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# New Kids on the Block: Understanding and Engaging Elementary Readers and Writers in New Times

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# New Kids on the Block: Understanding and Engaging Elementary Readers and Writers in New Times

## **Abstract**

This collaborative study examined literacy instruction in a fifth grade classroom with particular reference to two case study students and the role of pedagogy in bridging the divide in their literacy practices. Grounded in the multiliteracies framework and perspectives consistent with third space theory, data were collected using a multi-site approach. Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis and constant comparison approaches. Findings suggest that the two children disengaged from most of school tasks because of the traditional approach to instruction, lack of recognition of their learning styles and interests, as well as the absence of digital literacies. However, they became engaged with school as the teacher implemented a more transformative approach to learning which included the integration of digital technologies and the creation of productive spaces for learning. Implications for literacy teaching and learning were discussed.

## **Disciplines**

Education

## **Comments**

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## **New Kids on the Block: Understanding and Engaging Elementary Readers and Writers in New Times**

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*This collaborative study examined literacy instruction in a fifth grade classroom with particular reference to two case study students and the role of pedagogy in bridging the divide in their literacy practices. Grounded in the multiliteracies framework and perspectives consistent with third space theory, data were collected using a multi-site approach. Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis and constant comparison approaches. Findings suggest that the two children disengaged from most of school tasks because of the traditional approach to instruction, lack of recognition of their learning styles and interests, as well as the absence of digital literacies. However, they became engaged with school as the teacher implemented a more transformative approach to learning which included the integration of digital technologies and the creation of productive spaces for learning. Implications for literacy teaching and learning were discussed.*

We are in the era of rapidly changing literacies, and learners need to acquire multiple forms of knowledge, skills and values to meet the demands of the 21st century. While traditional literacy instruction is still vital for our students, it is insufficient in terms of preparing them for the multiple literacy demands of today's society (Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Ikpeze, 2009; Millard, 2006). Gainer and Lapp argue that a "remix" of effective instruction with the integration of new literacies and technologies can facilitate engagement and motivation as well as powerful reading and writing practice (Davies, 2006; Larson, 2009; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). New literacies can also serve as catalysts

for transforming instruction and constructing learners' multiple realities (Reinking, Mackenna, Labbo, & Kieffer, 1998).

More than ever before, today's classrooms should help learners gain skills suitable for success, but success defined in multiple ways (Gee, 2004, 2006). However, educational institutions have continuously fallen short of capitalizing on the rich contemporary and digital culture in which children live outside of school (Gee, 2006). Consequently, the identities that many children bring to school go unrecognized or misinterpreted (Harry & Klinger, 2005). Parsons (2008) argues that teachers can design instruction that both prepares students for high stakes testing as well as empowers and motivates them to take charge of their learning. To achieve this, educators need a better understanding of today's learners and their literacy practices. They need to rethink epistemological assumptions that underpin most classrooms, examine possible pedagogical approaches that will transform teaching and learning, and create new spaces for learners in the classroom and beyond. This article focuses on two participants and explores two questions: Why were two fifth grade students disengaged from classroom literacy activities? What pedagogical approaches and activities, if any, resonated with these students and motivated them to fully engage with classroom learning?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Multiliteracies**

Multiliteracies recognize that people read and write in many and varied ways using both conventional, new literacies and popular culture texts (Alvermann & Hong Xu, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007). The New London Group (NLG) reports that "technologies of meaning are changing so rapidly, there cannot be one set of standards or skills that constitute the ends of literacy learning, however taught" (p. 64). This theoretical perspective posits that we not only value multiple forms and uses of literacies but also view literacy as situated in time, place and culture, while recognizing that pedagogy can be used to build bridges between different forms of literacy practices. Millard (2004) found that working with multimodal texts helped children to link aspects of their "chosen worlds with their symbolic identities to inform and motivate the development of focused literacy" (p.154).

Luke and Carrington (2002) suggest that educators need to fuse the local literacy practices with which students engage, and the global literacies they bring through the Internet, into a new 'glocalized' literacy

which can be used within the classroom. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) warned that if educators fail to align learners' interests, affinities and prior knowledge to classroom teaching and learning, these students may likely reject formal education for all that it is worth.

