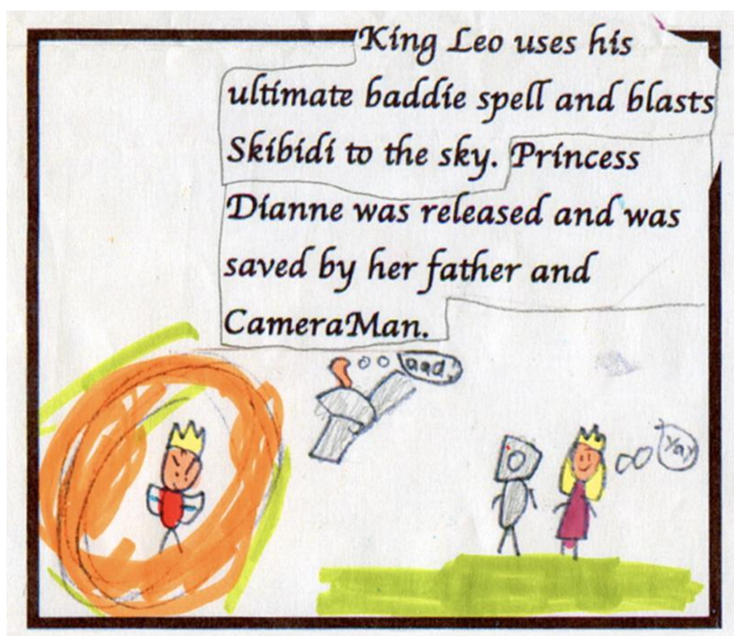
*Quinn's Story Titled The Disaster of Skibidi (Panels 4-6)*

Crucially, because the earthquake in Quinn's story was caused by Skibidi Toilet, a distinct and visible presence, future disaster could be avoided in Quinn's fictional world through the villain's obliteration. After a prolonged battle, Quinn killed off Skibidi Toilet in panel eleven. Quinn depicted Skibidi being shot into space via an "ultimate baddie spell" performed by King Leo (see Figure 11). In the accompanying illustration, frenetic orange and green lines represent the power of the spell as Skibidi flies through the air with a thought bubble reading "aah!" In his final portrayal of Skibidi Toilet, Quinn drew the villain small, a neutralized threat receding into the background (see Figure 11).

In his story, Quinn disrupted the power of disaster's looming potential, mocking and defeating disaster. In his storied world, a grotesque villain acted as a concrete entity for characters to rally against. The fictional character also united individuals in the real world as Quinn's classmates laughed and cheered at Skibidi's demise. Quinn reimagined disaster by dreaming of a place where a single spell could keep citizens safe from future catastrophe and using transgressive humor to critique the absolute power (Low, 2024) assigned to natural phenomena in other contexts.

**Figure 11**

*Panel Eleven of Quinn's Story Titled The Disaster of Skibidi*




Together, Sutton and Quinn's storytelling demonstrates how students in the classroom used transgressive humor to reconfigure power structures, imagining disaster as something to laugh at rather than fear. Through comics, students incorporated visual references to toilet humor and pushed the boundaries of typical curricular composing, building upon the medium's provocative history (Chute, 2017). Beyond offering a space of joyful respite (Materson et al., 2023) amidst heavy content, a worthy endeavor in and of itself, students' stories also asserted agency through the act of reframing disaster (e.g., as a harmless prank) and disaster response (e.g., as a joyful collective effort facilitated by magic spells). While asserting agency over disaster through transgressive, humorous fiction did not directly reduce harm in the real world, students' portrayals worked against fear that thwarts the preparation for, response to, and prevention of disaster. In this way, their stories, while irreverent and fantastical, held revolutionary potential (Morrell, 2008).

## Discussion and Implications

In this chapter, I explored how fifth grade students made use of the playful qualities of comics to grapple with, complexify, and reimagine natural disaster narratives. I found that students took up comics' affordances for improvised compositional play to imagine the experiences of those impacted by natural disaster and grapple with vulnerability and loss. Further, students leveraged comics' tradition as a lighthearted medium, combining playful images with somber compositional elements to create complex disaster narratives with multiple emotional tenors. Finally, students added to comics' legacy as a medium for transgressive storytelling. Students pushed the boundaries of school-appropriate composing with irreverent references to bodily functions as they reimagined disaster narratives. Students concretized and subsequently mocked natural phenomena, asserting agency and rewriting these forces as non-threatening.

A critical literacies lens illuminates how the compositional processes and products of DeShawn, Morgan, Allie, Jasmine, Sutton, and Quinn analyzed and renegotiated power relationships within the module of study. For example, students used the project to call attention to real-life injustices that they recognized (Vasquez et al., 2019) in disaster preparedness and response (e.g., insufficient infrastructure to protect oneself from harm). Further, students reconfigured power in their stories, writing worlds they might wish to live in (Low, 2024), including contexts in which natural phenomena are reframed as something other than destructive (e.g., Sutton's *Cloud and Kloud*) and where response to disaster brings communities together (e.g., Quinn's *Disaster of Skibidi*). Across compositions, students enacted agency as they chose how to engage with the content of the broader unit, for example, exploring the imagined experiences of a disaster victim through drawing (e.g., Morgan) or representing social problems

like insufficient access to material resources (e.g., Allie). This work was facilitated by a playful approach to composing.

As students engaged in the comics project, they used compositional elements that adults could be tempted to discount as incompatible with the serious work of critical literacies. For example, I was originally disappointed by students' overwhelming interest in incorporating characters from pop culture, video games, and television in their stories, concerned that these choices would not facilitate the articulation of critical perspectives. However, students demonstrated that playful scenarios and characters–from a personified toilet to an astronaut cat–can support the articulation of critique and should not be overlooked. This study extends literature asserting the potential for humor to raise awareness about social issues (Janks, 2002; Low, 2024) by exploring play in critical literacies curricular learning. This study complicates understandings of critical literacy in formal classrooms and urges researchers to consider the changemaking possibilities and nuanced social function of student work that might be inscrutable or offputting to adult sensibilities.

This work also suggests that playful comicsmaking may provide a particularly important avenue for expression as students increasingly anticipate and experience climate crises. Rather than serving simply as a "hook" to promote engagement, a playful approach through comics infused joy into curricular learning about heavy content. Importantly, students played and laughed in the face of disaster without minimizing the serious impacts of climate-related weather events on communities, present and future. As increasing numbers of young people experience symptoms of climate anxiety (Griffin et al., 2021), playful comicsmaking offers one strategy to prioritize the well-being of students in response to persistent and mounting crisis. Joyful play can work to support youth healing and empowerment amidst oppression (Hendrix-Soto, 2021). In this way, even the most absurd comicsmaking can be framed as potentially transformative,

countering feelings of hopelessness which might lead to negative health outcomes and ultimately thwart change. As teachers and researchers design climate education, they can consider how playful comicsmaking might support broader efforts to analyze power, engage in activism, sustain hope, and promote well-being despite crisis.

The blend of criticality and play within students' comics making was crucially supported by classroom teacher, Kristin. Kristin cultivated a warm rapport with students in her classroom across the school day and year, creating an environment in which lightheartedness and humor flourished. Often, youth humor is read as threatening to academic authority (Low, 2024), but Kristin made space for her students' jokes, even when they extended beyond what might usually be considered part of the formal curriculum. For example, she laughed the very loudest at the class book release party when Quinn debuted his toilet-shaped villain. Her classroom offers a model for teachers seeking to promote critical perspectives, showing how an embrace of humor and play need not negate commitments to a critical classroom culture. Instead, in this module and across Kristin's teaching, criticality and play flourished side by side.

## Conclusion

In her book *What It Is* (2008), comics artist Lynda Barry explores the process of composing stories with words and drawings. She writes, "Is playing always fun? What else is it?" (p.45). In this study, students' explored Barry's question through their composing, demonstrating the value of play as a tool for grappling with difficult realities and reimagining uncertain futures. As conversations around disaster preparedness and climate change become ever-more urgent amidst a changing ecological landscape, compositional play offers avenues for shifting paradigms and discovering new possibilities towards climate resilience (Rae, 2025). Rather than dismissing students' playful composing as unserious, adults should pay careful

attention, considering what storytelling through words and pictures might make possible as we plan for and adapt to intersecting crises.

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## Chapter 3: Comics-Based Field Notes as Data Generation and Early Analysis in Educational Research with Children

How do drawings communicate meaning in the elementary school classroom? A student in Kristin Pellerin's fifth grade class explained his understanding of one communicative affordance as we sat together looking at a comics composition he had made about an avalanche. The student explained his strategic use of drawing in key narrative moments saying, "if I make a drawing of it, it would make it seem like it went slower." Through drawing, he invited readers to slow down and linger on particular narrative moments, understanding the process of "reading" images as potentially slower than, and fundamentally different from, the process of reading words.

In her English language arts class, Kristin defined literacy broadly as a wide range of composing practices, thereby offering opportunities for students like the one described above to compare and combine different forms of meaning making. In doing so, Kristin supported students' metarepresentational thinking (Halverson, 2021) as they strategically selected various forms in response to their compositional goals. Through this approach, she also honored the complexity and variety of students' skills, knowledge, and insight in the classroom. As a researcher in Kristin's classroom, I took a cue from this classroom community's multimodal literacies approach. I wrote detailed field notes while seeking to better understand students' learning, but I felt constrained by the limitations of alphabetic text to represent visual and embodied meaning making. Thus, I sometimes switched to drawing, investigating what drawn images might make visible about students' literacy practices.

In this methodological chapter, I ask: How do comics-based field notes represent youth classroom composing practices and offer affordances for justice-centered research? I start by situating comics-based research within the broader context of arts-based research methods before

focusing specifically on the use of comics-based field notes in research with children. After describing the context and methods, I analyze three comics-based field notes that I created, examining how these data represent student composing in the focal fifth grade classroom. In addition to arguing for comics' succinct ability to offer thick description (Geertz, 1973) and present variable time through visual space (McCloud, 1993), I suggest possibilities for how comics-based field notes might be taken up as a method that centers justice. In particular, I show how comics data complexifies representations of research with children by centering non-normative portrayals of learning, emphasizing (rather than obscuring) subjectivity, and highlighting agency in how students choose to participate. Justice-centered research begins with caring engagement and careful representation of participants on a micro level (Paris & Winn, 2014), and comics-based field notes offer important affordances to promote this work in the elementary school classroom.

## Arts Based Methods

I situate this analysis in an emergent body of methodological literature on arts-based research (ABR), defined as "a process of inquiry whereby the researcher, alone or with others, engages in the making of art" (McNiff, 2018, p.24). This exceptionally broad definition results in a wide variety of ABR scholarship, spanning multiple disciplines, media, and research paradigms (Holm et al., 2018). What unites research practices that are conceptualized as art is an attunement to "aesthetic forms of experience" (Eisner, 2002, p.10), meaning that creators bring an intentionality to the sensory qualities of their compositions: how they look or sound, and how they might make audiences feel. Still, arts-based research–and even more broadly, art itself–is not a static category. Art is a lens that attunes researchers and readers to a work's sensory

dimensions. ABR foregrounds artistry as a valid component of scientific inquiry, disrupting categorizations of art and science as necessarily separate (Leavy, 2018).

ABR has sometimes been framed within the broader umbrella of qualitative research, evidenced by a body of research referred to as arts-based *qualitative* research (Leavy, 2020). Still, many scholars advocate for a framing of ABR as distinct from a qualitative paradigm (e.g., Rolling, 2018). For instance, McNiff (2018) cautions that when ABR is framed as part of qualitative research, it can be "subsumed by the language and operational assumptions of the social sciences" (p. 29). In ABR, research takes different "shapes," some of which are entirely distinct from the word-based logics of qualitative research. Still, a significant body of ABR integrates arts-based and qualitative approaches as a form of mixed methods research (Leavy, 2020). Across both paradigms, creativity is central to the analytic process as researchers themselves are the instruments of data generation (Leavy, 2018). In this analysis, I combine arts-based and qualitative methods, contending with the affordances and limitations of integrating analytic approaches and striving to keep qualitative disciplinary traditions from "subsuming" my impulses as an artist, even as I share this analysis in a written format much more aligned with the qualitative social sciences.

Under the broad ABR umbrella, artmaking is incorporated within the research process in myriad ways, for example, as a method of data generation, data analysis, and data dissemination (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Further, an extremely wide variety of art forms are used as part of the research process from piano playing to explore music pedagogy (e.g., Irwin et al., 2018), to rap lyrics remixed from textual data (e.g., Tunstall, 2025), and drawn visual narratives to disseminate research findings (e.g., Sousanis, 2015). While different arts-based methods offer distinct possibilities for the research process, arts-based scholars point to some shared affordances. For

instance, ABR is well situated to represent multiple ways of knowing including sensory and kinesthetic knowledge of both researchers and participants (Leavy, 2018). Further, because of the wide variety of practices associated with making art, ABR resists standardization which may lead to freedom from limiting conventions as scholars intentionally select formats best suited to represent their work (McNiff, 2018). Further, ABR scholars speak of arts modalities as facilitating discovery, uncovering “what would otherwise be inaccessible” (Leavy, 2020, p.21) and making space for a transformation of understanding through intuitive and vulnerable artmaking processes (Irwin et al., 2018).

