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2020

## Comic Book Conversations as Pedagogies of Possibilities in Urban Spaces

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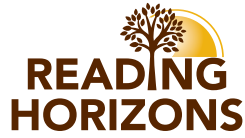


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## Comic Book Conversations as Pedagogies of Possibilities in Urban Spaces

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### Abstract

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The researchers in this qualitative case study explored the dialogic experiences of elementary school students during Comic Book Club meetings held in their local community resource center. The researchers wanted to know what experiences of dialogism were manifested in children's conversations about reading, writing, and comic creation and what concepts of dialogism were evident in those experiences. The interview and observation data and artifacts suggest that co-construction of meaning and intertextuality played important roles in the dialogic experiences of the participants. Children's co-construction of meaning and intertextuality also demonstrated engaged embodiment due to children's spontaneous enactment of dance and dramatization in the Comic Book Club sessions. The authors believe that the creation of an open ontological dialogic space enabled this liberatory embodiment of children's mental and physical capacities. They recommend that educators and researchers work to create dialogic spaces in schools and community centers to counter the numbing effects of antidialogic pedagogies that are prevalent in schools.

**Keywords:** *dialogism, ontological dialogic space, comic books, pedagogies in urban spaces, liberatory embodiment, intertextuality, co-construction of meaning*

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Drawing on Barbara Comber's (2016) *Literacy, Place and Pedagogies of Possibility*, this study explored the literacies and pedagogies of possibilities in urban spaces. Like Comber's work in low-income communities in Australia, the project reported in this article happened in a low-income apartment community in the United States where visitors were "surprised" by the orderliness, green grass and surrounding trees, the pool, playground, and labeled vegetable garden. In a small two-bedroom apartment converted into a community center, our work began almost 7 years ago. We are committed to demonstrating to the world the literacies and pedagogies of possibilities with low-income

children of color (e.g., Boyd et al, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Ladson Billings, 1994; Valencia, 1997) who are usually framed through a deficit lens (e.g., Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Flores, Tefft Cousin, & Díaz 1981; Gould, 1996; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Jensen, 1973; Payne, 1996; Rothstein, 2017; Valentine, 1971) and whose learning is seldom celebrated in the midst of Eurocentrist pedagogical practices narrowly centered around passing the test or “teaching to the test” and being compared to historically privileged groups (Au, 2007; Langer-Osuna & Nasir, 2016; Lea & Sims, 2008; Paris & Alim, 2017; Valant & Newark, 2016).

As literacy teacher educators invested in coming to know an urban space through firsthand long-term experiences, we believe that we are better equipped to talk about the literacy engagements of children with our literacy students in the teacher education classroom while at the same time learning from intimate experience how to counter prevailing deficit discourses. As Comber (2016) asserts, “There is an ongoing need for educators at all levels to contest the common assumption that poverty equals a lack of learning capability” (pp. xvii). We, like Comber, recognize the impact of poverty on children, their families, and their environments, but we contend that children’s environments should not “limit their literacy learning when teachers are able to design curriculum that opens opportunities for inquiry and imagination” (p. xvii).

Although there is much research on culturally responsive pedagogies in urban contexts, especially social justice curriculum for adolescents or older children (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Scott, Mortimer, & Aguiar, 2006; Sheridan, Clark, & Williams, 2013; Vakil, 2014; Wood & Jocius, 2013), less is known about dialogic pedagogies among children and young adolescents. Our qualitative case study explores what happens when curriculum spaces open up and unleash the potential of children’s literacies through the enactment of dialogic pedagogies and comic book creation. The following research questions reflect this interest:

1. What dialogic experiences can be observed from children’s conversations about reading and writing and comic book creation?
2. What concepts of dialogism are evident in these experiences?

In this article, we present the dialogic enterprise to frame our work followed by the review of pertinent literature on the practices of dialogism in school and non-school spaces and on facilitating and learning in urban contexts. We then discuss our methodologies, data collection, and analysis followed by our findings, discussion and implications, and conclusions.

## **Framing Our Work**

### **The Dialogic Enterprise**

Stetsenko (2014, p. 181) asserts that education is not a “value neutral endeavor” but one that is replete with “entanglement of knowledge with the practices of its production inclusive of dimensions such as historically evolved power differentials, culturally situated interests and contexts, political values and ideological positions.” For us this statement suggests that the dialogic enterprise cannot be held to a single frame of reference, descriptor, or conclusion but is an enterprise that is open-ended in intentionality for teaching and learning. Indeed, it is believed that all education (as a practice) is dialogic but as a “project (or ideology) it can be essentially antialogic” (Matusov, 2009, p. 3). We believe that what dialogism looks like varies according to the contexts and histories in which one is working, and in our work we embrace the sociocultural underpinnings of both Bakhtinian

and Vygotskian perspectives as well as those of contemporary theorists to present our descriptions of the dialogic enterprise in one urban community space.

Dialogism is an avenue for meaning making that occurs through talk and speech with others. According to Bakhtin (1981), our speech is not original because it is a composite of voices and perspectives that cross time and context—a phenomenon that Bakhtin refers to as heteroglossia:

At any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another.... [L]anguage is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.... Therefore, languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways. (p. 292)

Vygotsky (1978) recognizes the pivotal role of others in learning and what others, such as adults and peers, can do to support the learning of children. One of his ideas is encapsulated in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he defines as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). The zone of proximal development helps educators “delineate the child’s immediate future and his [or her] dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing” (pp. 86-87).

Many researchers have extended the meaning of ZPD. Holzman (2017), for example, contends that the space of the ZPD is “actively and socially created,” which she also believes is more usefully understood as a “process” and an “activity as the simultaneous creating of the zone (environment) and what is created (learning-leading-development)” (p. 30). The creativity that takes place in the ZPD can originate in “dyads, groups, collectives and so on” (p. 30). John-Steiner, Connery, and Marjanovic-Shane (2017) agree: “The communicative or interactional use of language, in fact depends on the imagination of others” (p. 7). We would add that the experiences, histories, and knowledge of the interlocutors are also critical to the interactional process.

Both Bakhtin and Vygotsky recognize the importance of interaction with others. Stetsenko (2007) contends that “the role of dialogicality in Bakhtin’s thinking and sociality in Vygotsky’s are well understood and integrated in today’s interpretations of their works” (p. 752). Although these two perspectives combined can bring added strength, creativity, and energy to our understandings of educational settings, some scholars disagree on the compatibility of their conceptualizations. One such theorist is Soviet-trained Bakhtinian scholar Eugene Matusov.