### **Creating a Third Space**

Fusing local and global literacies in contemporary education requires the creation of a third space. Third space (Gutierrez, 2008; Gutierrez & Larson, 2007; Moje et al., 2004; Rowe & Leander, 2005) highlights the need for teachers and other educators to create conducive contexts for learning. Gutierrez and Larson (2007) described third space as productive learning spaces which can be created and facilitated by students and teachers in a variety of ways. Third space supports both vertical and horizontal forms of teaching (Gutierrez, 2008), which allows us to view development within and across an individual's literacy practices. Moje et al. (2004) argue that third space provides a space where students' "funds of knowledge" are valued in hybrid spaces, where classroom learning is informed by both home and community based knowledge. They conceptualized third space in three ways. The first is a way to build bridges from knowledge and discourses not often privileged in academic settings, to that of conventional academic knowledge and discourses. In this respect, third space creates spaces of representation and transformation where students can be supported to move their literacy practices into a schooled domain of knowledge. The second view of third space conceives it as a navigational space that enables border crossing that will potentially facilitate success in different discourse communities. Finally, third space could be seen as a social, discursive or cultural space (Gutierrez & Larson, 2007), in which identities are created and transformed and where interactions create new sociocultural contexts that challenge what counts as knowledge and its ways of representation.

Third space, therefore, permits the resistance to the dominant order and the one that "comes into being because of the subordinate and marginalized position of participants" (Rowe & Leander, 2005, p.318). An analysis of third space also helps us to interpret and account for events that produce something new and unanticipated. The concept of third space is important in analyzing the literacy activities children engage with both in and out-of-school because it helps to account for not only the physical space of the classroom, but also virtual spaces of the Internet and hybrid spaces that are neither school nor homes, where learning can take place.

## **Methods**

### **School Context**

Kent Elementary (all names are pseudonyms), a K-8 magnet school, was the primary research site. It is nestled within a mid-sized school district with approximately 70 schools, 3,017 teachers, and approximately 34,000 students. Kent had a diverse student population of 713. Forty-seven percent of the student populations were African Americans, 44% European Americans, 4% Hispanics and 4% Others. The students' socioeconomic status was equally diverse. There were students from low, fixed, middle and high-income families. Fifty percent of the students were on free or reduced cost meals. Students' access to technologically mediated learning depended to a large extent on which teacher they had and the teacher's knowledge, proficiency and comfort level with the use of technology.

In the fifth grade classroom where this study was carried out, there were 16 African Americans, 9 Caucasians, and 1 Asian American, for a total of twenty-six students (13 boys and 13 girls). The teacher, Mr. Pedro was a White middle class teacher in his mid-forties, with more than ten years teaching experience. His undergraduate major was elementary education with an emphasis on science education. He was certified in K-6 special education and 7-12 geosciences. Mr. Pedro retreated from teaching for some time to work in the private sector but later returned to teaching. Upon his return, he was first assigned to sixth grade as a special science teacher for two years before he became a fifth grade teacher in an integrated classroom. Mr. Pedro was more comfortable with teaching science and math than language arts and social studies.

Mr. Pedro was recommended to me by his principal because of the large number of computers in his classroom. In addition, Mr. Pedro had great technical skills. He could fix computers or assemble them. However, during our conversations, he admitted that the computers were hardly used for academic purposes; but indicated interest in learning how new technologies can facilitate teaching and learning. In addition, his increased frustration with his students' "restlessness" and lack of motivation to read and write created a sense of urgency and determination to transform his classroom instruction. Mr. Pedro and I had different but complementary interests. He wanted to improve his students' engagement and I wanted to see the impact of some learning activities on students' engagement. Mr. Pedro and I initially agreed to collaborate to integrate new literacies and technologies. Because he was very open and willing to try out any

ideas, the collaboration was expanded to include all aspects of classroom literacy instruction. The new literacies as used in this paper refer to digital and online literacies or skills necessary to utilize the information and communications technologies (ITCs) that abound today. The new literacies include the ability to effectively use Internet resources to read, write and research online as well as collaborate with others using such tools as blogs, Wikis, websites, and face book among others.

### **Researcher's Role**

My role during this research was fluid, ranging from an observer to a participant observer (Spradley, 1980). While we collaborated and planned the activities together, Mr. Pedro was completely responsible for teaching, classroom management, and grading of the students' papers. Occasionally, Mr. Pedro requested my feedback or assistance to facilitate classroom activities or quick intervention when he felt overwhelmed while attending to students. For example, I helped to facilitate small group activities, literature circle discussions and online discussions which we initiated as part of the research. In all interactions with students, I was usually brief and tried not to assume an authoritarian researcher stance or role of the teacher.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were two fifth grade students, Jack and Sasha, who were selected through purposeful sampling from a group of six students. My interest in Jack and Sasha stemmed from the teacher's comment about the two. Mr. Pedro had described Jack and Sasha as students who ought to be high achievers but who were performing below expectation because they appeared disinterested in school. On closer interaction, I discovered that Jack and Sasha had very similar but unique literacy practices.