Despite these affordances, arts-based researchers also face significant challenges. First, as researchers innovate through engagement with a wide variety of media, they must attend to the ethical concerns of their specific modes of working. Visual arts research presents particular dilemmas as researchers contend with privacy concerns associated with visual representation (Holm et al., 2018) and a history of racist and sexist visual stereotypes (Kuttner et al., 2018; Pirie, 2025). Additionally, researchers who create arts-based, mixed-methods work that integrates ABR with qualitative and quantitative methodologies may experience tensions and even contradictions between paradigms, especially as dominant approaches are sometimes positioned to discredit and marginalize alternative ways of conveying knowledge (McNiff, 2018). Still, all research methods are constructions, only partial representations (Griffin & Schwartz, 2005), and the integration of methods from multiple traditions may lead to more nuanced portrayals. Finally, Kuttner et al. (2018) discuss concerns about ensuring quality of ABR, wondering about how quality checks and revision processes like peer review can be translated to arts-based work. They advocate for communities of arts researchers to come together worldwide to develop strategies for review and publication.

Together, the ABR methodological literature points to a proliferation of research created through arts practices–on their own or in tandem with practices drawn from qualitative and quantitative traditions. While the integration of the arts in/as research creates dilemmas related to ensuring quality and disseminating scholarship, an arts-based lens also offers new possibilities for discovery and may broaden the communicative potential of researchers across disciplines. In this project, arts-based research methods offered additional modes through which to document and synthesize classroom interactions alongside academic writing. The freedom in working across representational modalities associated variously with the arts and social sciences required me to think critically about methodological and analytical decisions as I sought to complexify representations of children across the focal study.

**Comics Based Research**

While ABR includes research that engages an endless variety of arts practices, a smaller sub-field considers the integration of comicsmaking in research. In defining comics-based research (CBR), I take up McCloud's (1993) definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (p.9) that conceives of comics as a series of multiple images read in relation to one another. Beyond this baseline definition, comics often share additional formal qualities. For example, comics frequently feature writing; thus, words and images are concurrently read and mutually informing (Chute, 2016). Comics artists also make use of emanata–or visual iconography emanating from a character (e.g., sweat drops to signify stress) (Weaver-Hightower, 2013)–in addition to other elements of visual grammar including frames, gutters between panels, and dialogue balloons, all of which communicate meaning (Chute, 2016).

CBR is a dispersed field of practice in which researchers working in multiple disciplines, using multiple methods, and with varied epistemologies and theoretical commitments include comics in their scholarly production (Kuttner et al., 2021). CBR is so varied in part because comics are used in multiple ways across data generation, analysis, and dissemination. Comics are used by researchers in three primary ways: a) researchers prompt participants to create comics, b) researchers create comics as a form of data generation and analysis, c) researchers create comics as a form of scholarly dissemination.

First, as part of data generation, researchers prompt participants to create comics that become part of the data record, communicating knowledge and recording experiences through their compositions. While comics are elicited from participants across disciplines, a robust body of educational research has analyzed student-created comics in particular. Prior comics scholarship has investigated how multilingual youth communicate narratives of immigration (Ghiso & Low, 2013), how students grapple with emotional responses to difficult histories (Simon et al., 2022), and how students understand elements of visual design (Pantaleo, 2015). Researchers prompt the creation of comics among students of all ages from pre-school aged children (e.g., Tatham-Fashanu, 2023) to post-secondary pre-service teachers (e.g., Abas, 2023; Galman, 2009). Importantly, in many studies that analyze participant-created comics, researchers write exclusively in traditional academic genres rather than engaging in artmaking themselves. In the focal study, fifth grade students created comics within their literacy unit which I subsequently documented and analyzed (see chapter 2 of this dissertation). However, in this analysis I focus on my own comics making as I documented the composing processes of students. I frame myself as researcher *and artist* alongside artist-participants.

In addition to prompting participant-created comics, scholars across disciplines also create comics as data generation. These comics can be thought of as a form of visual field note (Kuttner et al., 2021) and can be directly integrated as part of one's fieldwork notebook to document salient moments (Taussig, 2013). In the field of education, researcher-created comics field notes are rare. However, a couple studies point to potential approaches. For example, Flowers (2017) created comics in response to fieldwork experiences at an early childhood center and an arts-based graduate research lab. After class sessions, Flowers listened to audio recordings and transcribed audio as written text and drawings in combination. In another study, Tatham-Fahanu (2023) created comic-illustrated ethnographic field notes in collaboration with pre-school aged children. Tatham-Fahanu sketched interactions among children, digitally integrated students' own drawn self portraits, and presented the collaborative field notes to students as a form of member checking. These studies emphasized comics' affordance for unifying data across senses and across modes, showing how comics making can integrate images, sound, and body-sensory perception which might otherwise remain distinct and disconnected, or be left out of the data record entirely. I focus on comics field notes in this study to help fill this gap within the CBR literature overall.

Notably, researchers interested in generating visual data have additional options beyond sequential drawing. For example, researchers also use photography and video to generate data and emphasize these modalities' fidelity as a key strength (Holm et al., 2018). While drawing may represent fieldwork scenes less consistently compared to photographic methods, this perceived drawback also has advantages as drawing more easily maintains participants' anonymity (Tatham-Fahanu, 2023). Further, while all images are constructed by their makers, photographic methods can be erroneously perceived as objective. Drawing, on the other hand,

emphasizes a researcher's active role in framing and producing imagery thereby foregrounding and prompting discussion about the subjectivity of knowledge production (Taussig, 2013). Arts-based researchers trouble the notion that some methods are inherently "truer" than others, highlighting that feelings and subjective experiences communicated through some art forms can be valuable knowledge production in research (Osei-Kofi, 2013). Moreover, the process of creating comics as data generation can also double as a process of early analysis as researchers make strategic choices about what data excerpts to include in their comics compositions and combine data excerpts across sources (Weaver-Hightower, 2013). In this project, I created comics-based field notes to portray the nuances of students' engagement in the classroom, showing what learning looked and felt like.

Finally, comics can also be a modality for the dissemination of research findings. Research comics are shared as standalone texts (e.g., Kozik, 2023: Soussanis, 2015) and are also integrated within more traditionally written academic chapters and articles (e.g., Shaw et al., 2024). Typically, researchers who pursue comics-based dissemination speak explicitly about the strategic affordances of comics for representing knowledge in their respective projects. These explanations are helpful for audiences considering similar approaches but also speak to the entrenched logocentrism within academic research (Weaver-Hightower, 2013); scholars who write traditional academic texts are not often asked to defend their choice of modality. Scholars who disseminate their research through comics highlight the medium's accessibility, especially for generalist audiences (Kozik, 2023) and argue that comics provide "multiple entry points" (Shaw et al., 2024, p. 1) for reader engagement. Further, researchers choose to present findings in comics because they succinctly represent multimodal meaning making, including gaze, body movements and relationships to objects (Watson, 2025) and effectively portray emotions and

experiences (Weaver-Hightower, 2015). Through their sequential nature, comics also offer researchers a way to stretch or compress time as they portray key moments among research participants. In comics, readers are transported across time from one panel to the next (McCloud, 1993). Importantly the unit of time between panels is variable. Thus, researchers can offer a "slower paced visualization" (Watson, 2025, p.6) by shrinking the time between panels, highlighting the importance of brief interactions that might otherwise be glossed over.

Scholars who publish comics-based work do warn of potential drawbacks. For instance, comics researchers must respond to criticism that comics take up too much space on the printed page (Flowers, 2017; Parks & Schmeichel, 2014) or are otherwise poorly suited for publication in traditional academic research venues (i.e., peer-reviewed journals). Some recent research responds to this tension by exploring alternative avenues for dissemination. For example, prairie ecologist Liz Anna Kozik (2023) self-published her comics dissertation as a full-color paperback book to encourage readership outside of her academic discipline. An additional concern is that CBR may inadvertently favor visual data (Weaver-Hightower, 2013). While comics portray multisensory data beyond the visual (Flowers, 2017), they may focus on that which is visually striking to the exclusion of the mundane or abstract. Still, all research methods have representational drawbacks, and potential blind spots of a given method can be mitigated through triangulation (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, researchers may be hesitant to disseminate their work through comics due to a concern that they do not have adequate art skills to portray interactions. While CBR work must be assessed for quality and rigor (Kuttner et al., 2021), realistic drawing skills are not necessary to create effective research comics. Prior scholars have used drawings as simple as stick figures to communicate interactions (e.g., Tatham-Fahanu, 2023) or have collaborated with artists to realize their visions (e.g., Jones & Woglom, 2013). Still frameworks

for assessing effectiveness are needed as the field continues to grow (Kuttner et al., 2021), and researchers interested in comics making bear the responsibility to familiarize themselves with the discipline by reading comics, practicing their craft, and engaging with comicsmaking pedagogy (Flowers, 2017).

While methodological literature in CBR offers a comprehensive discussion about the potential communicative advantages and limitations of comics in/as research, this dialogue does not expressly address how comics methods might be taken up towards justice. That is, as educational researchers seek to disrupt practices that have brought deficit framings to communities of color and other marginalized populations in the United States (Paris & Winn, 2014), enacting harm through the research process (Osei-Kofi, 2013), what role might comics play in humanizing research practices and disrupting patterns of oppression (Keifer-Boyd, 2011)? In this chapter, I focus on the potentials of comics-based field notes towards justice-centered research. In particular I show three ways that comics can complexify representations of students in the elementary classroom. First, comics can portray diverse bodies at school, disrupting notions of productive students as necessarily quiet and still. Second, comics can emphasize a perception of time through multi-frame compositions to foreground and actively grapple with researcher subjectivity. Finally, comics can document agency by representing negotiations of assent and ethically documenting absences in the data record. Through this analysis, I caution that on its own, arts-based research does not center justice (Keifer-Boyd, 2011) and that comics, just like any other research method, is not immune from perpetuating harm (Pirie, 2025). Still, comics can bring much-needed nuance to depictions of children in research, pushing back on essentialized framings and bringing specificity to the gaps in traditional alphabetic texts that describe students' learning.

## Context and Methods

This analysis is drawn from a broader case study examining students' multimodal composing to speak about and enact justice across a literacy module in one fifth grade classroom. In this analysis, I focus on one methodological question: How do comics field notes represent youth classroom composing practices and offer affordances for justice-centered research?

### Context

The site of the study was Kristin's fifth grade classroom in a mid-sized Midwestern city. Kristin and I first met as research team members on a prior project in her classroom. I was drawn to continue working with Kristin and to continue investigating the teaching and learning of her and her students for several reasons. First, the class shared a passion for social justice; they frequently discussed social and environmental issues, and Kristin framed students and herself as activists and potential changemakers. Second, many members of the class shared an enthusiasm for the arts. Kristin understood artmaking as a means of supporting students in articulating knowledge in varied ways, of engaging students as they learned about new content, and of designing differentiated lessons with accessibility in mind as the arts inherently offered multiple "right" ways of completing assignments (Halverson, 2021). These were important features in Kristin's inclusive classroom where students brought a variety of strengths and dis/abilities. Finally, Kristin was eager to engage in curricular co-design with her students, with me, and with additional researchers and school staff who observed or participated in her class over the course of the year. This interest was reflected in Kristin's openness to adapting the direction of lessons to address student interests, in the ways that other class members often chimed in during class to teach one another, and in her nontraditional classroom management strategies, empowering students to help create and maintain their learning environments. Thus, this case was purposively

selected as a context in which multimodal and arts-based composing happened frequently and in wide-ranging ways.

At the time of the study, Kristin was in her eighth year at the public pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school where the study took place, with nineteen years of teaching experience overall. Kristin's students were a racially, culturally, and economically diverse group of ten and eleven-year-olds. Her twenty-two students identified as 32% Black, 27% two or more races, 22% white, and 18% Asian. All students were invited to participate in the study; twelve students completed the consent and assent process. The focus of the study was a single literacy module which students participated in during English Language Arts class in the last eight weeks of the school year. The module centered the thematic topic of natural disasters and was drawn from a provided curriculum used throughout the school district. The module featured a wide variety of activities including the analysis of poetry, informational texts, and illustrated narratives. However, Kristin and I strategically adapted the module to more fully center the arts in students' learning. Across the module, students created response drawings to texts they read, wrote original comics telling stories of natural disaster through words and images, and created multimodal public service announcement videos in which they acted as meteorologists and shared information about extreme weather preparedness. In addition to co-planning activities, Kristin also invited me to co-teach lessons throughout the module.