Matusov (2011) concurs that there are similarities in Vygotsky and Bakhtin’s “approaches to the social, the individual, and the social-individual relationship” (p. 100). However, he contends that there are “irreconcilable differences” (p. 100) in Vygotsky’s and Bakhtin’s conceptualizations particularly with regards to the social. He believes that Vygotsky’s (1978) approach was influenced by universalist, monologic, monological developmental (diachronic) activity-based philosophy. Bakhtin’s (1981), on the other hand, was synchronic dialogic discourse and genre-based approach. Vygotsky’s sociohistorical approach defines consciousness through activity mediation whereas Bakhtin’s dialogic

approach was ontological or seeing consciousness through bodily experience. Matusov argues that

Vygotsky's general law of moving from the social to the individual planes of development through the zone of proximal development would be rejected by Bakhtin for whom the individual cannot (and even should not try to) absorb the social-mutual understanding, intersubjectivity through agreement (i.e. absorbing the consciousness of another) within his or her own individual self. (pp. 100–101)

We agree with Matusov on the intersubjectivity of absorbing the consciousness of another and we acknowledge the limitation of Vygotskian thought in this regard. However, in this article, just as others have done (Holzman, 2017; John-Steiner, Connery, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017), we choose to extend Vygotsky's (1978, p. 86) zone of proximal development to acknowledge the significant role "of more capable peers" in the development of the teaching and learning process. However, we believe that "the other" does not necessarily come "all knowing" and must be prepared to learn and unlearn ways of thinking and being that may or may not necessarily advance and uplift learners.

We simultaneously embrace the Bakhtinian-influenced dialogic states of *intersubjectivity* (acknowledging that we do not have to consciously or subconsciously agree with one another) and *interaddressivity* (acknowledging gaps in our not knowing what the other will say and not expecting them to say what we desire to be said). We agree that the states of intersubjectivity and interaddressivity as understood by Bakhtin contribute to what we call the *dialogic enterprise* in its full bloom and contribute to a state of meaning making in an education project that is "less distorted, less inhumane, and less perverse" and, above all, "less anti-dialogic" (Matusov, 2009, p. 3).

In the dialogic enterprise, our voices become "interwoven" with the voices of others, resulting in conversation in which the interlocutors come to greater understandings about the topic of the dialogic conversation (Teo, 2013, p. 92). Dialogic speech is not one-directional. Instead, all speakers are engaged in and participate in dialogic talk given that speakers shape their utterances based on what others contribute to the conversation. As Paulo Freire (1993) asserts, teachers and students must learn from each other and become "co-investigators in dialogue" (p. 62). The co-investigator's context suggests a space in which both parties are surprised by each other about the matter of their dialogue (Matusov, 2009). In the dialogic enterprise, we push toward a more ontological way of being away from a purely pedagogical way of doing education. Matusov (2009) tells us that an ontological approach to dialogue should be "the primary guiding principle" of schools, whereas the "instrumental approach to dialogue sees dialogue as a pedagogical method to make learning more effective" (pp. 5–6).

Although we in the dialogic enterprise seek to move toward more fully blown dialogicity in the education project, we concur with Lefstein (2010, p. 170) when he cautions about "positing a dialogic ideal" given the many factors that influence dialogue in conventional classrooms. He urges us to adopt a more "*situated* model of dialogue, sensitive to the tensions inherent in dialogic interaction and appropriate to contemporary school contexts" (pp. 170–171, italics in original).

Our work described in this article was not situated in a traditional school context but in a community space. This community space with long tables and individual chairs was also a place where parents gathered for talks about self-development and financial literacy, for example. But the space had charts on the wall that could resemble a typical

classroom. The charts were, for instance, about subject-verb agreement and the types of sentences. However, in developing the ontological, we are not strictly bound by a limited time frame or externally imposed examination system. We have the freedom to create and recreate our learning and teaching space.

Table 1 summarizes the understandings of dialogism and dialogic pedagogy that comprise our theoretical and analytical framework. The table includes definitions of the key concepts and the associated learning experiences and pedagogical moves.

Table 1  
*Domains of Dialogism in the Theoretical Framework*

Concept	Learning experiences and pedagogical moves
<p><b>Dialogic reading</b> is reading that invites conversation and exploration of the content and ideas in the text (e.g., book, game) that has the potential to be transformative. The dialogue encourages open-ended ways of looking and thinking about the content and is very organic, spontaneous, and unscripted. There are no borders. Engagement in dialogic reading invites a mental and bodily response. This invites a strong ontological and less pedagogical approach (Matusov, 2009).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visualizing and imagining</li> <li>• Making personal connections</li> <li>• Acting out/enacting parts of the story/ dramatization</li> <li>• Responding kinesthetically (e.g., touching, gesturing, leaning into the story)</li> <li>• Being receptive to the invitation to read</li> <li>• Questioning, talking back, or challenging ideas in the text</li> <li>• Interpreting/making inferences about parts of the text</li> <li>• Responding spontaneously to text</li> <li>• Exhibiting high levels of engagement by leaning bodily into the text</li> </ul>

Table 1 Continued

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<p><b>Dialogic writing</b> is the composition/creation process that incorporates words, phrases, language, and ideas from other people and texts. This type of writing relates strongly to Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia because the experiences, realities, and spaces of the writer and of others come together to create a composite of voices, which influence the dialogic writing participants create. Should be more ontological and less pedagogical to build freedom of expression and flow of creative ideas (Matusov, 2009).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision-making (related to agency)</li> <li>• Forming connections between scenes and continuing stories across frames in comics and picture books</li> <li>• Drawing from one's own environments, observation, experiences, outdoors, at home and at school, when drawing to bring life and add richness to one's stories</li> <li>• Weaving in and blending voices of self and experiences of others into the creation</li> <li>• Blending modes and modalities and utilizing senses (e.g., feeling, sensing, hearing, tasting) in writing</li> <li>• Merging one's own languages, dialects, codes, and phrases with those of others/ other texts</li> <li>• Considering the audience's beliefs and expectations (a form of dialogue with)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dialogic talk</b> is talk, whether verbal or nonverbal, that connects to oneself and others and that invites active response, conversation, and sharing about the text and reactions to it. The influence of Bakhtin's (1981) intersubjectivity and interaddressivity are present. This talk builds on the ideational to develop cognitive and conceptual understanding and the interpersonal to build relationships; it is metacommunicative in building communication (Lefstein, 2010). Should be strongly more ontological and less pedagogical (Matusov, 2009).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telling and connecting to one's stories and experiences</li> <li>• Initiating explaining, response/reaction to the text and responding/reacting to response by others</li> <li>• Asking for clarification, justification, evidence, and explanation</li> <li>• Inviting to read/reread text with others</li> <li>• Reacting/responding to the surroundings/ context in which the text is read</li> <li>• Asking/initiating divergent, open-ended questions, comments, and opinions</li> </ul>



Table 1 Continued

**Dialogic texts** are texts that have the potential to engage readers in a dialogue. They are typically culturally relevant and age-appropriate, pique children’s interest, or bring in novelty to children’s experiences. Should invite more ontological and less pedagogical responses (Matusov, 2009).