Jack was a ten year old European American. His mother was a special education teacher and his father was a private businessman who worked as a movie producer. Influenced by his father's profession, Jack had been involved in acting in one or two commercials and hoped to be a screenplay writer in the future. Jack's hobbies included Internet based reading and writing on a variety of subjects.

Sasha was an eleven-year old African American from a middle class family of four. Sasha described herself as computer savvy, social and outgoing. She wanted to be a journalist when she grew up and as she put it, "I like to write and travel and these go well with journalism."

## **Instructional Context**

Before collaborating with Mr. Pedro, I observed his classroom for four weeks. During this period, I familiarized myself with the classroom and students, while we worked out details of our collaboration. While Mr. Pedro worked extremely hard as a teacher, he was nevertheless very traditional in his approach to instruction. For example, literature instruction consisted of having students read selected chapters of a trade book after which they took a quiz on those chapters. Mr. Pedro said he resorted to that method because most of his students did not read the assigned books. Collaborative learning was rarely utilized. Most writing activities were done using writing prompts. In many cases, the students had difficulty making meaningful connections with the prompts. In addition, while Mr. Pedro was highly interested in integrating digital literacies and had even attended some workshops, he was yet to integrate them in his classroom.

During the period of our collaboration, we thought about learning activities that would motivate and engage students as well as facilitate writing. However, the final selection was based on the perceived needs of the students, time availability and curricula congruency. The activities we designed closely mirrored the ACCESS Framework (Parsons, 2008). ACCESS stands for tasks that are authentic, collaborative, challenging, culminate with an end product, allow self-direction by giving students choices and finally lead to sustained learning across time. For example, we introduced the writing of a class magazine, which utilized both literature circle and online discussions, and made reflective writing a required part of every major assignment. In addition, we introduced a couple of short and long term web-based inquiry projects on social studies and literature, in addition to the science fair project, which was a required part of the curriculum. The new projects were used to promote Internet research, collaboration, authentic exploration, and reflective reading and writing. They also served as a springboard for integrated and multifaceted activities. Critical thinking was facilitated through higher order questions, creative activities, reflection and the analysis of digital videos recorded from class activities.

Group collaboration and independent learning were promoted through group and individual projects. Students were allowed more choice in their learning and more flexibility in the choice of projects. For example, while teaching about US neighbors (Canada), students were given sixteen activities from which to choose and students could choose any number of activities that gave them a cumulative point of 40. For example, in one activity, students were asked to draw a map of Canada. This activity was valued at only two points, while five points were earmarked for an activity

that required students to read and summarize a local newspaper article on Canada. Students could also earn 10 points if they interviewed someone who lived in Canada and analyzed the interview. The sixteenth activity was an open ended project called “design your own Canada project” (with the permission of the teacher), assuming the student did not find any of the other 15 activities motivating or interesting. These choices enabled students to work within their comfort zones.

Finally, classroom computers were utilized for meaningful and purposeful activities such as students’ writing, inquiry projects and web exploration. Altogether, our aim was to better connect to students’ interest and funds of knowledge, integrate digital literacies, and move from traditional to more transformational pedagogy.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected from multiple sites (home and school), using a case study method (Stake, 2003). The two participants were not only observed in the classroom, the researcher also visited their homes and interviewed their parents and observed some of their home activities. Classroom data collection lasted for six hours a day from 8:30 am in the morning to 2:30p.m in the afternoon for six months. Data collection from each participant’s home was done mainly in the evenings and by appointment only. The primary data sources included interviews, written field notes of observational data, video and audio tapes of classroom interactions, artifacts including writing samples, transcripts from online discussions, project papers, attitudinal inventories and the researcher’s reflective journal. I conducted formal and informal interviews with each participant and the teacher before and during our collaboration.