**Data Collection**

Across the fourth quarter of the school year, I observed, participated in, and at times, co-designed and co-taught, afternoon literacy classes in Kristin's classroom. I generated data using qualitative and arts-based methods including artifact collection (n=408), interviews (n=15), written observational field notes of each visit based upon audio recordings (n=26), and comics

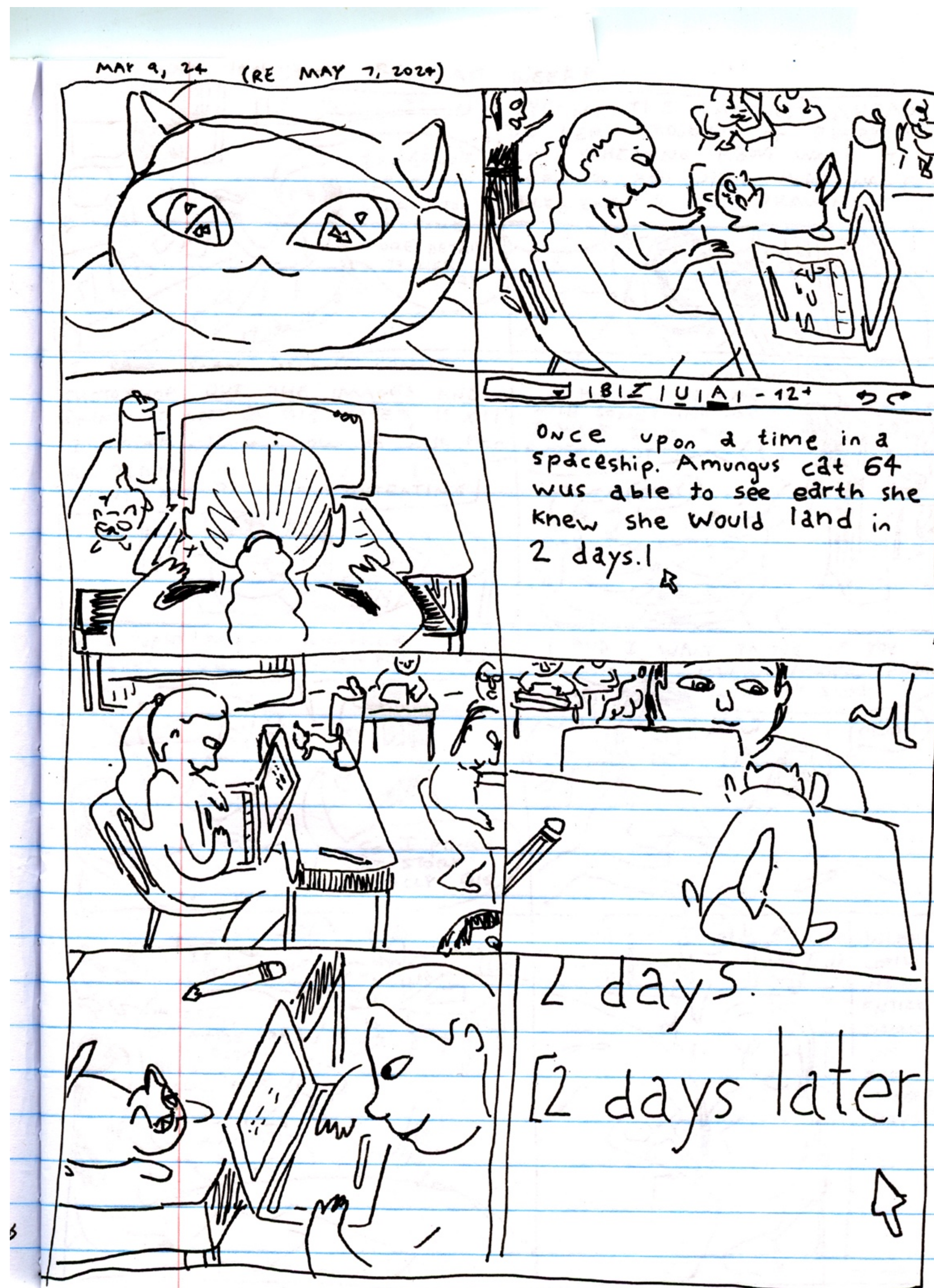
field notes. This analysis focuses on the creation and interpretation of comics field notes, comprising 132 drawings created by hand in black pen during the period of data generation. Rendered in a simple cartoon style, I often used a timer and constrained drawing to a predetermined 3-5 minutes to avoid overthinking and to support a process of discovery. Inspired by Barry's (2019) comics pedagogy, I drew participants' full bodies whenever possible to convey body language and movement. While I was careful not to intentionally invent details in the scenes that I drew, I worked quickly and left mistakes as part of the data record rather than starting over or correcting errors.

I created comics field notes using three distinct creative processes. Most often, I drew classroom interactions from memory in the hours or days immediately following classroom observations without referencing audio recordings or other forms of data. These data took the form of single drawings and multi-panel sequential compositions. Some comics included text but used minimal dialogue to avoid misrepresentation. For example, I created an eight-drawing sequential narrative depicting student Jasmine writing a story on her laptop computer. The drawings show Jasmine's workspace from different points of view and emphasize a cat stuffed animal perched beside her computer. Two drawings in the sequence zoom in on Jasmine's computer screen and show excerpts of her written story which reference a cat character inspired by the stuffed toy (see Figure 12). While this example includes no dialogue, I sometimes included small snippets of dialogue from memory in these compositions if I felt confident in my ability to accurately represent talk. I also included narration at the top of some drawings to provide added context. For example, I drew myself walking down the hallway waving at two students accompanied by the following narrative text: "I arrive while kids are finishing lunch."

On the page beside a given comics field note, I often included self-notes regarding supporting information such as the names of depicted participants.

**Figure 12**

*A Comics Field Note of Jasmine Staring at Her Stuffed Cat Toy While Writing*



When an interaction which I sought to represent through drawing included extensive dialogue or detailed depictions of classroom artifacts, I referenced other forms of data throughout the process of composing. First, I transcribed relevant portions of audio recordings generated in the classroom. Then, I listened back to the audio recording of the class session as I transcribed direct quotes within speech bubbles emanating from drawn characters. I also referenced scans and photographs of materials and work samples such as student compositions and picture book illustrations as I depicted these materials through drawing. Other drawn details including the configuration of the physical classroom space were informed by my memory of the class session. When drawings referenced multiple, additional data sources (e.g., audio recordings, artifacts) the composing process was more time consuming and less intuitive as I repeatedly referenced, moved among, and strategically integrated multiple data sources as I worked.

Further, I created several drawings of students from observation in real time within the focal classroom (n=3). These drawings were created rarely because I was usually in motion—talking to students, circulating the classroom, or co-teaching at the front of the class. However, when I was able, I drew scenes in the classroom as they were occurring, including during an afternoon read-aloud and in a quiet moment at lunch. In these moments, students sometimes asked me what I was working on. Drawing live in the classroom created opportunities for reciprocity as students and I chatted informally and shared our respective projects.

In addition to the drawings that I created during the period of data generation, I have also continued to create drawings in the subsequent months. I have drawn as a method for sensemaking in the analytic process (Leavy, 2020) and to add head notes (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010) to the data record that are absent across other forms of data. However, this analysis focuses on drawings created *during* my time in the field, between April and June of 2024.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed throughout the period of data generation and in the following months. In the sections below, I describe the approach to data analysis across methods in the broader study before focusing specifically on the process of analyzing pictorial field notes.

### *Analysis of the Broader Data Set*

While data generation was still ongoing, I began analysis by transcribing audio recordings, creating comics field notes, and writing analytic memos (Lareau, 2021) that synthesized data across methods. Next, I qualitatively coded (Saldaña, 2021) the dataset using digital spreadsheets to assign descriptive, process, and in vivo codes to data excerpts. I also printed audio transcripts and scans of classroom artifacts and sorted and re-sorted data excerpts into physical piles to better visualize the relationships among data. I used theory to help support the interpretation of data. For example, drawing on critical literacies, I coded for compositional redesign (Vasquez et al., 2019), understanding acts of writing (broadly defined) as opportunities to potentially critique and redistribute power. Drawing on spatial justice (Soja, 2010), I coded for instances in which students' compositions transformed physical space. I triangulated data across methods (Maxwell, 2013) to enhance trustworthiness. I found comics field notes to be the most difficult to analyze using traditional qualitative coding techniques, thus I focus on my analysis of those data in the following section.

### *Analysis of Comics-Based field notes*

The process of analysis surrounding comics field notes began *as* rather than *after* these compositions were created (Smith et al., 2015). During the process of visual portrayal, I made analytic decisions as I selected which classroom interactions to draw, juxtaposed moments across time beside each other in multi-panel sequences, and chose which details of a scene to highlight

through the process of visual depiction. After creating the comics by hand in a small composition notebook, I immediately scanned each composition and integrated them within the corresponding digital files containing traditional text-based notes from that particular day. Thus, as I coded the dataset, the comics-based field notes were tagged with many of the same codes as other forms of data. For example, I coded a comics passage in which a student's work in progress fell to the floor and was not retrieved as "resisting engagement," a code that was also applied to audio transcripts and text-based field notes. In this way, I triangulated comics field notes with other forms of data as I investigated how students made meaning about and enacted justice across the study.

As I sought to better understand how comics field notes uniquely represented youth composing in the classroom, I also analyzed these data apart from the broader dataset. I printed copies of comics field notes and annotated them, recording noticings about the interactions depicted through the data and also about *my own creative choices* in how interactions were represented. For example, I noted my choice to sometimes depict myself in scenes with students while at other times, omitting my physical body and instead drawing from first-person perspective. Overall, my process of analyzing visual data was less pre-structured than textual coding processes, resulting in both moments of discomfort and surprise. At times, I felt a tension regarding the ways that my subjectivity became hypervisible through these data, present in my visual style, linework, and other creative choices. However, I also saw the visibility of my subjectivity as a move towards broader goals of transparency. I sought to represent rather than obscure my researcher subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988) and the comics field notes supported that commitment. I found the process of analyzing comics data to be much less linear than other processes of analysis across the project, and I worked to embrace this non-linearity rather than

forcing the analytical and epistemological assimilation of an arts-based approach within a traditional social sciences framework (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

**Positionality**

I reject the possibility of objectivity and recognize that this analysis and the broader study were shaped by my multiple and intersecting identities. I am a white, non-disabled, adult woman raised in the Southern United States. I was a relative outsider among students, most of whom were racially minoritized youth born and raised in the Midwest. Across data generation, analysis, and writing, I sought to center the experiences of multiply marginalized youth participants (hooks, 1984) and to destabilize the power afforded me via my privileged identities in the classroom space whenever possible.

Also relevant to this study, I am a former K–12 art teacher and a visual artist. Experiences in my own classroom informed my approach to lesson design and instruction and supported my recognition of and respect for Kristin's highly skilled—and at times, subtle—teacher "moves." Further, because I shared about my background as an artist, students often showed me their own artworks or asked me for help with art projects in the classroom. I engaged in these conversations and collaborations eagerly while recognizing that my clear enthusiasm for the arts might be off-putting for students who did not share my interest. Finally, my arts background supported my creation of comics field notes throughout the study. While I find drawing to be challenging, even after many years of practice, my experiences as an artist informed my use and development of these methods. Still, anyone who can make lines on paper can create comics field notes. While this analysis does not offer detailed instructions on how to create these kinds of drawings, I plan to promote access to these methods through more direct guidance in future publications.

# Findings

In the following sections I analyze three focal compositions to show how comics field notes represented student composing and offered affordances for justice-centered research.

## Bodies in Motion: Comics Diversify Portrayals of Classroom Learning

To meet space requirements of academic journals and publishers and to directly communicate main ideas in research writing, many details about the nuances of space and about participants' bodies get omitted from published writing. Some omissions are necessary: it would be impossible and confusing to attempt to record and subsequently represent every detail about a research context. While still necessarily incomplete, drawing offers opportunities for succinctly describing setting and participants in research (Weaver-Hightower, 2013). Not only may drawings support audiences in constructing detailed understandings of contexts and participants, these depictions can also help complicate assumptions–an especially important affordance in representing youth whose bodies are marginalized in relation to socially constructed racialized, ableist, and cisgendered norms (Pirie, 2025). Through comics field notes, researchers can represent children with complexity and specificity, disrupting stereotypes about what learning looks like in schools.

For example, on the first day of data generation for the study, I arrived to the classroom as students worked on fictional public service announcements (PSAs), short videos in which students warned the public about imagined natural disasters and used their learning in the broader unit to explain how communities should respond and prepare for weather-related crises. Kristin asked that I help students plan and record their videos in small groups, and we set up a makeshift workspace in the hallway. Logan and her partner were the last group that I worked with that day, and they faced time pressure as the end of class drew near. Logan explained, “I’m

trying to figure out what to do" and spent time experimenting with different fonts in a document file on her laptop computer. With only a few minutes of class remaining, Logan asked that I transcribe her and her partner's ideas. Across the last five minutes of class, they quickly generated a script for a short video which they dictated as I scribed. "Attention, hurricanes are coming to Florida," the script began. Logan and her partner went on to include recommendations for evacuating, gathering food and water, and staying inside for the duration of the storm. A transcription of the audio recording documents the collaborative work session which ends with Kristin briefly joining the group and sending students to their next class.