- Texts at home
- Culturally and linguistically relevant and affirming texts
- Texts about unknown people, places, and experiences
- Texts that encourage new understandings, perceptions, and experiences of life and the world

**Dialogic use of technology** enables interaction with the content and provides the content that sparks viewers’ interest. For example, using an iPhone to play a game enables the reader to receive input that creates a conversation between reader and game, causing the reader to problem-solve, make decisions, and so on. Should be more ontological and less pedagogical (Matusov, 2009).

- Technology at home or school that invites response and reaction during reading or writing
- Interactive video games played with or without others
- Technology-mediated programming (e.g., movies, documentaries, films) that children can connect with or that may either contradict or expand their own experiences, understanding, or knowledge
- Technology that invites response and reaction during reading or writing or encourages collaboration with other

**Intertextuality of meaning making** relates strongly to the work of Bakhtin (1981). It refers to the multimodalities, multiple realities, and multiple experiences that influence the way participants make meaning from reading, writing, talking, and using technology. Intertextuality of meaning making also refers to the way participants negotiate the borders between their different realities and experiences. Should be more ontological and less pedagogical (Matusov, 2009).

- Connecting ideas across texts, contexts, people, and experiences
- Bringing in personal experiences; human, animal, and environmental encounters; and prior knowledge to help understand or create the text
- Using multiple modes, modalities, and senses to interpret or create text
- Negotiating tensions that arise from collaborating with others and exposure to other texts, ideas, and experiences

Table 1 Continued

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<p><b>Co-construction of meaning</b> is a process in which meaning is co-constructed through dialogic and bidirectional talk, participation, and response and where participants and facilitators are curious and work together to learn. At the same time, facilitators and researchers act as “the more capable peers” who provide the necessary scaffold for children’s growth and literacy development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The more capable other must also be prepared to adopt the stances of being “unknowing” and curious to acknowledge children’s own knowledge and experiences. Involves Bakhtin’s (1981) intersubjectivity and interaddressivity, and is strongly more ontological and less pedagogical (Matusov, 2009).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retelling the story/summarizing story with others</li> <li>• Retelling the story/summarizing story using one’s own experience and ideas</li> <li>• Shared reading and responding to text</li> <li>• Shared writing</li> <li>• Working with others or partners</li> <li>• Consulting with others about ideas</li> <li>• Offering help/feedback to others</li> <li>• Discussing the text together</li> <li>• Negotiating meaning with others</li> </ul>
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### Practicing Dialogism in School and Nonschool Spaces

Traditional classroom contexts tend to have more monologic forms of classroom participation patterns, and these tend to resemble tight pedagogical methods such as initiation-response-evaluation (IRE; Mehan, 1979). In this type of interaction, the teacher initiates conversation by asking a question, the student responds to the teacher’s questions, and finally the teacher evaluates the student’s response. The IRE structure tends to be more competitive because it requires students to respond to teachers individually. In our community space, we try to be open and welcoming with an open engagement pattern. We are also intentional in holding back as we prompt children to share their views and experiences in longer discourses repeatedly, not just a few words that may be “correct or incorrect.”

Reznitskaya (2012) argues that certain speech features foster talk. For instance, teachers or adults facilitating conversations tend to ask more divergent, open-ended questions; to ask for justifications; to ask speakers to make connections; to look for clarification from other speakers; to collaborate with other speakers; and to give lengthy explanations. Facilitators also tend to hold back demonstrations and explanations, give students time to respond to questions thoughtfully, and model language in new, sophisticated ways (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Mercer & Howe, 2012).

Boyd and Markarian (2015) see a teacher’s role as being complex and robust because the teacher “*leads and follows*, responds and directs as he or she employs a *repertoire* of talk patterns” (p. 273, italics in original). In their view, the structure of

conversation or instructional stance leads to greater student understanding. Not only do these teachers carefully design their activity, they also respond spontaneously to student contributions and follow the turns these activities take. We believe in being curious as well as open-ended because in many cases we are “unknowing” of the children’s references just as they may be “unknowing” of ours. Facilitators must be open to learning about and from the children. All of this takes place in a space that invites spontaneity despite having planned a sequence of experiences.

### **Facilitating and Learning in Urban Contexts**

Our facilitating and learning in an urban space involves a great deal of curiosity and being nonjudgmental. We believe that being honest about our “unknowingness” facilitates the dialogic enterprise. Being nonjudgmental also helps to promote natural, unfeigned curiosity when one does not know a space. In developing our understanding of urban contexts, we draw on the work of Milner (2006, 2020). Milner (2006) aligns urban with rural schools:

They have much in common, particularly with regard to SES [socioeconomic status]. Both types of schools tend to have high concentrations of students living in poverty, high concentrations of single parent families, the least qualified or credentialed teachers and the fewer school resources. (p. 346)

He goes on to define an urban context as

one that is heavily populated with culturally and racially diverse learners and has a heavy concentration of English language learners, a large number of poorer students—particularly students of color, high attrition of teachers, heavy institutional and systemic barriers and meager resources. Urban schools tend to be grossly underfunded, larger in size and infiltrated with administrative bureaucracy. (p. 346)

As European-descended (author 1) and African-descended (author 2) researcher professors and a European-descended middle school teacher (author 3) coming from middle-income backgrounds, we are unknowing in terms of the firsthand experiences of the children and families with whom we work in this community project. We strive to be nonjudgmental learners who desire to learn and unlearn pervasive deficit ways of viewing children from these contexts, hence our stance of being curious.