The students’ interview questions consisted of semi-structured and open-ended questions that sought information concerning their backgrounds, interests, attitudes toward school learning, and what they envisioned as classroom activities that would motivate them to learn. Questions were also directed toward their assessments of the new learning activities introduced in their classrooms. The teacher was asked about his teaching philosophy, teaching challenges and ways he intended to improve his pedagogy. At the end of each day, Mr. Pedro and I reflected on the teaching and students’ learning. These discussions and my observations in the classroom provided information for my reflective journal.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing, recursive, occurred in phases, and was aimed at uncovering patterns of actions, events, practices and behavior

from participants (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). A combination of data analysis methods was employed. These included coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), thematic analysis (Elly, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991) and within and cross case analysis (Merriam, 1998).

Thematic analysis began with open coding, which involves breaking down, examining and categorizing data by topic. Steps in the thematic analysis include establishing thinking units, categories, themes and integrating findings. First, I created two thinking units (Elly et al., 1991), “pre collaboration” and “collaboration stages” which were used as broadly framed sorting files. For the pre-collaboration, I analyzed the interviews, observation data and field notes taken about the two students’ attitudes and dispositions to learning before my collaboration with the teacher. The same analysis procedure was applied to the collaboration stage. Categories were then generated under each classification topic. Some questions for the participants aligned with some of these categories. For example, before collaborating with the teacher, the two students were asked to describe their learning experiences and why they were ‘uninterested’ in classroom activities. They were also asked to choose the kinds of learning activities in which they would like to participate, and the changes they would like to see in their classrooms. The same interview process was repeated with the students during my collaboration with the teacher, but the questions were geared toward their assessment of the learning activities introduced in their classroom.

Using analytic induction, I coded Jack and Sasha’s perceptions about school learning activities before and after the teacher integrated more progressive learning approaches. Key words such as “boring, fun, disliked, struggled, liked, enjoyed, high interest, no interest, low interest,” among others, were linked to particular learning activities and context. I moved from a broader contextualized description of the participants’ literacy practices in different spaces to a more focused microanalysis of their activities in these places. Within each category, I searched for themes by reviewing the data for statements or ideas that were particularly revealing, expressive or outstanding.

Finally, findings for each participant were integrated and these were again compared for commonalities, patterns, differences or unique happenings. Throughout this recursive process, I purposely searched for negative or discrepant cases. To promote validity, videotapes were used to verify and check the accuracy of observational field notes while discrepant information was presented to the participants for verification. Triangulation of data sources, refining working themes and member checks were additional standards used to enhance trustworthiness. I periodically

checked some of my interpretations of data with the participants to ensure that their views were represented.

## **Results**

In this section, I present the themes and patterns related to Jack and Sasha's literacy practices before and after the teacher infused more responsive activities. Data analysis produced two major themes: (a) disengagement as a form of protest, and (b) transformational pedagogy as a catalyst for learning and engagement. The first theme related to Jack and Sasha's literacy practices before the teacher's implementation of a more responsive pedagogy. The second theme highlights the impact of the teacher's pedagogy on Jack and Sasha's literacy practices, suggesting that a more flexible student-centered approach that fuses aspects of students' interests, their emerging identities, and the demands of the official curriculum, resulted in learning engagement.

### **Disengagement as Quiet Protest**

**Jack.** In school, Jack was quiet and withdrawn and hardly talked in class. He was both the youngest and smallest child in his class. Jack indicated that he liked to work independently, but also likes to work with others when it is something that interests him. When I observed Jack, I noticed that he lacked enthusiasm most of the time. Jack's teacher had described his performance in class as a mismatch to his intellectual ability. Jack's lack of interest in school could be seen from his remark during an interview when he was asked about his future ambition: "Am not sure I will make it to college because school is boring!" According to Jack, sitting and listening to the teacher all day long was not his style of learning. He would have preferred more "fun" activities and more access to computers and the Internet at school because they're "a lot more free and independent ways of learning." In contrast, Jack was engaged at home with a variety of self-selected writing projects on and offline, research activities and educational video games. He also posted his poems online, listened to his favorite authors and solicited feedback on his questions about various issues. Jack was bored and uninterested in most classroom activities because it appeared that his multi-literacy practices, dispositions for research, writing and self-directed learning were unnoticed (Harry & Klinger, 2005). Jack indicated that he chose not to engage in most class activities because they were boring and he just did not want to try unless it was on what he wanted to work. During a conversation with Jack's parents concerning his attitude toward school, his father expressed disappointment with the school system, but tried to rationalize his son's dilemma: "Jack is

like me. I never did well in traditional school.”