As I wrote field notes from home that evening to describe students' interactions, I added a drawing of the work session with Logan and her partner (see Figure 13). In the drawing, I am shown kneeling on the floor of the hallway, scribing the students' script on Logan's laptop computer. Beside me, Logan's chair sits empty and she appears in front of me upside down in mid-cartwheel. In response to the image, I wrote myself a note about the scene in handwritten print on the bottom of the page:

> If you were to take a snapshot of this moment, I'm not sure you would assume this to be a productive meeting. Logan is literally doing a gymnastics routine as we talk. I can only see here [sic] from the corner of my eye—a blur of constant motion.

**Figure 13**

*Comics-based Field Note of Logan, Her Partner, and Me Collaborating in the School's Hallway*

The single panel comics field note highlights Logan's movement as she collaborated with her partner and me on the PSA script. This movement—across the floor and literally through the air—is represented prominently in the drawing but is missing from the audio transcript of the scene. At no point did Logan reference gymnastics as she brainstormed and composed the script nor did anyone comment on her acrobatics. Because it was absent from participants' talk, Logan's movement was absent from the data record aside from my drawing of the scene and subsequently-prompted written notes. While Logan's gymnastics routine did not directly inform the content of her class assignment in any way that I was aware of, her movement mattered as a part of her compositional process to be documented, and even highlighted. Through drawing, I was able to emphasize and "honor multiple ways of knowing, including sensory knowing" (Osei-Kofi, 2013, p.137) in the interaction, even without fully understanding the connection between her sensory engagement and knowledge production.

While children are often required to make meaning in narrow ways deemed "appropriate" for school that include keeping their bodies still (Milner et al., 2019), Kristin practiced a nontraditional classroom management system in which students were empowered to make many choices about the form of their learning. Oftentimes, students were invited to move their bodies during lessons, both in ways directly related to the curriculum (e.g., when students acted the part of a newscaster in their PSA videos) and when movement indirectly supported students focus, comfort, or expression (e.g., Logan's cartwheels). Logan, an energetic student, often stretched and spun during the school day and frequently participated in curricular discussions as she wordlessly did cartwheels and splits while listening to her classmates. Further, these movements were part of how Logan understood herself. When I asked her to share her name, demographic information, and any other details to describe herself at the end of an interview, Logan selected "[physically] flexible" and "gymnast" as two of the three descriptors that she wanted to share. Gymnastics was important to Logan in how she represented herself and thus, in a conception of research that honors participants desires, gymnastics became important to me in how I represented Logan in this writing.

As Osei-Kofi (2013) writes, we "bring our bodies to the learning experiences" (p.146), and comics offer affordances for representing bodies in context and in motion. As a move towards justice-centered research, the field note embodies what Keifer-Boyd (2011) calls *arts-insight*, that is, arts research that offers representations of marginalized or non-normative perspectives. The drawing of this work session pushes back on ableist portrayals of elementary school classrooms as necessarily quiet and still, while seeking to represent Logan with nuance and detail that would feel accurate to Logan herself and to her peers.

**Composing through Time: Comics Highlight Subjectivity and Relationships**

While even a single image like the drawing of Logan doing a cartwheel provided important context about the research site and complicated limited notions about what productive classroom spaces could look like, multi-panel compositions offered even more insight about how student interactions and compositions evolved across time. I frame all 132 drawings created during the period of data generation as one extended comic, an overarching sequential narrative. However, sometimes I created shorter comics as part of the overall composition which used multiple panels to narrate a scene or interaction.

Through the use of multi-panel storytelling, comics field notes emphasized my perception of time, showing how processes unfolded in the classroom across discrete moments. Even as a two-dimensional medium, comics are particularly well suited to portray time, as they turn "time into space on the page" (Chute, 2016, p.5). A comics' sense of time is informed by the artist-researcher who can represent time in different ways (McCloud, 1993), stretching pivotal moments across many panels, thereby creating the perception of slowed down time (Watson, 2025), or conversely, jumping across significant time between panels, connecting seemingly disparate events. This form emphasizes researcher subjectivity, as the reader experiences the writer's manipulation of time laid out visually on the page.

For instance, on May 3rd, I created a comics field note portraying a classroom interaction that occurred on April 30th, the tenth day of the focal module. On that day, students began a comics project themselves, telling stories related to natural disasters with words and images that demonstrated their learning in the broader unit. Students began by completing worksheets which prompted them to brainstorm ideas for their stories. As students worked, Kristin and I circulated

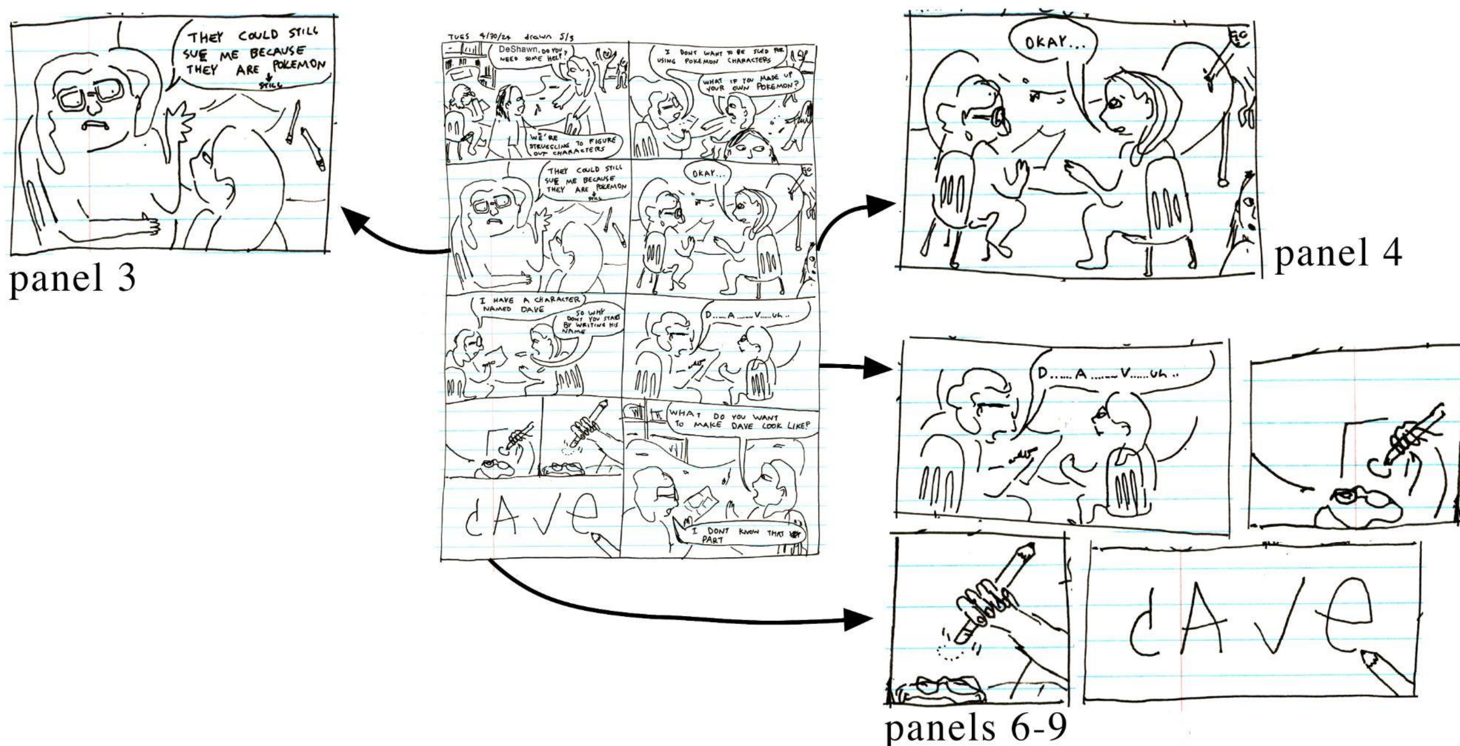
the classroom, asking guiding questions to support any students who needed help brainstorming ideas.

The comics field note that I created documents a three-and-a-half-minute consultation with fifth grade student DeShawn (see Figure 14). Despite taking place across a relatively brief period of time, the interaction is portrayed across twenty distinct drawings, the longest composition within the broader corpus of comics field notes. I drew myself approaching DeShawn's workspace, discussing potential characters with DeShawn, and asking guiding questions as DeShawn wrote and drew on his brainstorm worksheet. While a scanned copy of DeShawn's worksheet is part of the data corpus as is a transcription of the audio recorded interaction, the comics field note integrated data across modes. Its creation promoted meaning making across data sources, itself an early stage of analysis (Leavy, 2020). Further, the comic documented aspects of process that were not logged through artifact collection nor audio recording. For example, the composition portrays the body language and facial expressions of both DeShawn and me. Panel three shows DeShawn's concerned expression as he explains his discomfort using pre-existing characters in his comics (see Figure 14). It was difficult to hear the concern and growing frustration in DeShawn's voice in the audio recording, but his worried eyes and waving hand in this drawing help to communicate details about the emotional tenor of this moment in the interaction. Further, multiple panels zoom out to show both DeShawn and my full bodies, portraying our body language, proximity to one another, and the surrounding objects and space. For instance, in panel four I drew DeShawn and I sitting beside one another at a collaborative workspace in the focal classroom. I lean in towards DeShawn as he looks down at a blank sheet of paper with other students moving around the nearby space (see Figure 14). The

drawing helps to contextualize the compositional process along with the transcript of our verbal conversation.

**Figure 14**

*Page One of a Comics-Based Field Note of DeShawn's Compositional Process*




I perceived this interaction with DeShawn as developing slowly, and I stretched out the interaction across panels to communicate this slowness. I depicted DeShawn sounding out and scribing the name *Dave* across several panels and erasing an error (panels 6-9, see Figure 14). In panels fourteen through eighteen, I show DeShawn continuing his composition, drawing the face of his character feature by feature (see Figure 15). By creating this field note, I better appreciated what I perceived as painstaking labor on DeShawn's part; he was a student who generally participated enthusiastically in lessons and shared insights in class discussions but described writing and drawing in an interview as "painful." He preferred activities that did not require scribing by hand. Further, the creation and analysis of the field note illuminated a contrast

between these slow parts of DeShawn's compositional process and other aspects that developed much more quickly. For example, after creating his first drawing of Dave as documented in the field note, DeShawn went on to take inspiration from Dave's physical form, quickly inventing and orally narrating a backstory to explain why Dave looked the way that he did. The comics field note helped draw my attention to the temporal variety of DeShawn's compositional process, informing my conceptualization of certain parts of DeShawn's process as compositional play (as described in the previous chapter).

**Figure 15**

*Page Two of a Comics Field Note Representing DeShawn's Compositional Process*

While I created this comics field note to better understand DeShawn's process, what I saw looking back at the composition during a second round of analysis was my own subjectivity on the page. I saw my own voice represented prominently in handwriting as I asked guiding questions that informed DeShawn's composition, and my own perception of time presented through hand-drawn frames. I reflected that it was me who perceived this interaction as feeling slow, perhaps impacted by internalized, developmental norms about the "appropriate" pace of writing and drawing in a fifth grade classroom (Sakr & Osgood, 2019). I did not ask DeShawn if he agreed with my perception, and I worried that my subjectivity of these data made them somehow invalid. However, arts-based researchers challenge a fact versus fiction dichotomy, arguing that data expressing feelings and subjective perception are still–at least in some sense–true (Osei-Kofi, 2013). Through comics field notes, this subjectivity is in full view as I am depicted participating fully in the interaction and as the encounter is framed through my perspective. My engagement with research participants as a fellow collaborator, learner, and teacher is reflected in these drawings, which privilege representing my interactions with participants, rather than seeking to write myself out of the research context (Green, 2014). This approach requires a careful interrogation of bias to disrupt overinterpretation. However, the method also reflects an approach to research that centers the humanity of everyone in the space: students, teachers, and me (Paris & Winn, 2014).

**Enactments of Agency: Comics Highlight Negotiations of (Non)Participation**

In some comics field notes like the one described in the previous section, I represented student compositions, copying portions of student-made artifacts and placing the depictions in a broader context to share details about where and how students created their work. However, in other comics, it was the *absence* of student compositions which I portrayed. For example, I drew

one student with his hands in his lap and a blank piece of paper on his desk as classmates drew and wrote at desks all around him. In another comics, I showed a student and her reactions when her composition went missing in the classroom, documenting how she moved forward without it. In this way, comics field notes sometimes highlighted what students *did not* make or *did not* share. As I planned to generate data, it did not occur to me to document these absences. When students were prompted to draw or write I would generally collect the writing and art that they made, scanning and returning their work without documenting compositions that were not shared, if any. However, through comics field notes, I documented absences from the data record, examining how absences themselves might be important data.