However, at the same time, our work attempts to develop what Milner (2020) describes as tenets for the success of urban students based on the analyses of his interview with Mr. Williams, a former student during segregation and an educator. Mr. Williams stressed the importance of discipline, and Milner interpreted this as meaning to

provide multiple opportunities for students to “excel”; focus on cognitively rich and rigorous curriculum practices; communicate and collaborate with families to support student development; model tenacity, persistence and care; invest in the individual to impact the community; build and sustain relationships with students; engage in real talk about social realities and expectations in society and expand racially centered textual curriculum opportunities. (p. 155)

Similarly, we draw on the wealth of scholarship in urban contexts to inform our work. This scholarship focuses on social justice curriculum and emancipatory education, which are embodied in culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Freire, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stetsenko, 2017). Gay (2000) describes

culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). This is a strengths-based approach that empowers, validates, and affirms children.

From these studies we affirm the importance of the following:

- culturally responsive curriculum that encourages conversation by drawing on readers’ personal and cultural wealth (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, 1992; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Wood & Jocius, 2013)
- curriculum that develops social justice and civic engagement (e.g., Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010)
- the value and high levels of engagement that can be demonstrated in after-school programs (e.g., Sheridan et al., 2013; Vakil, 2014)

Our study builds on these findings to explore the conversational experiences of the elementary Black and Latinx students who participated in our community comic book project in an urban housing community.

## **Methodology**

### **The Participants and the Context**

The participants in this qualitative case study were seven children, three girls and four boys between the ages of 5 and 10. Six of the participants were African American, and one was Latinx (see Table 2). As low or very low income, parents or legal guardians qualified for resident housing assistance programs and services. The programs offer neighborhood-based resources and services to help these parents maintain independence and resolve life challenges such as drug-related, health, and safety issues. They also provide recreational and community-based and educational enrichment programs and activities for the children in residence. As part of the educational program, the children receive free snacks, lunch, and supper. The Comic Book Club described in this article is volunteer community service that we provided for children in partnership with one such residential housing program. We have been engaged in this project for 7 years; however, the data for this article are from the early years.

Upon visiting for the first time, 7 years ago, we were struck by the physical layout of the buildings, which fostered sense of community among the residents. The apartment buildings are situated in a square, with all apartment doors facing the inside of the square. In the middle of the square is the community’s pool, which beckons the younger residents in the summer. Behind the pool is the computer lab and leasing office. The community also boasts a vegetable garden and a playground. The community center, where our Comic Book Club meetings were held, was located in an apartment on the lower level for easy access to all of the community’s residents. Because the community center was located in an actual apartment with a living area, kitchen, bathroom, and bedrooms, visitors felt as though they were entering someone’s home. On warmer days, residents would often sit outside, talking to their neighbors, listening to music, and watching kids play. Perhaps the most popular community event occurred in the afternoon, when the ice cream truck would arrive, selling sweet treats to residents of all ages.

Table 2  
Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age, gender, and ethnicity	Characteristics
Beyoncé	9-year-old African American female	She often helped the younger children. She also enjoyed reading parts of the story to the group and helped the researchers pass out supplies.
Michael Jordan	8-year-old African American male	He came to our first Comic Book Club meeting with his own comics he had created at home.
Keke Jones	8-year-old African American female	She created comics with interesting storylines and colorful pictures. She enjoyed working with all kids in the Comic Book Club.
John Cena	10-year-old African American male	His participation showed us that engagement does not always involve spoken words as he expressed himself through drawing.
Angry Lion	8-year-old Latinx male	Drawing was the predominant way he showed his engagement with the text. He also enjoyed using technology to collaborate with others.
Princess	5-year-old African American female	She enjoyed working with the girls in the group and looked to them as role models.
JJ	7-year-old African American male	He participated enthusiastically in many of the activities in the Comic Book Club. Though he did not speak much, he often participated kinesthetically in the activities.
LeBron Jackson	10-year-old African American male	He liked drawing and his comic strips were very detailed.

The Comic Book Club met weekly in the computer lab and community center. Meetings for this after-school community enrichment were loosely structured and focused on (a) reading a culturally relevant text together, (b) discussing/responding to the text, and (c) composing comic books.

The texts children explored included fiction and nonfiction, traditional print books and audiovisual material. Our sessions were organized thematically around the topics and texts (e.g., cats and cat behavior, stories from Africa, dreams) that fit together and that were of interest to the participants, based on our talking to and observing the children. The texts and media the children read and discussed in our sessions were thus responsive to the children's interests and cultural backgrounds. The children also learned about the world through reading, writing, and talking to guest speakers from countries such as China, Vietnam, and Nicaragua.

The sessions ran typically for about 6-8 weeks per semester. This allowed for revisiting and building extended conversations about the ideas the children encountered in reading and viewing the traditional text and multimodal text. The children also had time to respond to these ideas through comic strip creation, drawing, and dramatic performance. The overarching goals of this book club were to open spaces for conversations; to encourage interpretations, interactions, free response, and creativity in literacy activities; and to provide adult-facilitated scaffolding as well as peer and one-on-one support for children as needed.

Composing comic books is a critical component in our enrichment program because comics appeal to our readers and because they aid reading and writing development (Chase, Son, & Steiner, 2014; Pantaleo, 2018; Sun, 2017). The children participated in other activities as well, such as making a playdough home city, with favorite places for visitors to see and activities to do, or designing Christmas cards for family members and decorating them with drawings, fabric, yarn, and cotton balls. These latter activities laid the foundation for telling stories in a comic book format about themselves and their life experiences and about others whom they met in the books they read.

A typical day involves revisiting what we read previously or previewing a new topic and new books or media that we will be reading or viewing in a session. Children refine old questions or brainstorm new questions about these texts and media, followed by a read-aloud with a whole group, with help from peers. Often, at this time, spontaneous conversations emerge about the key words and phrases that may help children answer questions (with or without facilitator support). Children may also enact select scenes or key words from the readings and media and/or make additional observations or ask more questions. Next, they read in pairs or individually, and they consult supportive texts and resources to locate answers to their questions or get help with unknown vocabulary.

Throughout reading, children get tailored adult-facilitated assistance, combined with peer conferencing and brief impromptu whole-group conversations about their emerging discoveries. This aids their understanding about the ideas they encounter in the reading material. Children then report on what they have found orally or through role-play and then move on to drawing and making comic strips. Talking with facilitators and peers about their emerging creations helps children add more details and elaboration to their stories. Throughout, children are encouraged and praised for helping one another, asking questions, and sharing resources, strategies, and advice. We stress the importance of creativity and praise children constantly for wearing their "creative hats."