Jack’s case challenges us to rethink the concept of “traditional” school in the age of new media. Traditional pedagogies, which explicitly outline which knowledge children should acquire and how, perpetuate the deep grammar of schooling, and in many cases, offer learning experiences that are irrelevant to children’s lived realities (Gee, 2004, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Marsh, 2006).

Another major reason for Jack’s disengagement was because he conceived writing and literacies as computer mediated and authentic activities. In school, Jack’s purposes for writing were limited. One reason was because he had to hand-write everything, while at home he had access to a computer. Another reason was that there were not many opportunities for authentic reading and writing in the classroom. Jack was motivated to write when he perceived writing as an authentic activity, directed to real people, and for real purpose. Jack wrote readers theater scripts for his after-school program, asked questions and listened to his favorite authors online, and occasionally posted his poems online. He also participated in the AoM (video game) forum discussion because it involved interaction with real people and he could get feedback from them concerning the technical glitches he experienced with the video game. Jack was working on a book manuscript and a collection of poems for online publication. Computer access was his major motivation for most of his writing because he could format, edit and revise the manuscript without “messing papers up and with less frustration.” Conversely, much of what he wrote in school was done only with paper and pencil, and his audience was his teacher. These activities were boring and uninspiring. They were more laborious and not authentic.

**Sasha.**

Like Jack, Sasha also performed below her intellectual level in school. Her writing notebook had pieces that were never developed nor finished. Many of her take-home assignments were not done. Most of her private time was spent on online activities. When I observed her in class, I noticed that what interested her most was chatting with her group of friends and discussing some magazine articles that she wrote. Sasha usually brought to class the magazine she published privately on girls’ issues which she shared with her friends. School, for Sasha, was all about friendship and social interaction. No wonder that the reasons why she went to school, as listed in her blog were to make her mother happy and to meet with her friends. When I asked her to explain why school learning was not part of the reason she went to school, she told me that she did not learn much from school and was bored most of the time. “My friends make it worthwhile,” Sasha retorted. Sasha reacted very negatively to the fact that computers in their classroom were

for a select few--- for those with whom the teacher was satisfied. Her reluctance with writing and other activities was a deliberate protest against the teacher for making them handwrite most of their class work when there were many computers in the classroom, and for using computer time as a reward and punishment system. Consistent with Davies and Merchant (2009), Sasha's interests were more on Web 2.0 tools such as online participation, social networking and collaboration. Blogging, for example, was her favorite pastime. Interestingly, while Sasha was actively involved in several writing projects at home, she was uninterested in school literacy activities, especially writing. As far as Jack and Sasha were concerned, writing and literacies were motivating only when they were computer mediated activities, and not with paper and pencil.

Like Jack, Sasha was a prolific writer and most of the writings were computer-mediated and done outside of school. As indicated earlier, Sasha was involved in a myriad of writing projects. She published a biweekly magazine, and was working on a collection of short stories. She also wrote poems, book reviews and kept daily record of important events in her website and blog. Sasha was reluctant to write in her class because to her "it was tedious and time consuming" to write on paper and then later revise and rewrite. Besides, the teacher was the only audience for class writing and Sasha was used to writing online for wider audience feedback. For Sasha, digital compositions were not just necessary; they were a way of life that the classroom was disrupting.

## **Transformational Pedagogy as a Catalyst for Learning and Engagement**

### **Jack.**

Transforming classroom instruction through a flexible and constructive approach to learning and assessment, as well as attention to learners' interests did impact Jack and Sasha's literacy practices. Literature discussion groups, inquiry-based learning, collaborative and individualized activities, reflective writing and the integration of new literacies and technologies, not only changed classroom dynamics but also created opportunities for Jack and Sasha to engage more with school. When I asked Jack to specifically identify the activities he liked most, he mentioned independent projects, webQuests, video analysis and online discussion. Other activities that impacted Jack and Sasha's engagement with school are described in detail below.

Project-based learning had an impact on Jack's engagement with school. One of the changes that Mr. Pedro implemented was to allow students more choices to explore their interests and "design their own

projects,” if they wished, with his permission, if they did not like the class assigned projects. Jack had a passion for myths and had been researching and collecting information on mythology including ancient Greek, Egyptian and Roman mythology. When the opportunity to design a project of his choice was presented, he decided to compare the original myths (information he had been researching on mythology from books, Internet and other sources) with the *Age of Mythology* (AoM), a video game. Jack compared the two genres to determine how the game reflected or did not reflect the real mythology. After extensive research, he synthesized his findings in a five-page report and wrote a conclusion as follows:

I think the people behind the *Age of Mythology* (AoM) (producers), distorted the original myths because they wanted to make a fun, good selling game and make a profit out of it. The game was most likely made for purposes of entertainment and not to educate players about mythology. Most of the people who have come across this game didn't know enough about mythology to criticize and correct certain aspects of mythology that the creators altered. However, I personally enjoyed the game a great deal and was ecstatic when I finally won the AoM campaign.