For example, on the fifth day of the focal literacy unit, students read a picturebook titled *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* written by Edwidge Dantican and illustrated by Alix Delinois (2010). The book's narrator, a child named Junior, tells the story of being trapped under his home for eight days after a catastrophic earthquake. Each spread of pages documents one day that Junior survived under his house while waiting to be rescued. After engaging in several discussion activities about the text, students were instructed to create an addendum to the text. A slide on the classroom's smart board read, "Imagine this book was called nine days: a story of Haiti. What would happen on the ninth day? Write and/or draw a final page to the story." As students' work time neared to a close, I walked by student Jasmine's desk, and she shared her idea in progress. An excerpt of a comics field note portrays our interaction as part of a larger sequential composition depicting moments from the day's lesson. The first panel presents a slightly zoomed-out scene showing the context of Jasmine and my conversation. In the drawing, Jasmine is seated at her desk with her head turned to face me. I am bent over slightly as I approach Jasmine's workspace to listen while other students work at desks nearby. "I'm drawing

him [protagonist Junior] in his bed," Jasmine shared as she drew, hunched over a piece of copy paper (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16**

*Comics Field Note of Jasmine Drawing in Class*

The second panel depicts my response to Jasmine, showing a more zoomed-in framing of our interaction. Crouched above Jasmine's workspace, the panel shows both Jasmine and my head and shoulders close together as I lean in to talk. I asked Jasmine for permission to photograph her work with an eager expression on my face saying, "Can I take a picture?" In the drawing, I hold up my phone between Jasmine's face and mine. "Nuh-uh," Jasmine replied quietly. In the comic, small lines indicate the shaking of Jasmine's head.

The final panel in the sequence shows the same scene from my perspective with only Jasmine visible. Jasmine holds a pencil in one hand and with the other hand covers the drawing of her work while looking up at me. The comic panels make visible Jasmine's non-assent to having her work photographed and shared. I slid my phone back into my pocket and continued circulating the room, leaving Jasmine to keep working on her drawing. At the end of the activity students volunteered to share their compositions with the group, and I photographed work by students who were willing to share. Jasmine kept her drawing to herself.

The comics panels make visible Jasmine's non-assent with having her work photographed and shared beyond the context of her classroom. While Jasmine was eager to tell me about what she was working on, she made clear through body language (e.g., shaking her head and obscuring her work with her hand) that she did not wish to share the work itself. While she also answered verbally ("nuh-uh") when I asked to take a picture of her work, Jasmine's response was quiet and is not audible on the audio recording of the class session. Thus, across other data sources (e.g., written field notes transcribed from audio recordings, artifact collection), my interaction with Jasmine was not represented. Of course, if I had IRB approval and necessary technology and support to generate video data I might have represented Jasmine's response with more fidelity through video. Still, video data is far from objective and presents its own challenges. As Watson (2025) writes while explaining the rationale for representing interactions with children as comics in qualitative research, children negotiate assent in research as "embodied, multimodal process that can be fleeting and easily missed" (p. 1131). Through comics, researchers can curate interactions, editing out extraneous details and emphasizing the "fleeting" and "easily missed" body language, movements, and subtle interactions that might not translate on video. Further, the anonymity afforded to participants through the simplified

drawing of comics and the non-obtrusiveness of the method (drawings can be made after an interaction without disrupting or drawing extra attention to an interaction) are affordances not offered by video data.

The comics field note does not add Jasmine's drawing of Junior into the data record. Jasmine did not want the drawing included. Jasmine often chose to share her work with me during class, and I do not know why she decided to keep this drawing to herself. It is possible that the vulnerability of composing about difficult content (tragedy endured by a child) may have informed Jasmine's choice. Still, the fact that I did not see Jasmine's composition does not negate any value this composition may have held for her. Tuck and Yang (2014) write about *forms of knowledge the academy does not deserve* as a framework for recognizing narratives of pain that participants do not wish to share. Perhaps this composition was deeply personal for Jasmine and therefore intentionally withheld from the data record. I cannot know.

While the comics-based field note of our interaction does not depict Jasmine's composition, it does depict an enactment of agency by Jasmine as a research participant. The absence of Jasmine's drawing from the data record was her choice, and the comics field note documents how she dissented to one part of the data generation process despite enthusiastically engaging in the research at many other moments throughout the unit. In this moment, drawing represented Jasmine's dissent by "grappling with the complexities of children's identity as autonomous capable research participants" (Watson, 2025, p.3). While opportunities to participate are frequently framed as empowering for children in research, in this instance drawing complicates notions of participation as implicitly empowering, documenting agency in non-participation on Jasmine's own terms (Madrid-Monique, 2020). The drawing I created

added a complex portrayal of Jasmine to the data record, showing her as an agentic research participant who negotiated the assent process on an ongoing basis.

The creation of this comic relatively early in the study's data generation process was also instructive to me as I negotiated ethical engagement with students throughout my time in their classroom. Visual literacies research points to a particularly strong impact of images on memory (Griffin & Schwartz, 2005; Leavy, 2020), and after making these drawings, the image of Jasmine covering her composition with her hand stuck in my mind. Arts-based methods may not only realistically represent interactions but may also construct symbols or metaphors (Madrid-Monique, 2020), and this drawing took on symbolic significance. By marking the absence of Jasmine's composition in the data record, the drawing served as a reminder to listen and look for students' articulations of assent and dissent throughout the remainder of the study, however subtle. Arts-based approaches may prompt researcher transformation (Osei-Kofi, 2013), and I proceeded with increased awareness of students' cues regarding their desire to participate (or not) in each aspect of the study. I recognized that students' participation was made all the more vulnerable through their engagement with the heavy content of the focal unit around disaster and their creation of open-ended artistic work. While this moment with Jasmine could have quickly faded from my mind and from the data record in a blur of hundreds of classroom conversations, the comics composition documented the interaction and supported my attunement to students' subtle and multimodal cues of assent and dissent (Watson, 2025). Critical to enacting justice-centered approaches to research is an engagement with youth participants on their own terms (Paris & Winn, 2014). This field note documented one such moment and paved the way for engagement that respected students' agency and autonomy.

## Discussion and Implications

In this chapter, I examined how comics field notes represented youth composing practices in a fifth grade classroom and offered affordances for justice-centered research. First, I showed how comics can complicate normative assumptions about what classroom learning actually looks like, bringing specificity that might otherwise be left out of academic writing. Second, I showed how comics can emphasize rather than obscure researcher subjectivity, bringing awareness to the constructedness of research. Finally, comics highlighted enactments of agency as students communicated assent and dissent, offering reminders to look for and honor subtle cues in how students wished to participate.

Taken together, these analyses of comics field notes highlight ways that the method can complexify representations of children, crucial for justice-centered research. As Dyson (2005) writes, students in research are too often presented as decontextualized data, "faceless, nameless, and overwhelming. But these massive numbers of children are not isolated individuals; they are social participants included, or so we hope, in particular classrooms and schools, in particular institutions and communities' (p.177). Rather than only disembodied pseudonyms on a page or decontextualized statistics, comics field notes present students as embodied and alive, engaging in their environments in a wide variety of ways. Further comics depict students enacting agency, making empowered choices about the form of their learning and terms of their research participation. As researchers engage in projects that seek to disrupt oppressive practices and highlight the brilliance of minoritized students, they must align justice-oriented research topics with justice-centered research practices (Tuck & Yang, 2014). This work is all the more important in elementary schools, where younger students are not always framed as capable participants with expertise about their experiences (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). Comics field notes

are a method well-suited to justice-centered research as sequential drawings work to represent the agency and multidimensionality of participants.

Further, comics field notes disrupt notions of objectivity by humanizing the research process, representing researchers as an inevitable part of the research context and providing insight about relationships and interactions among researchers and participants. This framing highlights the constructedness of data. In these analyses, I visually depicted my engagement with students and brought attention to the ways that data reflected my own perspective. Rather than threatening the trustworthiness of the work, this framing seeks to disrupt singular, researcher authority and makes space for multiple perspectives which productively complicate depictions of teaching and learning.

This analysis also offers a model for one kind of mixed methods research integrating qualitative and artistic forms of knowledge production. Rather than instrumentalizing art making to accommodate disciplinary requirements of the social sciences (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013), I acknowledge and embrace comics making as an arts practice and valid form of knowledge production in its own right. I seek to embrace many of the qualities that make ABR distinct from qualitative methods: a foregrounding of aesthetics, emotions, and subjectivity, for example. In combining arts-based and qualitative approaches, I seek to foster "epistemological respect and reciprocity rather than epistemological assimilation or colonization” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p.237). Still, I recognize that the perceived cultural capital of traditional social science research formats (Tuck & Yang, 2014) impacts this analysis. After all, this chapter adheres to many of the norms of traditional social scientific writing. I wonder what additional insights might become articulable if I re-imagined this analysis in a different format less tied to social scientific norms, for example, as a comic book. In future work, I plan to explore additional

artistic forms for CBR work, as the genre and medium of the work influence potential audience and expressive potential.

This analysis builds on existing literature by highlighting researcher-created comics as data with important affordances for representing meaning-making beyond words (Flowers, 2017), prompting early analysis (Leavy, 2020), and creating nuanced representations of children in education research. While a recent proliferation of cross-disciplinary literature in comics-based research has explored many approaches for including comics in the research process (Kuttner et al., 2021), there is scant literature describing comics as a method of data generation. CBR much more commonly takes up comics as a form of scholarly dissemination, engaged with only once data generation and analysis are complete and often created in collaboration with an outside comics artist who does not have first-hand experience of the research site.

In the instances when comics are used as part of the data generation process, they are much more commonly prompted by researchers and created by participants rather than penned by researchers themselves (e.g., Abas, 2023; Simon et al., 2022). While participant-generated comics data offers important insights into participant perspectives, future analyses could pair participant and researcher-generated comics as two methods of complementary data generation. For researchers that elicit comics-based data from participants, making comics data themselves could offer important insight into the vulnerability of creating and sharing art to represent experiences. A better understanding of the comics-making process through direct participation also supports researchers' analysis of comics-based data more broadly and may help prevent over interpretation as researchers come to better understand the limits of comics-based data through experiences of first-person creation.

Additionally, this study contributes to and extends literature on comics-based field notes as a method for data generation specifically with children. My focus on fifth grade students offers important insights about representing elementary-aged learners, as related, prior scholarship has generally focused on pre-school aged populations (e.g., Flowers, 2017; Tatham-Fashanu, 2023; Watson, 2025). I extend previous work that highlights how comics can represent multimodal meaning-making and unify visual, textual, and body-sensory data in the upper-elementary classroom. While it might be assumed that meaning making becomes more word-focused as students grow older, this study emphasizes the need for multimodal and arts-based representations beyond early childhood as well, emphasizing the diversity of gestures, movements, and interactions used by people of all ages to communicate. Along these lines, I suggest the need for additional research that uses comics-based field notes to represent the learning of students beyond early childhood, pushing back against assumptions that learning interactions among elementary and secondary students are somehow less multimodal or less embodied than the learning of very young children.

I also acknowledge important limitations of comics field notes for data generation. First, while fast paced, improvisational, and “spontaneous” drawing (Barry, 2019) facilitated a process of discovery (Smith et al., 2015), the drawing process risked compromising accuracy, especially in regards to spoken dialogue. When I created quick drawings of classroom interactions, I imagined myself in a scene and communicated details of body language, affect, and spatial orientation, often without explicit plans to do so. However, I avoided including lengthy portions of students’ talk as I was unable to recall participants’ words verbatim without referencing audio transcripts. In select compositions, I worked more slowly and repeatedly cross-referenced other data sources (see Figures 3 and 4). Slower, more meticulous compositions were less revelatory

analytically, but ensured accuracy–at least of spoken language–and allowed for the integration of multiple data sources (e.g., audio recordings, scans of artifacts, head notes), another useful aim for comics data. As researchers plan for the use of comics field notes, they can design their approaches to artmaking with these affordances and limitations in mind, selecting creative processes that best align with their goals. Future methodological scholarship could offer additional strategies for the creation of comics-based data generation, adapting instructional resources designed for cartoonists (e.g., Barry, 2019; Brunetti, 2011) for use by researchers. Future work is also needed to support the analysis of comics data, as researchers contend with the method's inherent subjectivity while upholding trustworthiness. Finally, future work could also offer guidance on how to triangulate comics data with qualitative data, ensuring rigor without simply imposing text-based paradigms on arts-based research.

As other research has documented, an additional limitation of comics field notes is that they are generally time consuming to create (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). This is a significant drawback as researchers negotiate constrained time during data generation for study visits, memoing, data organization, transcription, and many other tasks. Still, comics-based data generation can take many forms with single-panel drawings requiring as few as four minutes (e.g. see Figure 2), integrating easily into text-based field notes, and offering useful context to complement or complicate written data.