## **The Role of the Researchers**

We, the researchers in the project, are two university professors and one doctoral student. The professors carry multiple identities in this project: We are neighbors who live less than 5 minutes from the children's residential community, we are university teacher education professors in an urban research university, and we are social activist ethnographers who seek to understand the lives of children in urban community contexts. One of us is of European descent, and the other is of African descent. The doctoral student also carries multiple identities: She is a full-time teacher at a public middle school, and she is a part-time doctoral student at the same university at which the professors work. Through this work and her studies, she is developing an understanding of urban contexts while deconstructing her White privilege.

With the support of their European American doctoral student, the researchers bridge the boundaries of race and class to deconstruct dominant stereotypes and develop thick descriptions of working-class children's literate lives (Heath, 1983; Sleeter, 2015). In fostering the development of conversational spaces in the Comic Book Club, the researchers had to shed powerful vestiges of traditional classroom teaching histories that subscribe to the conventional monologic and triadic discourses, orderly conduct, raising hands, sitting on chairs, reduced talk, no cross-talk, and limited movement and interactions. In other words, what Matusov (2009, p. 3) calls the very "distorted, inhumane and perverse" type of dialogicity in mainstream schooling.

We learned very early that the path to creating conversational spaces is built intentionally in resisting the enforcement of traditional classroom structures and allowing free and natural laughter, spontaneous movement, and focused and sometimes directive interactions while still allowing for nondirective free and organic responsive questions and moments. We as researchers first had to shed our inhibitions to allow free conversations. We could not function in this space as "knowing" because we had to have an "unknowing" stance to learn from the children about their lives and ways of knowing. This stance fostered an appreciation of and respect for the children and encouraged them to be their naturally curious selves.

The conversations and experiences that we describe and report on in this article emerged out of the creation of open spaces, which sought to reduce the inhibitions of the researchers as well as the children. The children too had to shed the vestiges of the traditional classroom when they came to the Comic Book club. We observed that this shedding of the school self was quite uncomfortable for our new participants, but over time they learned how to be their natural curious selves in a space that was both like yet markedly unlike school. We were working against the enactment and recreation of an antidialogic ideology or project (after Matusov, 2009, p. 3).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this analysis are drawn from a larger longitudinal qualitative case study (Creswell, 2007) that examines the literacy practices of learners in urban contexts who read culturally relevant literature and who create graphic/comic books for a book club in a housing community. We began this work in the fall of 2013, and we continue it to this present time. The study obtained multiple data sets: individual learner and focus group interview and observation data, parent/guardian interview data, learner work samples, and learner background information from the housing community and from parents/guardians. We use the interview and observation data to address this article's specific focus, which



is elementary students' experiences of dialogism. We also include student comic book creations to illustrate key findings.

Because we spent several sessions exploring one book, *Giraffes Can't Dance* (Andreae, 1999), we use one book in this article and students' conversations and comic book creations from that book to describe the dialogic experiences of our participants. The intensity of working with one book and revisiting our conversations and comic book creations over time help us enact rigor (Milner, 2020) in our curriculum. The revisiting and rearticulation of children's ideas helps learners build, expand, and enrich their conceptualizations of the work being done. *Giraffes Can't Dance* (Andreae, 1999) is a story of Gerald the Giraffe, who cannot dance because his legs are too skinny and crooked, which produces jeers and sneers from the other animals. Yet with the advice of a wise grasshopper, the clumsy Gerald soon gains the cheering crowd as he learns to dance and prance to nature's different music.

To access the participants' perspectives on and experiences with different types of educational talk, we conducted in-depth (50-minute) interviews with the children whose parents permitted their participation in the study. Although the interview focused on certain topics for consistency across the participant data, such as the kinds of reading, writing, and technology use experiences at school, at home, and in the Comic Book Club, the interviews were unstructured enough to allow the children to share their perspectives on these experiences. We also conducted brief interviews with the children during the Comic Book Club meetings over a period of 15 months to gain these participants' perspectives and thinking as they were reflecting on the books they read and the comic books they were creating based on these texts.

To supplement the interview data for this analysis, we gathered participant observational data from the meetings of the book club. Participant observation allowed us to examine how children were experiencing and responding to conversations and composing in the Comic Book Club. As such, the observational data provided the larger context for the children's perspectives and offered opportunities to compare their behaviors and experiences with their stated perspectives on their experiences in the reading and writing activities and technology use in the book club.

We utilized the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to analyze, interpret, and reduce interview and observation data into groups of related codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) and then into major themes about learner perspectives on and experiences of conversations. The first round of coding focused on getting a sense of the data and understanding participants and their experiences in reading, writing, and technology use in general. The second round of coding was more focused and targeted participants' talk about and experiences of dialogic learning and communication in the book club.

For this round of coding, we used the dialogism domains described in Table 1 as a theory-driven analytical lens. This allowed us to document the participants' experiences of dialogism within and outside the school context and to classify these experiences based on the various concepts of dialogism contained in these experiences. The third round of coding provided the opportunity to refine our understanding of domains and to ensure that we captured the relevant experiences for our participants.

To ensure internal validity (Creswell, 2007), triangulation of data was observed. That is, multiple data sources were collected as a check on participants' perceptions and experiences. Short conversations with participants during observations over a 15-month period of time were employed as additional internal validity measure.



To establish inter-coder reliability (Creswell, 2007), the data were analyzed and coded by the two researchers, individually and then collaboratively. This allowed for confirming points of similarity and clarifying and adjusting differences in coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), leading to the development of the final coding scheme and emerging themes. The third researcher served as an external auditor and helped to improve the quality of the themes in this work. When we reached saturation (the point when no new coding categories and themes are identified or modified), the data analysis process ceased (Creswell, 2007).

### Findings

As data analysis drew to a close, we noted two domains of dialogism that emerged strongest from the data: intertextuality of meaning and co-construction of meaning in dialogic reading and writing, which we discuss in the following sections. Although due to space constraints we are unable to discuss all domains in this article, we note that the two domains reported here embed elements of other domains. For example, intertextuality, which allows participants to engage multiple modalities, realities, and experiences for meaning making, relies on dialogic reading (e.g., challenging ideas in the text) of dialogic texts (e.g., texts about unknown people, places, and experiences) and dialogic talk (e.g., reacting to response by others). Likewise, co-construction of meaning is a process by which new understandings are obtained through dialogic reading, talk, and participation with others or by oneself.

### Dialogic Reading, Writing, and Intertextuality of Meaning

The participants in the Comic Book Club used intertextuality to connect ideas across texts, contexts, and personal experiences to make meaning.