Jack's analysis of AoM, that it is a “distortion” of the original myths, could be seen as a challenge of the cultural values that position children as consumers and as objects of consumption. By allowing Jack to analyze a video game as part of his academic work, Mr. Pedro encouraged the integration of a popular culture text as part of Jack's repertoire of learning. This corroborates the call by literacy scholars that popular culture texts should not be viewed as diversionary or something to be shunned; instead, students should be encouraged to appreciate and critique such texts (Alvermann & Hong Xu, 2003; Gee, 2006). Besides, Jack's project may have been both empowering and motivating because it was authentic, challenging, allowed for self-direction, and culminated in an end product that met the assignment's requirement and resulted in an earned grade (Parson, 2008).

While Jack undoubtedly thrived well as an independent, self-directed learner, there were other aspects of his identity that were unrecognized or even misinterpreted in the classroom until he had an opportunity to be involved in some learner-centered activities. For example, during the literature discussion of two books: *Door in the Wall* by Marguerite De Angeli and *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo, Jack actively contributed to the discussions and was highly engaged. Although he described himself as a listener rather than a talker, he nevertheless

described the literature circle discussion as insightful, fun, and interesting because he could listen to other students' ideas and contribute his ideas.

The video analysis reflection was another activity with which Jack was engaged. This activity required students to watch the video of their class debate, as well as their group preparation for the debate, and to write an analysis of their group's performance. Below is an excerpt from Jack's paper:

When I watched the video, I noticed that our group did not function well...I mean, we were not well prepared for the debate. Second, some boys in my group were difficult to work with. Another reason for the poor performance of our group was because we were mainly boys and none of us was a good talker. One of our speakers stammered while he spoke, while the other missed the key points. In the future, I would like to work with a group with a mix of eloquent students, and I will like the group to spend more time to prepare for the presentations.

Reflection is an important aspect of students' learning because it provides them with opportunities to evaluate their own learning and helps the teacher to understand the students' perspectives.

In addition to the activities mentioned above, online discussion at <http://www.nicenet.org>, was one of the most motivating learning activities that gave Jack access to powerful and authentic literacy experiences. Online discussion forums were created based on two trade books, *Because of Winn Dixie*, and *Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo. Students were required to respond at least three times to the discussion threads created by the teacher. However, Jack had a total of 15 entries. He not only responded several times to the teacher created prompts, he also created two discussion threads one of which was entitled 'I am a writer.' Below is an excerpt from Jack's first comment on this prompt:

I am currently writing a book on my computer about two men who live in a small town in Jenta. The book is called Jenta Warriors because it takes place in a town called Jenta. One day, the town is pillaged by raiders led by a scourge named Geneikus. The men, Inaj and Adiba, are knocked unconscious and taken to Geneikus' camp. They defeat Geneikus and his top assassins with the help of a man named Larveau.....

Here, we see Jack's identity construction as a writer. As Larson (2009) rightly pointed out, online space helped Jack to take ownership of the learning process and provided an avenue for him to showcase his skill and his passion for writing. At the time this thread was posted, none of Jack's

classmates and teacher knew he was writing a book. In another discussion thread entitled, *School Life*, Jack criticized the behavior of some students in his school:

A problem I have in school is the other students. One can hardly go to the lavatory without getting hurt by students wrestling one another. The toilets often have large moats of body fluid that keep coming back. Also, students are not respectful to each other at all; often, students pick fights and call each other horrible names. Once, a kid in my class called me rude names in the hallway and later asked me for loose-leaf paper. I replied, 'no' and he went to everyone in the class and asked them all the same thing: 'Can I have a piece of paper because Jack is gay.' Students in school can be very mean.

Online discussion provided a third space that allowed Jack to express himself and create his own identity (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000). The identity transformation from a reluctant to an enthusiastic and prolific writer was made possible by a new sociocultural context and discursive space (Gutierrez & Larson, 2007). Jack's motivation and engagement with school after the teacher introduced more learner centered activities and facilitative learning spaces, present a compelling case that demonstrates that new times demand new approaches, flexibility and, above all, recognition of the needs of children in an information age. Sasha's case also buttresses the same argument.