The inherent subjectivity of comics-based research–and of arts-based research overall–is a central tension of this work. The comics field notes analyzed in this chapter featured my visual style, communicated my sense of time, and presented my own perspective of the research site. In future work, multiple researchers might choose to depict the same interaction and invite participants themselves to document research contexts through comics, complicating singular

authorial subjectivity. Still, the researcher's visual, authorial presence in comics-based research may also prompt audiences to conceive of the constructedness of *all* qualitative research in new ways, leading to more rigorous future scholarship (Kuttner et al., 2021). Further, researchers might try creating comics from the viewpoint of participants to better understand perspectives other than one's own, while recognizing the limitations of what can be known about another's vantage point on the world around them.

As I drew depictions of students throughout the field notes, I strived to create representations that would feel accurate to members of the classroom community. However, I did not formally ask students to reflect on the field notes, nor did I actively seek out feedback on my drawn interpretations of events. In the few existing studies on comics field notes in educational research, scholars note that member checking might help determine if drawn depictions align with youth's self-conceptions (Pirie, 2025) and could lead to the elicitation of additional details (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). Future scholarship can work to create frameworks for using comics-based data in interviews with students or engaging in iterative revision in response to student input.

## Conclusion

As researchers seek to represent the agency and multidimensionality of children, they may find traditional research methods (e.g., traditional interviews, text-based field notes) insufficient to communicate the nuance and complexity of students expressing and resisting meaning (Machado et al., 2024). Here, arts-based methods have a crucial role to play. The comics field notes featured in this analysis showcase how drawing can serve as a resource to recognize and interpret students' multimodal meaning making, complexifying portrayals of students in research. Ultimately, comics-as-method can broaden representations of children in

research, centering justice as researchers seek to describe and highlight the brilliance and variety of students' expression.

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# Chapter 4: Material Transformation with Markers, Scissors, Tape: The Rhetorical Work of Children's Crafts

*I'm in a fifth-grade classroom during an afternoon lesson. Ms. Pellerin paces slowly as she reads aloud from a novel. The class is quiet but abuzz: one student draws faces with markers, while another attaches paper scraps with tape. Soon it's time for recess, and Ms. Pellerin and I sit on a bench near the playground while she keeps eyes focused on her class.*

*Ms. Pellerin tells me that while she noticed various side projects during the read aloud, today she didn't mind since students were listening intently; sometimes kids just need to do something with their hands. "I think every elementary school classroom should have a maker's space," she says.*

*"I think your classroom* ***is*** *a maker space," I reply.*

*Ms. Pellerin laughs. "I guess you're right."*

Whether doodling with markers while listening to a story or creating friendship bracelets at lunchtime, students in Kristin Pellerin's class were constantly making crafts. These creations–constructed with multiple, colorful, and dimensional materials like markers, folded paper, and supplies brought from home—were just one part of a diverse literacy landscape. Still, crafting differed from other classroom literacies in important ways. First, unlike spontaneous dance routines or oral discussion contributions that began and ended across seconds, students' crafts endured across significant time. In addition to temporal durability, students' crafts occupied space. Different from the many worksheets that were turned in daily, classroom crafts were designed to be seen and took up physical and visual classroom real estate.

Existing literature explores the value of crafting-as-literacy for a variety of purposes. For example, crafting makes room for students to pursue varied individual interests (Dalton, 2020)

and tell family stories while disrupting monolingual language ideologies (Machado et al., 2023). Barajas-López and Bang (2018) attend to the histories and cultural specificity of materials for making as they documented claywork among youth in an indigenous summer program. While scholars of multimodality assert that different kinds of composing materials have distinct affordances (Halverson, 2021; Kress, 2003), scant scholarship has emphasized the particular potentials of craft materials to alter spaces. In this paper, I share findings highlighting how fifth grade students used the aesthetic and dimensional qualities of crafts to modify space. In doing so, I take up Royster and Kirsch (2012) drawing on Geertz's (1973) conception of "tacking in" and "tacking out." By tacking in—that is, zooming in to pay close attention to the details of students' compositions in overlooked sites of the elementary school—this analysis underscores the subtle but consequential work students do through crafts to make spaces more inclusive. Ultimately, this analysis considers the environments where students learn as more than "voids simply to be designed and filled" (Kervin et al., 2019, p.23) and suggests that positioning students as co-creators of their learning spaces can be an important step towards justice. I ask: *How do fifth grade students use crafting to enact spatial justice through transformations of school spaces?*

## Thinking with Spatial Justice and Liberatory Feminist Perspectives

I frame this study through a theory of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) which emphasizes the transformation of physical space as a mechanism for enacting justice. Far from a static background upon which life is carried out, spatial justice considers how geographies actively shape our social world. Further, physical spaces not only transform action, but are themselves transformed in response to human intervention. Humans reconfigure spaces big and small in ways that are informed by our ideologies, from redrawing the borders of voting districts to rearranging furniture. Spaces are a dynamic reflection of the beliefs and values of their designers,

a fact that frames the intentional transformation of geographies across scales as an overlooked strategy for social justice work (Soja, 2010). Schools are one important site to enact spatial justice; students can engage in critical examinations of the built environment and participate in decision making about what form their learning spaces should take (Comber, 2016).

I bring a liberatory feminist perspective (hooks, 2015) to spatial justice, considering the transformation of geographies as a tactic towards the eradication of "sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p.14). Physical spaces reflect and instantiate sexist ideologies through both features and absences (e.g., lack of lactation rooms in a workplace). Thus, the transformation of space is an avenue through which to counter sexism. Importantly, liberatory feminism affirms the interrelatedness of oppression across axes of identity including gender, race, and sexual identity, calling for solidarity without flattening difference while centering the experiences of multiply marginalized people (hooks, 1984). Towards this goal, hooks (2015) specifically calls for theory that speaks to and is created by voices outside of academia including youth. Young people participate in this vision when they create compositions that articulate injustice and dream of change (Toliver, 2021). In this study, liberatory feminism together with spatial justice illuminated how students took up crafting to counter oppression through physical interventions in their learning spaces. Further, these theories aligned with the feminist pedagogy of Ms. Pellerin, who positioned students as scholars and activists by inviting them to critique power and enact change in class assignments and extracurricular composing.

**Context and Methods**

This analysis comes from a broader, IRB-approved qualitative case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) highlighting the multidisciplinary literacies of fifth grade students in a public PK-5 elementary school in a mid-sized Midwestern city. The broader study investigates how students

used compositional forms including drawings, videos, and comics to speak about social issues and to enact justice. Here, I focus specifically on student-driven crafting: multimodal compositions with a material presence and authentic rhetorical purpose beyond completing a class assignment.

I spent eight weeks in the focal classroom observing student learning and at times, co-teaching literacy classes alongside classroom teacher Ms. Pellerin. Twelve students from the class of twenty-two completed the consent and assent process to participate in the study. I generated data through field notes, interviews, and artifact collection (Lareau, 2021). In alignment with the study's theoretical perspectives, I drew upon feminist rhetorical practices (Royster & Kirsch, 2012) across data generation and analysis, for example, collaborating with Ms. Pellerin and her students as a participant in their classroom community and centering students' self-descriptions in my writing (Blackburn, 2003/2020).

In this analysis, I look closely at two student compositions. These examples speak to the range of composing in the classroom: students crafted in response to motivations beyond the curriculum and curricular tasks, using materials from home and classroom supplies. These examples also illuminate the ways that students worked to make spaces more welcoming to marginalized communities in the school (i.e., girls and LGBTQIA+ people) through material intervention.

### "Guess What I'm Gonna Do!": Designing a Menstrual Care Station

Logan [all student names are pseudonyms], a white eleven-year-old girl, was described by Ms. Pellerin as "a maker at the heart of who she is." True to this description, Logan turned to crafting to propose a solution to problems she encountered when she started her period for the first time at school. She described the situation to her friend Jasmine during recess, explaining

that she had found herself in the bathroom without a pad and felt stuck waiting for help. "[My friend] was gone for like ten minutes, so I didn't even get to eat my lunch!" she exclaimed in frustration. After wondering aloud why the school bathrooms didn't have tampon dispensers, Logan decided that she would make a station with menstrual supplies for the school's bathroom to improve the experience for future children. "I'm gonna grab like a little basket or a bag, and I'm gonna put tampons and some pads in there and maybe some gum [for] if kids start their period," Logan shared excitedly as she and Jasmine spun slowly on the playground's merry-go-round. As she planned the project, her excitement grew. "Guys! Guess what I'm gonna do," Logan called out to friends across the yard.

In conversation with Jasmine, Logan envisioned using her skills as a maker to craft a practical solution (Halverson & Peppler, 2018) to the problem she had faced not having access to menstrual products. She imagined a material intervention that enacted spatial justice (Soja, 2010) by transforming the physical bathroom to be a more conducive place to start one's period. Her proposal countered a sexist and adultist absence (hooks, 1984), that is, the lack of adequate consideration for menstruating children in the school's spatial design. Logan's proposal also demonstrated an attunement to the affordances of her selected materials (Eisner, 2002) as the proposed project not only provided pads and tampons but also considered how materials might communicate emotional care. Her vision accounted for the aesthetic dimensions of the project including the "basket or bag" to hold supplies and hand-drawn signage. Rather than attempting to present as official, these homey touches emphasized the crafted nature of the intervention and spoke to Logan's desire to create an environment where students' more-than-material needs were also considered.

**"It's Okay to Like Both Genders!": Advocating for Queer Acceptance**

While much of the classroom crafting that kids engaged in was self-directed, Ms. Pellerin also prompted engagement with varied materials through assignments. For example, in one math extension activity, kids demonstrated an understanding of fractions by making fraction flags, geometric designs created on paper with markers and collage elements that illustrated fractional proportions including halves, thirds, and fourths. Ms. Pellerin framed the open-ended assignment as an opportunity for students to explore personal interests through symbolism. Allie, an African American ten-year-old girl, co-opted the assignment for her own activist purposes, creating a version of the bisexual flag (see Figure 17). Allie divided the top portion of her page into thirds and colored each portion with markers: magenta, purple, and blue. Underneath her flag's stripes, Allie penned the text "it's okay to like both genders!" punctuated with a smiley face.

**Figure 17**

*Allie's fraction flag*

Allie's choice to articulate a message of queer acceptance through this particular assignment appeared to be strategic. Ms. Pellerin shared in advance that compositions would be displayed on the classroom wall, thus inviting students to be co-creators of the space, and Allie took up this invitation. Allie enacted spatial justice (Soja, 2010) through her contribution to classroom decor, signaling to members of her class and outside visitors that the classroom was a place where queer identities were embraced. Indeed, Allie used the simple materials at her disposal for the assignment (i.e., paper and markers) to maximize impact. She copied the colors and shapes from the "official" bisexual flag for the top half of her composition, creating a recognizable association. Further, Allie strategically modified the bisexual flag design with a caption. Unlike her classmates who mimicked the typical dimensions of a flag on horizontally-oriented paper, Allie oriented her paper vertically, creating space for text. She penned a straightforward caption identifying her flag as an unequivocal statement of queer pride for anyone who overlooked the color symbolism. Through her public composition, Allie dreamed (Toliver, 2021) for a community that celebrated varied sexual identities, reminding people in the classroom that who they were was "okay."

**Discussion and implications**

Through this analysis, I found that crafting was far from an inconsequential pastime in this fifth-grade classroom. Students used crafting towards a feminist conception of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) by transforming spaces of their school in ways that countered oppression. They created an accessible and comfortable context to start one's period and a welcoming environment for queer community members. This analysis extends research on children's multimodal composing for social justice by emphasizing an under-considered aspect of crafts: they occupy

space and thus hold potentials to transform environments. Finally, even though the crafted interventions featured here were decidedly student-driven, this work has implications for classroom teachers. While Ms. Pellerin did not necessarily prompt the crafting practices students engaged in, she quite literally *made space* for students' creations and allowed them to remain in the classroom across significant time. By providing time and materials for students to craft spatial interventions and positioning students as co-creators of classroom environments, this study offers possibilities for how teachers might extend commitments to social justice through student-led transformations of school spaces.

**Afterword**

This dissertation chapter was written in response to a call for articles for a special issue of the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*. This interdisciplinary journal is primarily situated in the field of composition and rhetoric with many editors and contributors working within English departments across the country. The issue was published in spring of 2026 and titled *Composing at the intersections: Queer, trans, feminist multimodal rhetorics*. The editors chose to allocate 2,000 words per article to maximize the number of "high-quality and brilliant submissions" (F. Pouncil, personal communication, December 17, 2024). Through the curation of sixteen short contributions, the editors emphasized the range of multimodal compositions that can be read through queer, trans, and feminist lenses—from a music video of a hip hop star to public art featuring a famed abolitionist and the language surrounding an LGBTQ+ campus resource center (Sanders et al., 2026).