Figure 1. Keke's comic

In Keke Jones's comic (Figure 1), she blended her understanding of *Giraffes Can't Dance* (Andreae, 1999), her understanding of comic book features, and her prior experiences with a variety of texts. Her story is about zoo animals who escape and go on an adventure into space. One baby animal gets lost along the way and is having trouble finding the other animals. Keke's story is similar to the story we read together in that she uses exotic animals as her characters. She shows knowledge of comic book features, something we discussed with the participants, to organize her story. The different parts of the story are divided into scenes, which are written in different panels. She uses speech bubbles to include dialogue between the characters. Instead of saying that the guard is sleeping, she draws a security booth with multiple Zs coming out of it. At the end of her comic, she uses bold, all-caps print to build suspense when the baby animal is lost.

Keke described this process this way: "I thought of some stuff. I thought of some stuff in my head." She continued by saying she took ideas and "smashed them together to make a story." In this way, her stories could adhere to "how other people make their own stories" while still representing her original ideas. In this instance, Keke showed that her inner dialogue, her knowledge of comics, and the story the group read together helped her write her own comic.

Lebron Jackson also drew on his knowledge of comic books, the stories read in Comic Book Club, and his personal experiences to compose original comics. In his comic, two animal characters go looking for Freddy, a character who is missing. They search various parts of the city looking for their lost friend. Like Keke, Lebron also used *Giraffes Can't Dance* (Andreae, 1999) for the inspiration given that he picked a giraffe and a bear to be the main characters in his stories. He also drew settings that looked similar to the major metropolitan area he lives in, such as highways, cars, a mall food court, McDonald's, and the city dump. Lebron incorporated traditional comic book features such as speech bubbles for dialogue and panels to organize and sequence his story. The intertextual connections made for an engaging comic (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Lebron's comic

<sup>1</sup> Original participant speech and writing are preserved throughout.

Participants drew heavily on popular culture to make meaning during various Comic Book Club activities. For instance, several participants chose the names of their favorite celebrities and athletes for pseudonyms. Beyoncé, Michael Jordan, John Cena, and LeBron Jackson were all inspired by their pop culture heroes when picking names. Pop culture also influenced the reading and writing participants did during Comic Book Club and also at home. John Cena incorporated the name of his favorite video game, *Subway Surfers* (Moller, 2012), into one of his comics. He also created impressive characters in his stories that had “earrings, shiny teeth, gold teeth, shades, new shoes, jewelry, and Adidas,” he explained. In this instance, popular fashions influenced how he characterized the impressive people in his stories.

Beyoncé reported reading books about Hannah Montana, a character from a television show on the Disney Channel (Correll, O’Brien, & Poyres, 2006), and Michael Jordan composed his own book at home about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Eastman, Laird, Wolf, & Wise, 1987) when he could not find one in his school library. Angry Lion collaborated with others while playing *Grand Theft Auto* (Benzies, 2013) in his spare time in order to make lists of important supplies he would need to be successful in the game. These television shows and video games became avenues through which participants could read and write meaningfully both inside and outside of Comic Book Club meetings.

Popular culture was not the only avenue through which participants blended and merged their voices with others. Michael Jordan’s retelling of the story read at school playfully merged his own language with the words from the text from which he drew the story. He also tried to incorporate utterances from multiple actors and characters in his story relay, which is yet another form of intertextuality and sense making that was evident in his recount of the story. When describing the part of the story when the police are going to arrest the “bad guys,” he said, “And when the bad guys come, he fart. And the fart got inside, they throat, and they and they got outside. And the police said, stop, and that’s when they went to the circus.” By merging his language with that of the story, he made the story comprehensible and entertaining to his audience.

Participants also drew on their personal experiences when reading and writing. Beyoncé enjoyed reading books about Hannah Montana, but she also chose books about people dying “because [she’s] tired of people dying” (Correll et al., 2006). This statement suggests that Beyoncé has had personal experience with death and would like to know more about it. Michael Jordan used his personal experience with dance to describe *Giraffes Can’t Dance* (Andreae, 1999). Not knowing the name of the waltz, he described it as being “like when you go to the wedding, they do the same thing.” John Cena also drew on his personal experiences when composing a comic: “I drew a picture of my dad when he had an afro when he was young and now he doesn’t have hair.” Using personal experience helped these writers make their stories more detailed and interesting.

### **Dialogic Reading, Writing, and Co-Construction of Meaning**

For most of the participants, co-construction of meaning occurred when they were consulting others about their ideas and asking for help. When participants were unsure how to move forward with a piece of writing or needed assistance drawing or using the computer, they would co-construct meaning. For example, John Cena reported that he liked working with other children because “they help people think through things.” More specifically, other children in the Comic Book Club project helped him draw lions and remember the names of video games he wanted to incorporate into his comic. John Cena reported extending the same type of help to other participants by helping them draw lions in their comics, too.

Beyoncé also enjoyed helping other participants as well as receiving help from them. When helping others, she asked questions like “what character do they wanna put, what they want their character name to be, what do they want to say.” She also reported receiving the same type of help when she was trying to pick a character for an online comic strip she composed during one meeting. The other participant who helped her did so by asking her a series of questions, which helped her ultimately decide which character she wanted.

Keke Jones also talked to others to help her when she had difficulty writing about certain topics. She would often take breaks and talk to other participants. They would help her come up with ideas, but more often, just taking a moment to talk about other topics helped clear her writer’s block. During our observations of a Comic Book Club activity in which pairs worked together on the computer, Keke and Angry Lion were able to compose a comic together and were successful not only at constructing the story but also at negotiating turn-taking with the computer. Even though Keke and Angry Lion chose not to comment about their experience of working together in the follow-up interview, their positive collaboration was something all three of us observed and discussed during our debriefing session after that particular meeting of the Comic Book Club. Perhaps what we saw as a powerful co-constructive moment was something participants began to recognize as a regular part of Comic Book Club meetings.

Participants also co-constructed meaning with us during Comic Book Club meetings. In one of the earliest sessions, we read *Giraffes Can’t Dance* (Andreae, 1999). One of us started the session by reading the story to the children one time through and then read the story to the participants again. This time, the participants began to spontaneously co-construct meaning with the researcher reading the text.

Researcher: Keke, what are you thinking?

Keke: I don’t know what buckled means.

Researcher: You don’t know what buckled means, but look at the picture.

Keke: Yeah, when I see the picture, I see it.