### **Sasha.**

Like Jack, Sasha became more engaged with school when school learning was aligned with her out-of school interests, especially when the teacher utilized knowledge of her interest as a springboard for classroom activities. For example, as soon as the teacher discovered that Sasha published a personal magazine, she was asked to pioneer the publication of a class magazine as the editor-in-chief, in recognition of her interest and experience with publishing. Sasha wrote the editorial comment for the magazine and with the help of co-editors, collected articles from peers, edited them, and got the magazine published. The success of the first magazine led to the publication of the second edition of the magazine. By recognizing Sasha's out-of-school interest and using her skill as a resource in the classroom, the teacher helped her transition from personal to school literacies (Ikpeze, 2009) through a culturally valued academic activity.

With an increase in the number of class activities that involved social interaction and collaboration, online research and exploration, Sasha finally found her niche. Sasha, who had previously described herself as a "talker"

clearly enjoyed literature circle discussions. She was analytical, critical and related the books to her life. Sasha also carried out an independent study on the caste system in India, a topic she said had been close to her heart. Like Jack, online literature discussion seemed to have captured her interest and engagement the most. Sasha had 17 entries during online literature discussion and most of them were very lengthy. She also created three threads, one of which was entitled ‘School Life’ and used this forum to narrate her experiences in school including what she described as the marginalization of fifth graders:

Here is what I think is wrong with our school system:

#1. The lunch aides: They are mean, rude and they do not care about your side of the story. They will make rules but then they will break the rules that they made.

#2. The dress code: If you break the dress code you are going to be punished. I understand that part but they don’t punish everyone. Seventh and eighth graders get off [e-z] easily. They make the 5th graders change their shirts because they are wearing a tank top in 80 degrees weather. It makes no sense and I don’t get why they don’t question the 7th and 8th graders. I mean, come on, they said they don’t favor people; but the truth is they do .....

Sasha was working on a manuscript for a short story titled “*Being Jessica*”. While responding to the forum “*I am a Writer*”, she highlighted some of her work. Below is an excerpt from the book:

I just started to write a bunch of short stories and poems and I use some peoples’ songs that I really like. By the time I’m in twelfth grade, it should be finished. It’s about me, my life, how I feel about myself and other people I love and people I hate, and lessons I have learned in my life so far. I have two poems and three songs and one short story already. I want to get a publisher to publish it so I can make some money from it. But, I don’t care if it is not published because I love to write. Like Katy Rose says “I’m teaching myself to dream” and I hope the dream will one day come true.

Indeed Sasha’s dream as a writer cannot be overemphasized as it manifests in all her daily activities. She thrived on writing and uses it to protest some of the unjust social issues. For example, Sasha created a thread on Bullying and had this to say about this hot topic:

Reading about *Because of Winn-Dixie* and *Tiger Rising* reminds me about bullies and bullying..... I have also suffered bullying

and here is my story. I go to summer camp every year since I was six, and every year I would get teased and harassed about my weight. I do not get why people have to do this. So what! I'm overweight; it's not hurting you. But it makes me sad to see and think that people would do that and it makes me mad so I take it out on my friends and family when I really don't want to.

Sasha used the opportunity created by this forum to highlight issues that were focused on her prior personal experiences in life (Larson, 2009). An outspoken Sasha was asked to explain how she felt about most of the new activities in their classroom, to which she replied "I think I'm having a blast now." In sum, flexibility in instructional approach and the integration of web 2.0 tools, especially online writing, not only aligned with Jack and Sasha's out-of-school interests and future aspirations, but also created authentic contexts in which they were both engaged in their learning and took ownership of the learning process.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Jack and Sasha present similar but unique portraits of elementary school readers and writers in new times. Research indicates that many children like Jack and Sasha struggle with both engagement and motivation in school (Guthrie, 2004; Millard, 2006). Some of the generally identified reasons for students' disengagement include the disjunction between the multimodal world of communication available in the wider community and the conventional print mode of the standard curriculum, as well as the perceived lack of relevance of what is offered in class to students' present and future interests (Millard, 2006). This best illustrates Jack and Sasha's case, highlighting a shifting intersection between personal and academic literacies which can facilitate or constrain school learning (Dyson, 1999). An effective pedagogical approach seems to be a panacea to bridging this divide. This happened when Mr. Pedro recognized the unique talents of Jack and Sasha, and allowed their out-of-school practices and values to be part of the school domain of knowledge.

