

2017

Seeking the Comprehensive Gestalt in Student Identities: A Means to Social Justice Realizations

Ewa McGrail

Georgia State University, emcgrail@gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/mse_facpub

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGrail, E. (2017). Seeking the comprehensive Gestalt in student identifies: A means to social justice realizations [Editorial]. *Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Research Strand*, 4(2), 1-5. <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/mcgrail-editorial-4-2/>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Middle and Secondary Education at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Middle and Secondary Education Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Research Strand, Vol.4 No.2, Fall/Winter 2017, pp. 1-5
Ubiquity: <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/>
ISSN: 2379-3007

**Seeking the Comprehensive Gestalt in Student Identities: A Means to Social Justice
Realizations**

© Ewa McGrail

Georgia State University

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Ewa McGrail, Ph.D., Georgia State University, College of Education and Human Development, 30 Pryor Street, Atlanta, GA 30303.

Contact: emcgrail@gsu.edu

Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Research Strand, Vol.4 No.2,
Fall/Winter 2017

Seeking the Comprehensive Gestalt in Student Identities- A Means to Social Justice Realizations

As educators, we need to evaluate and assess students and their performance levels at different points in their academic journey, so that we can plan instruction to meet their varying learning needs. However, we seem to have an innate tendency to foreground only some aspects of student performance and perceived abilities and not see or focus on the other aspects, abilities and ways of being, valuing and perceiving. In doing so, we may be positioning them as either competent or non-competent members of the classroom community (Snell & Lefstein, 2018). According to Gestalt theory (Boeree, 2000), there is more to the whole than the sum of its parts. That is, by putting value to only certain parts in student performance and abilities, we are likely to miss out on the other competencies and performance indicators or ways of being and seeing that also constitute our students' academic and social identities. As a result, we may end up representing only one image of our students as learners and individuals, the part which does not necessarily reflect the whole human beings that they truly are.

The Research Strand articles in this issue of *Ubiquity* call on teachers and educators to recognize the parts and perspectives in student identities that they may initially not see clearly, but that nevertheless represent those individuals' *Gestalt*—the organized whole truthfulness to their identities. Specifically, in Low's piece, *Not to be "Destoried": How an Academically Marginalized Student Employs Comics and Multimodal Authorship to Claim a Counter-Identity*, we are challenged to view Héctor, a sixth-grader, beyond his immigrant background and speech impediment and the perceived low-ability status he is assigned at school, a false status based on the traditional performance and ability markers (e.g., test scores) which have been used to determine his current social and academic identity. In other words, Low calls us to change our

attitude (*Gestalt*) about children like Héctor and begin to see them differently, the way we come to see different things in the same image of the tree when we look at both an entire tree and its parts.

In *Youth Disrupting Traditional Notions of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation through Writing*, Vetter and Langston-Demott also urge teachers and educators and society at large to go beyond the traditional categories of gender and sexual orientation into which the adolescent participants in their qualitative study did not fit and which consequently did not represent these individuals' *Gestalt*—the organized whole that comprises their actual social and academic identities.

Importantly, the participants in both Low's study and Vetter and Langston-Demott's research used composing in either the medium of comics or fictional writing as means to re-write and re-negotiate the identities that had been attributed to them in and out of school contexts. Accordingly, these participants' writing offers alternative categories of attributes, skills and values through which to perceive of them. Specifically, by challenging and repositioning the "social information" about their identities and the "normative expectations" (Goffman, 1963, p. 2) of them and of their literacy skills, the participants in both studies were able to claim different identities and representations of themselves and their abilities than those assigned to them by others. In addition, their writing gives voice and shared feelings to those who may be experiencing similar positioning but who may not have had the opportunity to speak. The researchers in both studies invite us to consider the implications of seeking the comprehensive *Gestalt* in the perception of students, and in doing so, they contribute to the realizations of social justice in social identity identification processes.

References

- Boeree, G. (2000). Gestalt psychology. Retrieved from http://209-197-4156.unassigned.ntelos.net/images/stories/library/Stennett_Psychology_Articles/Gestalt_Psychology.pdf¹
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Snell, J., & Lefstein, A. (2018). "Low ability," participation, and identity in dialogic pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(1), 40-78. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217730010>²

Author Bio: Ewa McGrail is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy Education at Georgia State University. In her research, McGrail examines digital writing and new media composition; copyright and copyright awareness, as well as media literacy and social representations of outgroups or individuals who are otherwise not in the mainstream.