Researcher: Ahh. What does buckled mean?

Next, a chorus of responses rang out: running, falling, clumsy. Then John Cena responded:

John Cena: He tries his best, but he clumsy.

Researcher: So, who can show me buckled? (Participants get up and pretend to fall on the ground. Michael Jordan lurches toward the wall with one arm outstretched. LeBron Jackson and Angry Lion fall and roll on the floor.)

In this exchange, co-construction of meaning occurs. First, Keke felt comfortable telling the group that she did not understand the word *buckled*, which shows how open spaces help participants take risks and feel safe (Burbules, 1993). The researcher asked Keke to use the picture in the book to help her understand the meaning of the word. Other participants were invited into the discussion to offer their understandings of the word *buckled*, and they gave kinesthetic meanings of the word by acting out that part of the story. Keke came to a better understanding of the word because the researcher and the other participants helped her co-construct meaning by using the picture in the story to help them figure out the word and by drawing on their knowledge of other similar words that could

be used to understand *buckled*.

Beyoncé initiated a similar interaction at a later point in the story:

Researcher: So, the warthog started waltzing, and the rhinos rocked and rolled. The lions danced a tango that was elegant and bold.

Beyoncé: What do *elegant* mean?

Researcher: Have a look and see.

(Some participants move closer to the researcher so they can get a closer look at the pictures in the book. Some begin to stand up. Beyoncé stands up.)

Beyoncé: I show elegant. (Smiling, Beyoncé extends her arms above her head to demonstrate elegant.)

Researcher: OK, show us elegant. (Beyoncé dances while humming a song. Michael Jordan gets up and dances tango-like dance with Beyoncé.)

Michael Jordan: I want to do the lion part.

Researcher: OK. Come and do the lion's part. Which is what? What do the lions do? The lions danced the tango. (Beyoncé and Michael Jordan continue to dance.)

Similar to the previous exchange, Beyoncé initiated a conversation about the meaning of a word in the story. Again, the researcher asked the participants to use the picture to construct a meaning of the word and then invited them to make a kinesthetic meaning by acting the word out. Not only did Beyoncé come to a better understanding of the word *elegant*, but her question also spurred other participants to begin acting out other parts of the story. These examples contrast sharply to the initiation-response-feedback structure of most conversations that occur in classrooms (Mehan, 1979). Furthermore, both Keke and Beyoncé were able to initiate dialogic experiences by asking learner-generated questions (Hansun Zang, 2009).

Later in the reading, participants drew on their knowledge of popular culture to understand the story:

Researcher: With that the cricket smiled and picked up his violin. Then, Gerald felt his body do the most amazing thing. His hoofs had started shuffling making circles in the ground. His neck was gently swaying and his tail was swishing round.

Lebron Jackson: He dancin'. He doin' the stanky leg. (Participants all laugh. Several get up and begin doing the stanky leg.)

After the participants and the researcher engaged in discussions about the meanings of different words in the story, the participants continued to initiate conversations about the text. In the excerpt above, Lebron is co-constructing meaning by using the text as well as his knowledge of popular dance moves (i.e., the stanky leg) to describe for the other participants the dance that Gerald is doing at the end of the story. His description has an impact on the other participants because they are familiar with the stanky leg, and all laugh at this explanation.

As illustrated above, participants co-constructed meaning to write their comics. They also co-constructed meaning with each other and with us to gain better understandings of the stories read during Comic Book Club meetings by initiating conversations about the stories through learner-generated questions.



## Discussion and Implications

The work described in this article represents the very early years of our time in our community project. We were still exploring how to be in this space. We knew all along that we wanted to create a dialogic space, a space that was different from traditional classroom settings, to learn about the children in urban contexts. In this, our seventh year, we are still learning.

Our evolving framework on the domains of dialogism (Table 1) speaks to where we are in our conceptualization at this time. We see clear evidence in our early beginnings of the presence of intertextuality and co-construction of meaning, which we place in the ontological realm (Matusov, 2009). These two themes connect strongly to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia, the confluence and convergence of voices formed when past utterances influence current utterances. The role of the researcher or facilitator is pivotal in furthering these ways of being while at the same time pushing children to excel and be smarter through rich and demanding curriculum practices (Milner, 2020).

Both intertextuality and co-construction of meaning invited an embodied dialogism, which is a playful and spontaneous way of communicating children's understanding of ideas, key phrases, or social practices by enacting or performing these concepts for the whole group. Space, gestures, facial expression, body language, movement, laughter, and cultural connectedness are additional forms of intertextuality and means for communicating meaning. The creation of the ontological dialogic space (Matusov, 2009) invited these liberating and participatory forms of cultural expression and being (Gay, 2000).

### Intertextuality

Intertextuality often represented a blend of language-related knowledge, cultural experiences, literacy practices, influences from previous reading and writing engagements, and idea connections across various texts and contexts. The children's intertextuality in this study was rooted deeply in their previous personal encounters with reading and writing, and it reflected their "subjectivity, perception of the world, and ways of knowing" (Abd Elkader, 2015, p. 7). In this context, these children's personal experiences echoed their desire to dialogue about these realities as they attempted to make sense of them and of the world around them, especially of the events occurring in their lives, be they literate or personal.

Alternatively, intertextuality around personal experiences connected what they knew and with whom they were familiar and comfortable with that which was a new idea or a different form of experience encountered through involvement in reading and writing. Examples of personal intertextuality in our study were Michael Jordan's explanation of dance, for which he did not know the name and therefore to help himself he compared it to the way people dance at weddings, and John Cena's using his father's afro hairstyle as inspiration for designing a character's appearance and personality for a story in his comic book.

From the constructivism learning theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), these latter forms of intertextuality represent these children's active learning and meaning making as they assigned an old schema to a new object and experience. We refer to this active meaning making as engaging in dialogue, old mental models, ways of knowing with new models, and ways of knowing in an attempt to understand and interpret the world around them and themselves and of their own experiences.

The children's intertextuality in our study was also affected by popular culture in many ways. Popular culture represented a variety of contexts, genres, modes, and modalities, including sports celebrities, video games, and television shows, and it was

woven in different ways into the fabric of the intertextual experience among these children. For example, popular culture was a part of name selection for themselves after celebrities or character design. Character design involved adapting attributes and accessories from either fashion or video games for characters in their comic books.