Jack and Sasha wanted to pursue writing-oriented careers in the future. Both felt marginalized in school contexts where the dominance of traditional approaches to learning hampered their effective engagement. Labels such as "struggling" and "reluctant writer" were used by their teacher because they were viewed from a fixed or print-centric perspective. However, as classroom activities became more diverse, collaborative and inclusive, and as the teacher integrated digital and online literacies, Jack and Sasha became competent, engaged, proficient readers and writers.

Third space was constructed through numerous facilitative learning opportunities created by the teacher and students. For example, Jack's self-designed project allowed him to construct a hybrid space where he could critique a popular culture text (video game) and permitted his resistance to a traditional learning model where the teacher was regarded as the sole repository of knowledge. Online discussion helped to position both Jack and Sasha as critical producers and consumers of digital text to breaking with the official conventions of sanctioned literacies and teacher expectations.

By transforming his classroom instruction, Mr. Pedro was able to capture the interest and engagement of not only Jack and Sasha, but all of his students. Transformational pedagogy refers to a set of eclectic approaches that is both engaging and motivating, draws from students' lived experiences and facilitates critical response from students. It involves a "literacy of fusion" (Millard, 2006) and use of students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001) which demand attentiveness from teachers to the worlds their students experience outside of the classroom. Like the findings of Millard (2006), a literacy of fusion enabled Jack and Sasha to work with multimodal texts and to link aspects of their chosen worlds with their symbolic identities to inform and motivate the development of academic literacy. They also served as a catalyst for constructing their multiple realities (Reinking et al., 1998) and for increased engagement and motivation.

The findings from this study and the discussions above highlight certain important issues related to literacy teaching and learning in the 21st century, with implications for teachers, students and schools in general. The study suggests that the teacher's role is paramount in implementing responsive and learner-centered instruction and in helping students link their personal identities to school learning. Students should be appreciated for the unique talents they bring to the classroom and these talents should be utilized to achieve curricular goals. Integrating new literacies, including Web 2.0 tools in purposeful ways, as well as other learner-centered approaches, seems to be one effective way to foster engagement and motivation.

There is a need to create opportunities within and beyond the classroom for authentic knowledge construction. Helping to create spaces where students can collaborate, read and write for real purpose and for real audiences that reflect real life communicative events has become imperative in today's information age. Children of "Generation 2.0" (Jacobs, 2011) are likely to be bored in the traditional classroom unless activities are fun and engaging or reflect their lived experiences. The fast paced world of ICTs apparently influences the way they think, act and their

level of engagement. Instead of making the classroom the end all in their learning, teachers should provide these learners access and opportunities to navigate different productive and facilitative spaces for learning which include out-of-school, private, public, hybrid and virtual spaces. This will motivate, support, and extend their repertoires of practice and equip them strategically to transfer discursive practices into new spaces for more meaningful learning.

With children born and growing up in a digital world, there is a need for an ecological balance between print and digital literacies. More than ever before, it is now important to address issues around an increasing number of children who feel marginalized in the school system. One of such issues is paper and pencil writing versus computer-based writing. With computers becoming more and more ubiquitous, children are finding it unattractive to compose via paper and pencil. Teachers, especially at the elementary school level, need to acknowledge this burgeoning reality of resistance and respond accordingly by integrating digital literacies more purposefully.

## **Conclusion**

Education in the 21st century must prepare children to build suitable portfolios for success in the real world. The preponderance of digital technologies and the emerging globalized information economy implies that tomorrow's schools must be equipped with the right physical and technological infrastructure. Qualified teachers must help students develop proficiency with various technological tools that would enable them to use, create, critique, analyze and evaluate multi-media texts, problem solving and collaborating with their immediate and global communities. More attention should be directed to student engagement and creativity, as well as life and career skills, not just student achievement as measured by standardized tests. Children need to be given the opportunity to employ a variety of ways of knowing, telling, designing, making texts, and engaging in meaningful dialogue in relation to their preferred modes and dispositions for learning. Transforming the schools of the future will also entail continuous professional development of teachers to help them acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for effective teaching in the 21st century and beyond. Changing literacies imply changing standards for instruction and assessment, and recognition of the many and varied ways and spaces in which literacy practices occur. Jack and Sasha's cases help us to relate to these crucial issues.

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