

**“I feel terrible...”: Storying Power Differentials Across Relationships in the
Elementary English Language Arts Classroom**

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Abstract

Grounded in contemporary research highlighting how children’s invaluable identity work is often overlooked, this study investigates how one elementary child tailored mandated writing for their own social purposes. Detailing the text the child wrote in the mystery genre, the author illuminates the moves the child made to index particular positionings for himself and his teacher. Through one-on-one conversations with the child and teacher, the author highlights divergent readings of the text it and how this text framed relationships—to one another and to children’s writing—in new ways.

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Scholars have long-recognized literacy as ideological rather than an autonomous set of static skills (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984) and researchers of early literacies have consistently used rich stories to demonstrate how children negotiate the “official,” or mandated, curriculum through their writing and play (Dyson, 1997, 2013; Wohlwend, 2011; Yoon, 2013). In turn, researchers have demonstrated the interconnectedness of children’s social worlds, identities, and the explicit curriculum (Brownell, 2017, 2018a; Dyson, 2018). Ultimately, such scholars argue for young children to be understood for who they *are* rather than only as they are *becoming*. Thus, this article presents a story about the focal child—Malik—as he *is* in the figured world of the classroom at the moment rather than only who he may become after matriculating (Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018).

Many scholars examine the complex social interactions between children in the classroom or the connections children make between their lived funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) at home and school. I build upon the work of the aforementioned scholars that argue for the value in recognizing and sustaining the social work children do within their schooled literacies. As in my past work (Brownell, 2017, 2018a), I work to ascertain how children in the upper elementary grades also use writing to do powerful social work among their peers. However, in the case of Malik, I call attention to the intricate social maneuvering of children in new ways.

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Specifically, I demonstrate how Malik addressed power differentials evident in his relationship with his teacher. While Dyson (1997, 2013) and others (Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018; Wohlwend, 2011, 2013) in literacies have noted how peers (literally) play in(to) the writing of young learners, few have yet examined how children's relationships with teachers is or is not taken up or worked through. Put simply, literacies research has often looked at kid-to-kid relationships in writing, but more scholarship considering kid-to-teacher relationships is necessary, particularly instances wherein children, like Malik, seek to disrupt normalized power differentials.

In this paper, I use a dual-lens of critical sociocultural theory (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) and critical positioning theories (Harré & van Langenhove 1998; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 2001) to focus on the power differentials of the relationships between Malik—an outspoken boy who self-identified as both African American and Puerto Rican—and his white teacher, Mr. Holiday. These power differentials became visible through one of Malik's writings within the mandated curriculum. My larger inquiry was initially guided by the following research question: *How do children negotiate relationships & index positionings through writing in the mandated curriculum?* Yet, after I reviewed Malik's writings alongside interview transcripts, I realized a secondary question was necessary. In this paper, I examine how Malik used the mandated writing of the classroom to index particular positionings by considering the following: *In what ways can power differentials among and between children and teachers be read in children's writings in the mandated curriculum?*

I first introduce the larger context of writing within the United States before detailing the frameworks that informed my analysis. Then, I outline the methods for this

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inquiry and take time to describe the focal child participant, Malik. In the findings, I highlight the complicated relationships within the classroom made visible through Malik's writing. In closing, I challenge the idea of the neutrality of writing in elementary curriculum and encourage researchers and teachers alike to attune themselves to the complex power differentials present in today's elementary classrooms.

Contextualizing Writing in the United States

Despite a long-term understanding that children's literacies are not static or easily measurable by mandated tools, the Common Core State Standards [CCSS] (2010)—as originally written—and related curricular materials do little to account for the diversity of children, their literacy practices, or their communities (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009). Rather, the CCSS (2010) were written to prepare students for a presumed future and were driven by developmental understandings with little attention to context (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015). In this way, the CCSS encourage writing instruction that is easily measured and readily assessed such as through a rubric grounded in mechanics, conventions, and grammar used in a final product (Hayes & Olinghouse, 2015). Hence, related curricular assessments often focus on the reliability and validity of writing (Graham, Herbert, & Harris, 2011). Research has revealed, however, that many teachers often deviate from the "official" curriculum (Dutro, 2010; McCarthy, 2008; Wessel-Powell, Buchholz & Brownell, 2019) while children frequently work 'under-the-radar' to create space for themselves, including their concerns and their interests (Brownell, 2017, 2018a; Wohlwend, 2013). Contemporary research highlights how children do invaluable identity work in their writing, but that it is often overlooked because teachers do not always fully attend to the underlying content of children's writing (Dutro, Selland, &

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Bien, 2013; Yoon, 2013). Building from this knowledge, I entered this study with the intention to investigate how elementary children tailored mandated writing for their own, often social, purposes.