Through my contribution to the special issue, I was excited to be in conversation with scholars outside of the field of education and beyond the social sciences. Mine was the only article in the issue which analyzed the compositions of children, and I used this opportunity to

bring children's perspectives to discussions of queer, trans, and feminist rhetorics that generally center adults. Given the publication's audience, I used the limited space afforded me to analyze two paradigmatic examples of how crafts enacted spatial justice in the focal classroom. Unlike the other, more social-sciences oriented articles that comprise the dissertation, this article does not explicitly articulate themes nor use representative data to explain how students use arts materials for justice-oriented transformation more broadly. Still, by looking closely at two student examples I emphasize what kinds of subtle yet consequential transformations are possible through crafts.

In future writing, I plan to build on this analysis to further explore how students use crafts to create more welcoming and inclusive spaces. I am particularly interested in how crafts not only occupy physical space but also move *through* space as they are passed, gifted, and traded. In the focal classroom, students created crafted toys which were handled by multiple students, they crafted gifts given and received by classmates, and they created wearable compositions (e.g., friendship bracelets) which moved along with students' bodies. I wonder how this highly visible circulation of crafted compositions might be used to communicate belonging, among other purposes. Further, this article does not fully explore the broader context in which this work was (and might continue to be) carried out. While I emphasize that Ms. Pellerin facilitated students' justice-oriented crafting by providing supplies and time for creative production and by making physical space for students' compositions, future work will explore how individuals and systems might not only facilitate but also thwart student's crafted justice work. For instance, how might legislation that prohibits the discussion and celebration of LGBTQ+ people in schools limit crafted interventions like Allie's flag? And might students use crafting to circumvent

structures that perpetuate injustice? I look forward to grappling with these questions as I continue to push this work forward.

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## Chapter 5: Implications and Future Directions

> *What then of drawings? What sort of lifeline might they provide? Well, first of all they provide a welcome pause to the writing machine whereby another philosophy of representation and meditation takes over. It is nice to walk on two legs instead of one.* (Taussig, 2011, p.30)

In his book *I swear I saw this: Drawings in fieldwork notebooks, namely my own*, Taussig (2011) grapples with the role of drawing alongside writing in ethnographic data generation. The metaphor of walking on two legs describes a broadened expressive potential achieved through the combination of drawing and alphabetic writing. An intentionally multimodal approach to field-note writing allows Taussig to switch among composing modes depending on what it is that he aspires to convey. In addition to expanded expressive potential, the arts as research method offer new paradigms for knowledge production (Gadsden, 2008). When Taussig speaks of a "another philosophy of representation," he draws our attention to an epistemological shift in what counts as knowledge.

In chapter three, I take up Taussig's work as I explore drawing as research method alongside writing. I consider how an expanded, arts-based conception of what data and analysis look like might work towards justice through more nuanced and expansive representations of children and learning spaces. Across the dissertation, I document how the students in Kristin Pellerin's class also expanded conceptions of knowledge and knowledge production, using comics to reimagine disaster narratives and crafts to transform school spaces. Across the dissertation, an expanded conception of literacy, and of knowledge more broadly, highlights the brilliant composing of students that might otherwise be overlooked and brings into focus how

students strategically took up various arts modalities as they sought to speak about and enact justice within and beyond their curricular learning.

The purpose of this dissertation has been to highlight how a broadened conception of what counts as literacy learning in the elementary classroom offers students important avenues to speak about and enact justice within and beyond the curriculum. Students in the focal classroom had the freedom to choose among varied, arts-based compositional modes, and they experienced broadened opportunities to articulate critical perspectives, to make non-linear connections, and to focus on process rather than concerns about producing rigidly defined polished products. Across the dissertation, I have also sought to portray the humor, joy, and playfulness of students' (and adult researcher/educators') meaning making while exploring serious issues, foregrounding the role of play in justice-centered education. Not only can play coexist alongside learning about serious topics, but a playful approach supported engagement, criticality, and rigor. This study emphasizes that while students' compositions many not always be interpretable by adults (Templeton, 2024) and may read as trivial or inappropriately lighthearted (Machado & Beneke, 2025), students play and use humor to make sense of and comment on serious issues in their worlds.

Further, through this project I have aimed to disrupt disciplinary silos in research and in teaching. By drawing on scholarship in literacy education, art education, and writing studies, I have sought to portray the breadth of students' compositional practices across modalities and disciplines. I emphasized that students' arts and literacy learning happened across the school day and beyond. I highlighted the authentic work that students seek to do through their compositions, far more than completing a class assignment. Additionally, as a researcher I seek to share this work with multiple disciplinary audiences and to connect social scientific and artistic methods of

inquiry, broadening what counts as legitimate knowledge production with and about students. In the remainder of this concluding chapter, I highlight tensions and limitations for this work, describe additional, forthcoming analyses from this study and consider implications for future teaching and research.

## Tensions

While the focal module suggests exciting possibilities for arts and literacy integrated learning in the elementary school classroom, the study also surfaced tensions as Kristin navigated multiple instructional priorities, as important concepts were glossed over in the focal module, and as I made decisions about how to represent this inquiry in textual form.

### Navigating Skill Development Across Multiple Compositional Modes

One tension surfaced through this study was around limitations in instructional time. More specifically, when students spend more time experimenting with creative modes of representation in the elementary school literacy classroom, they might spend less time engaging in standard academic writing. Kristin alluded to this tension in an interview when she spoke about students' comics making, explaining that unlike in other academic assignments, students "didn't have to do paragraphs if they didn't want to" when composing comics. As a classroom teacher balancing multiple demands and competing priorities, Kristin explained that it was difficult to find time for students to explore the arts while also practicing the conventions of academic writing that would be assessed on high stakes tests. She said:

> It's always one of those things that I question sometimes. Because I am someone who leans towards trying to always incorporate creativity which often will lend itself to meaning you're gonna have a little bit less of this structured writing time [sigh]. And I don't know what the answer is…I go back and forth. Every year I want to make sure that

> these kids go out [to middle school] as really good writers, but in order to do that you kind of have to give them a little bit of creativity.

As Kristin reflected, she worried that arts-based composing would take time away from academic writing tasks and acknowledged that in many contexts beyond her classroom, "good writers" were defined narrowly as those who had learned standard conventions of academic English. Kristin went on to explain an increased feeling of urgency in prioritizing conventional writing practice in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic when she had seen a significant and enduring drop in students' writing confidence. However, Kristin simultaneously emphasized that arts-based assignments–at least "a little bit of creativity"–were sometimes necessary to support traditional writing development, promoting engagement and informing the academic writing process. Literature on arts integration stresses that arts and other disciplinary instruction can be mutually beneficial, supporting learning across both/multiple disciplines (Burnaford et al., 2007). However, teachers navigate practical considerations about how to allocate limited instructional time and prepare students to succeed on high stakes tests. While I highlight the affordances of substantively incorporating the arts within literacy learning, I simultaneously recognize the pressures that teachers face in aligning their lessons with multiple, and at times conflicting, curricular priorities.

**Bringing Discussions of Race to Learning About the Natural World**

While students learning throughout the unit was explicitly justice focused and featured analyses of power across activities, I see a lack of explicit engagement with issues of race as an additional tension in this work. Environmental crises and structural racism are inextricably connected. For instance, people of color in the United States are disproportionately impacted by "heat deserts" in densely populated urban cities and have endured multiple failures in

environmental justice in recent years like the water crisis in Flint, Michigan (Ladson Billings, 2023). An exploration of the connections between racism and environmental crises would bring this project even further into alignment with a vision of justice in education as transformation, seeking to uncover and critique racial inequity (Dowd & Bensimon 2015). Further, Kristin and her students were well situated to engage in this kind of exploration, having participated in a Pro-Black social studies unit on American history earlier in the year that Kristin and her colleagues co-designed (Bullington et al., in press). While students articulated understandings about the interconnectedness of environmental and social issues (e.g., Allie's comics narrative about not having money to fix one's house after disaster), I was struck by the lack of explicit composing and discussion on the topic of race. I believe I could have facilitated deeper learning about the interconnections between racism and ecological disaster through small curricular additions and see this as a missed opportunity on my part. Through the articulation of this tension (i.e., the absence of explicit meaning making around race and racism), I seek to emphasize the importance of connecting learning about the natural environment with interrelated social issues like racism in the elementary school classroom.

**Presenting Arts-Based Research Through Academic Writing**

A final tension of this dissertation is its literal form. Across this writing, I highlight how different composing modalities (e.g., comics, crafts) allowed students to articulate different aspects of their knowledge. Still, this dissertation might be read as failing to interrogate the typical genre conventions of an academic text. While I feature images of drawings throughout the findings chapters, these images generally support meaning communicated through the written text rather than innovating on the form of the dissertation itself. I worry that this contrast between students' and my own compositional practices might be read as a misalignment: while

students practiced metarepresentational competencies (Halverson, 2021) by intentionally selecting the compositional modalities of their creative work, I defaulted to an expected genre and medium for this dissertation without disrupting formal expectations. However, my adherence to genre conventions of academic writing is in part an intentional response to differential power afforded to various literacy practices in academia. Only certain literacy practices are considered legitimate in specific contexts (Gilmore & Wyman, 2013/2020), and this is all the more true of high-stakes, institutionally sponsored writing like a doctoral dissertation. That said, as I plan for additional ways that this project can reach audiences, I will consider which insights I might be able to uncover and share through arts-based reinterpretations of these data. I'm especially drawn to the media of the handmade artist's book, and I look forward to making some narratives and analyses from this classroom more sensorily vibrant through color and feel of tangible materials.

## Limitations

There are also several limitations of these analyses which are important to note. First, I spent a restricted amount of time in the field, only eight weeks overall. My period of data generation had an immovable deadline of June 5th, 2024, the day when students graduated from fifth grade, began summer break, and prepared to begin sixth grade at middle schools across the district. Further, several end-of-year events, including a student music recital and a field trip resulted in changes to the normal school schedule and disrupted data generation.

Still, one factor that worked in my favor was my prior familiarity with the research site. I had built relationships with Kristin and her students through participation in another research project in the classroom earlier in the school year. Thus, I began the period of data generation with familiarity regarding the classroom, curriculum, and students which allowed me to quickly focus in on the phenomena of interest. Further, regarding my role as a co-teacher, previous

experiences with Kristin and her students supported my planning of lessons. I was able to create slide presentations, select focal texts, and design activities in advance that aligned with Kristin's typical teaching approaches and that responded to students interests and abilities.

Further, I was generally only able to observe and participate in lessons during students' English language arts and science classes daily with only infrequent participation in other aspects of their school day. This was due in part to other obligations as a doctoral student and teaching assistant and seemed appropriate at the time given the project's focus on arts-integrated literacy. Still, during the period of data generation it became evident that students' literacy learning and composing was not limited to language arts class and instead extended across and beyond the school day. This was especially apparent as I began to document student crafting which occurred across the school day and in students' lives beyond school. In future research, I plan to extend my commitment to a broad conception of literacy by generating data more holistically across the school day. I also hope to further investigate students' art and literacy practices beyond the school day to better represent participants as not only students but as artists and literate beings working across contexts of school, home, community programs, and more.

One additional limitation is a lack of data around the compositional processes of Kristin, the classroom teacher. Kristin intentionally framed herself and other adults in the room as part of the classroom community of learners, actively disrupting static roles of "student," "teacher," and "researcher" in the space. The overarching research question of the study reflects this framing by investigating the compositional practices of students, teachers, and researchers in the elementary school classroom. While I have robust data representing both students and my own compositional practices, I have scant data documenting Kristin's composing. I did interview Kristin about the module and audio record her class facilitation and participation in discussions,

but these data generally focus on Kristin's facilitation of and reflections on students' composing. I share these limitations not to minimize Kristin's instructional practices as valid compositional work, but instead to suggest that the study could have more actively framed Kristin as a writer and artist in addition to her role as teacher. In future projects, I hope to more intentionally frame classroom teachers as artists/writers/makers. This could involve prompting teachers to reflect on their instructional practices as processes of creative production, documenting writing and art that teachers might create alongside their students during class, and/or inviting teachers to respond to experiences in their classroom through writing and art.

## A Preview of Future Analyses

Much of what I hope to write about the artmaking, writing, and discussion among Kristin Pellerin and her students in the focal unit has not yet been written. I look forward to continuing to analyze and write about these data far beyond the submission of this dissertation. In particular, there are three emergent analyses that I am excited to extend in the coming months. I briefly describe those articles in preparation to contextualize the findings presented here and offer a glimpse into additional corners of the data corpus. Across these emergent articles (and in the dissertation overall), I seek to speak across disciplinary audiences framing aspects of this project for publication in journals of literacy education, art education, writing studies, and research methods.

### Questioning the "Natural" in Natural Disaster: Composing About Climate Change

First, I plan to write an analysis of how students composed about and took action related to climate change throughout this module on the topic of natural disaster. As I described in the dissertation's first chapter, content about climate change was notably absent from the district-provided curricular materials but was very present in the curricular contributions to the module

by Kristin, the students, and me. Students contextualized the extreme weather events that they learned about as part of larger systems of changing climate driven by human activity and leading to far-reaching environmental and social consequences. I plan to write more explicitly about the module's focus on climate justice in a forthcoming publication that examines how students represented the present and potential future impacts of climate change through artmaking.