The children's cultural references were also sites of learning for us because we did not know some of them and had to ask the children to explain and later research their names to become "knowing." We learned to become curious and not to dismiss as unimportant or uninteresting the ideas that children brought to the Comic Book Club. We learned the importance of adopting the stances of "unknowing" and curiosity. This is the development of interpersonal dialogue through intersubjectivity and interaddressivity (Matusov, 2011), acknowledging our own "unknowing" and seeking to learn from these young learners by being curious and deeply interested in what they are saying.

### **Co-construction of Meaning**

Co-constructing meaning was another common dialogism theme evident in our participants' reflections and experiences. Offering help to others; consulting each other about ideas, plot, method, and format or layout for their comic books; and freethinking and talking to others were typical displays of collaborative authoring among our participants. Even with numerous benefits of such dialogic meaning making and collaboration for the children in our study, many of which have been corroborated in other studies (Andrews & Rapp, 2015; Boyd & Markarian, 2015; Teo, 2012), some children found dialoguing about and working with others on a comic book difficult and even at times resisted it. We believe that their school contexts support a more "antidialogic" or pedagogical enterprise (Matusov, 2009, p. 3), and learning the dialogic site of the Comic Book Club required cognitive effort or discipline (Milner, 2020) to counter the dominant antidialogic ways of teaching and learning.

This was especially true for Beyoncé and Michael Jordan. Differing levels of knowledge or skill required for completion of a task and diverse viewpoints and background are frequent challenges in collaboration (Andrews & Rapp, 2015), and these could have been the reasons for unsuccessful collaboration between Beyoncé and Michael Jordan. We also noticed that Michael Jordan preferred to work independently, and he enjoyed having a great deal of autonomy and flexibility in designing his comic books.

Hence, we argue that Michael Jordan did engage in co-constructing of meaning using the sources that provided inspiration for his comic books rather than co-authoring the new meaning with other children. In other words, instead of consulting other children and working with them while composing his comic books, he consulted his favorite video games or books and thereby involved his own ideas in dialogue with the ideas from these information sources.

Like structural features that are not the only ones that characterize dialogic talk (Boyd & Markarian, 2015), dialogic meaning making does not necessarily require collaboration and collaborative working with others. It can be an independent effort as well. As Matusov (2009, p. 3) reminds us, "Education as practice is dialogic." In this context, Michael Jordan's intertextual meaning making using other information sources functioned as a form of co-constructed meaning making even though this creative act did not involve collaborative effort with others. Thus, self-regulated dialogic meaning making served as an alternative to collaborative co-authoring of meaning.

Bakhtin (1981, p. 282) argues that the speaker is always oriented "toward the

specific world of the listener” and uses a composite of viewpoints, horizons, accents, and social languages to create utterances and discourse that would be meaningful to this listener. Through their discussions, reading, and writing, the participants in the Comic Book Club oriented their comics to the others in the group as well as to an intended audience by co-constructing meaning with each other and using their knowledge of video games, books, and other popular culture items.

### Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a framework for creating ontological dialogic spaces in a community-based research project with elementary children. There are many challenges in doing this work, and the most difficult involves divesting oneself of past-learned histories of schooling for both the researchers and the children. Another is a divestment of deficit narratives and the development of a strong counter narrative for both researchers’ and children’s subjectivities.

A strong commitment to the transformative possibilities of the dialogic enterprise built on the understandings of Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1981), and Matusov (2009, 2011); the work of urban researchers such as Gay (2000), Ladson-Billings (2006), and Milner (2006; 2020); and our own commitment to equity and social justice and the promotion of rich, rigorous learning experiences for all children kept us grounded in realizing the empowering possibilities of our work.

We found consistently in our sessions children’s engaged embodiment of the work. This did not occur immediately but came after several sessions of being in the space and learning from the other children’s ways of being. In our storytelling, it was their “leaning into” the stories with rich facial expressions, eyes on the reader or the text, and spontaneous body movements. If they felt like singing, they sang; if they felt like dancing, they danced; and if they felt like acting something out, they did. In their comic book creations, they chose different colored pencils to work with, how they looked for words in the book, how they concentrated to figure out the spelling for a word they tried to spell, and how they paid attention to every detail in their artistic renderings. This was their own initiative and contribution.

We believe that the creation of an ontological dialogic space enabled this embodiment. Researchers have been criticized for not engaging in “embodied communicative practices” in doing qualitative research or “infusing the vitality of embodiment” in our work (Ellingson, 2017, pp. 1–2). Schools have traditionally divorced the mind from the body (Nasir, Ross, McKinney de Royston, Givens, & Bryant, 2013), but human embodiment is our response to the world and the spaces we inhabit, so why should we inhibit our responses that are part of the semiotics of learning and experiencing? Our research points clearly to the need for educators to create dialogic embodied spaces and learning opportunities for students. Following Dyson and Dewayani (2013), Ellingson (2017), and Norris (2019), our future research with the children in the Comic Book Club will take up the multimodality inherent in the embodiment of our work as researchers who are learning in this space as well as the culturally embodied ways the children teach us about how they learn. Such an ontological approach of engaged dialogism would entail intertextual multimodal and interdisciplinary embodied meaning making that draws on learners’ agentic selves and the performative characteristic of childhood cultures (Dyson & Dewayani, 2013). We believe that such an approach disrupts deficits such as adherence to a predominantly cognitive approach to teaching and learning found in traditional pedagogical contexts and liberates learners to be their fully embodied selves. Norris (2019) reminds us that multimodality



is inherent in the “embodied and cognitive, psychological and performed with language plus non-verbal movements” (p. 3, italics in original). The children in our research and in similar urban contexts do not lack capability; they lack opportunity! From our firsthand experiences, we reiterate and remain inspired by Comber’s (2016) charge that “there is an ongoing need for educators at all levels to contest the common assumption that poverty equals a lack of learning capability” (pp. xvii).

Above all, what we want to encourage in educators is a commitment to an ontology of education (Matusov, 2009) that allows children to be their naturally curious selves and not to stifle their curiosity by our educational practices of following the agenda rigidly and in ways that shut up and make children sit down. Our early forays into “letting our hair down,” acknowledging our “unknowingness” and being genuinely curious about our participants kept us open to the possibilities of potentially transformative ways of teaching and learning. These are our forays into the ontological dialogic enterprise outside of school spaces.

We contend that more teacher educators need to be in these kinds of spaces to learn and unlearn ways of being. Instead of thinking it is the children who have a problem, we must look at the educational structures and strictures that limit them and embrace a new philosophical perspective: the ontology of being one’s real self in teaching and learning.

### **About the Authors**

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