**Collaborative Composing in the Elementary Literacy Classroom**

Writing studies scholars are attuned to diverse processes of composition, framing writing as evolving non-linearly through time and impacted by context, materials, and modalities (Prior & Shipka, 2003). Through this framing, all writing is–to some extent–collaborative. While some writers engage in active processes of collaborative production, all writers use technologies and strategies developed by others and influenced by their social worlds. I am interested in bringing this perspective on writing to the elementary school classroom, a place where writing is traditionally framed as a solitary activity (Dyson, 2013). While many of the composing practices that I featured in the dissertation involved collaboration to some degree, this was not the focus of my analysis. In future writing, I plan to examine how collaborative composing was fostered in the focal classroom through an expanded definition of writing. I will explore how a multimodal conception of literacy supported the reimagination of writing as a collaborative process, thereby promoting communicative access (Miller, 2019) for the diverse group of students in Kristin's class.

**Curricular Connections Across the Personal and the Systemic**

Finally, inspired by the ways that justice is theorized simultaneously as personal care and systemic transformation in education (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Ladson Billings, 2023), I am also exploring how the sharing of personal narratives and interrogation of larger systems were

interwoven within the focal curriculum as a practice of educational justice. How were connections made between individual stories and broader social issues? One of Kristin's many pedagogical strengths was her ability to make space for people in her classroom community to share stories from their own lives and to connect these stories to broader social and environmental phenomena. I seek to highlight and analyze these instructional practices, focusing on formal integration of personal narratives into the curriculum (e.g., a structured question and answer session in which students asked about my experience through hurricane Katrina) and informal instances, where students shared personal stories that were improvisationally integrated within curricular learning.

## Implications and Directions for Future Research

This study suggests implications for K-12 teaching, work in teacher education, and research. In the following sections, I outline directions for future research and teaching.

### Implications for Teaching

A central investigation of this study was the ways that particular arts-based composing modalities offer unique communicative possibilities. For example, through the combination of words and images in comics, students were able to create tragicomic tensions that mixed lightheartedness and grief as they portrayed natural disasters. This finding suggests that teachers might expand the expressive potential of their students by inviting them to take up a wide range of arts-based composing practices. Teachers might design a lesson around a particular art form or offer options form multiple composing modalities, allowing students to consider which media are best suited to accomplish their writerly goals. As teachers expand the kinds of composing their students do in the classroom, they can better align their instruction with the kinds of multimodal composing that happen in the real world in the twenty-first century (Kress, 2003),

and offer instruction in the kinds of creative, public-facing compositional modes that can enact social change (Duncombe & Lambert, 2021). Further, compositional freedom can enact a social justice art education approach which centers the *how* over the *what* (Dewhurst, 2023). In other words, justice is enacted in curricula not only through curricular content about social and environmental themes but through disrupting power dynamics in the classroom and offering meaningful choice and curricular freedom to students.

While teachers can integrate the arts in justice-centered curricula through engagement with a wide variety of media, I wish to highlight the particular implications of comics making since comics are a focus of this dissertation. The medium of comics offers freedom and flexibility as students decide which aspects of a narrative to portray in words versus images and which elements to present in panels versus obscuring in the gutters between depicted moments. Further, many comics use simplified iconography for visual representation (McCloud, 1993), promoting accessibility as young artists with a range of skills explore comics making. Finally, comics emphasize the recursive nature of the writing process (Prior & Shipka, 2003) and disrupt systematized and linear conceptions of writing in the elementary school classroom (Dyson, 2013). For instance, students can write all the narration of a comics narrative before circling back and complicating the story with pictures, or they might draw key moments of a story on separate pieces of paper and construct a narrative by arranging and rearranging those discrete elements. Teachers might consider inviting students to make comics as part of the curriculum to take advantage of these affordances, especially since comics are commonly read by students within and outside of school, while comics making in schools happens much less frequently (Wallner & Barajas, 2020).

When educators broaden the modes that students use to make meaning in their classrooms, students may create compositions that are unfamiliar to adults and diverge from typical, academic norms. This may create challenges for educators as they seek to assess learning through arts-based outputs. Educators can prompt students to present their work, explaining why they made particular creative choices and how their learning is represented. Alternately, teachers might engage in individual consultations with students to learn more about their creative choices or facilitate peer review, allowing students to respond to the work of one another in pairs or small groups. Regardless of approach, teachers might consider ways of communicating trust in students as artists in their own rights and authentic interest in interpreting what students have to say, even when their work deviates from adult-centric norms.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

While the arts-integrated module investigated in this dissertation was Kristin's idea, it might not have come to life without our collaboration. Kristin was the only fifth grade teacher in the school's English language instruction program and thus had no school-based collaborators to work with on curricular innovations. The planning and implementation of arts integrated learning can be time consuming (Burnaford et al., 2007), and many elementary school teachers do not receive education nor support regarding how to teach in and through the arts. Scholarship alludes to a concern that arts-integrated instruction can be difficult to implement in everyday classrooms. For example, in a review of K-9 learning with comics, Walner and Barajas (2020) point out that most studies currently investigate researcher-initiated interventions. They wonder how often comics-based learning happens in the vast majority of classrooms not involved in formal research endeavors, and this question could be extended to arts learning across other disciplines as well.

To build capacity in teaching the arts, teacher education programs can consider expanding curricular offerings in arts-based teaching practices, especially for elementary classroom teachers and for secondary educators in teaching disciplines outside of the arts (e.g., math and English teachers). Elementary education programs might consider university collaborations with art education and music education programs (among others) to build capacity among pre-service teachers to integrate arts in their instruction. Further, teacher education programs might position students as artists themselves, inviting pre-service teachers to articulate learning in their courses through visual arts, music, and performance. As pre-service teachers discover affordances of arts-based expression in their own learning, they may be more likely to bring these practices into their future classrooms.

## Implications for Research

This study suggests several implications for future research. In the following sections, I speak to several future research directions.

### *Aging Up Arts Integration*

As rare as arts integrated instruction in elementary schools may be–especially approaches that do more than instrumentalize arts practices towards learning in other disciplines (Burnaford et al., 2007)–arts integrated instruction seems to be even more rare in secondary school classrooms. This may be due in part to the structure of the typical school day, as middle and high school students generally move through distinct disciplinary classes with different teachers, creating challenges for interdisciplinary work. Further, students beyond elementary school are sometimes perceived as “growing out” of arts practices (Barry, 2019), with students who do not aspire to become arts professionals engaging in the arts less frequently. Still, arts-based transdisciplinary approaches offer avenues to bring innovative perspectives to real world

problems, (Morales, 2017) and are increasingly used in university and professional learning (e.g., Abas, 2023). Thus, future work could explore arts-integrated instruction in high schools that circumvent structural barriers and dovetails with emergent practices in elementary and university learning. For example, future studies might examine how students integrate curricular learning across disciplines into compositions in their arts classes or how high school teachers across content areas collaborate to teach multidisciplinary units. I would be especially excited to draw upon my experience as a high school art teacher to contribute to this gap in scholarship on arts-integrated learning on the secondary level.

***Teachers and Arts-Integrated Curricular Redesign***

Further, while this study focused primarily on students composing across the focal unit, future studies could focus on teachers, examining their arts-integrated instructional practices and their redesign (Vasquez et al., 2019) of classroom assignments to broaden what counts as literacy in their classrooms. This work might build upon prior scholarship of professional learning communities that have positioned teachers themselves as a community of artists (Lashley et al., 2025) and as collectively imagining educational futures (Machado et al., 2023). Future studies could connect an investigation of teachers' professional learning in the arts with data generation in classroom spaces to better understand what kinds of professional supports teachers might need to implement arts-based learning. Professional learning communities might also offer a site for collaboration among arts and non-arts teachers to co-design integrated learning, and future research might also examine these relationships.

***Justice-Centered Composing Beyond the School Day***

Finally, as I mentioned in the introduction of the dissertation, much of the research on critical and justice-centered arts practices among youth has investigated learning beyond the

school day: in summer programs, after school, and in community spaces. Beyond the school walls, arts are not constrained by pressures of standardized testing (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013) and slim, static time slots, at least not in the same ways. However, a binary between in-school and out-of-school arts learning may be misguided. Ideally, learning across contexts is mutually informing as students bring knowledge and experiences from outside of school into their curricular learning while also applying their curricular learning in contexts beyond school. Thus, future studies might consider not only how the arts are integrated within multiple disciplinary subjects towards justice-centered learning in schools but how students take up the arts to speak about and enact justice across contexts within and beyond the school day. During my time in Kristin's classroom, students often spoke about creative practices outside of school from giving a speech at a community event to participating in Saturday art classes. I recognized that the artmaking students participated in at school was just one part of their artmaking lives. One way that future studies might connect in-school and out-of-school artmaking practices might be through participatory methods like photovoice (Bellino et al., 2017) through which students might share moments from their creative lives beyond the classroom.

## Conclusion

Arts educator Elliot Eisner (2002) writes that "the arts liberate us from the literal" (p.10). Through the arts, creators abstractly represent lived experiences and imagine alternative realities. While sometimes non-linear or even nonsensical, dreaming through the arts sustains hope through crisis and fuels collective action. In Kristin's classroom, students not only dreamed of alternative futures through the arts but helped create the futures they wished to live in through their artistic practices–centering nuance, care, and joy, even while grappling with difficult

content. I see the creation of each drawing, poem, craft, song, or dance routine among children in Kristin's classroom as a potential action towards justice with significance, no matter how small.

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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Student Interview Protocol

**Looking at Comics**

1. Can you read your story to me?
2. Tell me about your process making this story.
    a. What was your favorite part of the process?
    b. What was the most difficult part of writing/making your story?
3. How did you get the idea for this story?
4. What is your favorite part of the story?
5. Did you get ideas from any books, tv, shows or other things you've read or watched (for your story)?
6. Is there anything in your story that is similar to something that could happen in real life?
7. What do you hope that other people will learn or think about when they look at your story?
8. What do you think your story can teach people about what happens in real-life natural disasters?
9. Do you plan to share your story with anyone? Who do you hope will read it?
10. Did any part of your story come out differently than you planned/imagined?

Tell me about X. How did you decide to put X in your comic

**Learning about disaster across the Unit**

1. How would you describe 'what is a natural disaster' to a kid who didn't know?
2. Do you think it's important for kids to learn about earth systems and natural disasters? If so, why?
3. I know that your class has been learning about natural disasters in literacy and earth systems in science. Have you learned something that surprised you?

**Overall**

1. What other writing have you done at school this year? Was this project similar or different?
2. How did it feel to draw and write about natural disasters? What did you think about/ feel while working on your art and writing?

**Demographic info and identity**

"I'm going to ask some final questions about who you are. Just like every other question, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

How old are you?
What is your race or ethnicity?
What language/ languages do you speak?
How else would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you?

## Appendix B: Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Protocol

**Class Overview**

1. Tell me about yourself. How did you wind up teaching here?

2. Tell me about your class this year.
    a. What are some of the strengths of particular students or your class as a whole?
    b. What are some of the challenges of particular students or your class as a whole?
    c. Tell me about a couple of students who stand out as writers, artists, makers. What do they like to draw/create?

**Focal Unit: Curriculum**

3. Tell me about the literacy unit that you taught on natural disasters this year.
    a. What were your goals for student learning?
    b. What curricular materials are you using?
        *If this doesn't come up: what did you use to supplement the formal curriculum (videos, books, discussion of experiences)
    c. How do you like those [curricular] materials?
    d. Where did you get those materials (e.g., made by another teacher, found online, provided by the district)
    e. Were there other materials or teaching tools that you wish you used or had access to? Was there anything missing from the current curriculum?
    f. I got to observe less of the science unit, but tell me about the learning on earth systems, especially any overlap with the literacy learning
    g. How do you feel about 'natural disasters' as a topic for a 5th grade literacy unit overall?

**Focal Unit: Integrating Comics**

4. Tell me about incorporating the natural disaster comic project into your unit. What was that like?
    a. Could you tell me about a particular moment or class session that stood out to you?
    b. What is one student's work that stands out to you? (have examples of student work)
        *What does this student's composition indicate to you about what students are learning?
    c. Is there another student's work that stands out to you? (repeat question above)
    d. How was this writing different from other writing that students did in your class this year?
    e. Did you experience any tensions incorporating this project into your curriculum (because it's art? Or because it's a long term project?)

**Teaching: Background and Pedagogy**

a. How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
b. How was it to have me (and other researchers) as guests and co-teachers in your classroom?

c. Can you share some factual information to wrap up?
    i. How many years have you been teaching?
    ii. How long have you worked at Woodlawn?
    iii. Where else have you taught?
    iv. How old are you?