Theoretical Framing

Recently, more and more scholarship across education has used critical sociocultural theories to consider, as Schenkel (2019) notes, “how power impacts the ways students learn” and, in particular, “how interactions are situated in and impacted by broader sociohistorical systems of power” (p. 22). This theoretical shift is, in large part, due to researchers’ desire to better address and account for issues of identity and agency, particularly as related to power differentials on both the micro and macro scale. Within literacies scholarship, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) build from the work of Gutiérrez and Larson (1994) to emphasize the necessity of pairing sociocultural theories with and alongside of critical theories in order to envision research and educational practices. Doing so, they suggest, can make visible power differentials, particularly as evidenced by “conflict and disjuncture” and argue such moments “are often the spaces in which learning occurs” (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 5).

For many, descriptions of power readily relate to the differentials between students and their teachers as observed through classroom-based behaviors (Brownell, 2018b, 2019; Schenkel, 2019). For example, in many elementary classrooms, children that frequently speak out of turn may be dismissed to move a clip down on a stoplight style classroom management chart. On the surface, the actions of the teacher may appear as a caring, logical response. While an elementary teacher, I myself viewed the response as a means to ensure, for example, children understand the need to wait their turn, a skill I

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understood as necessary for success far beyond the walls of an elementary classroom. In more recent years, however, I have come to understand how practices such as this reified power differentials always already present in my classroom. Ultimately, as I worked to ‘right’ wrongs (e.g., asking a child to limit their vocal participations in an effort for more children to be heard), so too did I further perpetuate dominant ways of knowing and participating. As exemplified in this example, classrooms are home to both overt and covert power differentials as teachers and children often vie for control. As social actors in the classroom, their participations are “performances of social identity [that] are cloaked in the fabric of power and ideology and economics” (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 8).

Like in my discussion of power, I understand positionings and identities as informed by the social contexts in which individuals participate (Harré & van Langenhove, 1998). Positionings and identities are continually in flux. Because they are fluid entities that change across multiple social contexts, they are tools to both establish associations with (and distance from) individuals in communities. While individuals can index particular positionings and identities themselves, they are also frequently positioned by others. Although positionings and identities of individuals are enacted in the moment, they are also both historically situated and influenced. In this way, positionings and identities are pluralistic (Harré and van Langenhove 1998; Holland et al., 2001).

As relational processes informed by the self while also influenced by others, positionings and identities can be used to explore how individuals participate in discursive and embodied practices as they index specific positionings or identities

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(Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Across interactions between social actors, identities are always shifting as individuals negotiate power differentials and how the varied practices of each party will (not) be taken up, valued, or sustained (Holland, et al., 2001). In this way, identities are always already organized into “figured worlds” (Holland, et al., 2001), or conceptual spaces built around a shared set of practices, understanding of artifacts, and socially constructed norms and beliefs. Figured worlds are informed by place and time, often with specific artifacts and language connected to them. For example, in the figured world of the focal classroom, Mr. Holiday and his students had a shared understanding that the clothesline clips attached to color-coded paper, held much weight in the classroom as an artifact that ‘tracked’ children’s social behavior (and, arguably, their social ranking). The behavior management clip chart controlled children’s bodies and voices and welcomed them into the hidden curriculum of school (Anyon, 1981; Brownell, 2018b), with the teacher ultimately having say when and how children may participate in the classroom. Outside of the space of the classroom or the hours of the school day, however, the clotheslines clips could be repurposed as puppet show materials or to fasten student-produced creations from the ceiling. Put simply, the clips only measured the behavior of the children during school hours and in the figured world of the classroom; outside of this time and space, the clips were likely of little concern.

The figured worlds framework was a useful tool for me to explicate power differentials within children’s classroom-based writing, particularly as it related to the mandated curriculum. Previously, I used a figured world lens to read relational power in the writing of one young girl (Brownell, 2017). Reading her work with three figured world lenses—that of the mandated curriculum, that of the classroom, and that of play—I

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emphasized how, in her text, the child did important identity work while also making visible power differentials between peers. In this article, I return to the work of Holland, et al., (2001) to highlight how, as in the case of Malik, power differentials between children and their teachers are also evident in children's writing. Pairing this work with the aforementioned critical positioning theories, in my analysis, I demonstrate through my analysis how Malik acted to disrupt established power hierarchies in the figured world of the classroom by positioning himself as the hero in his response to a mandated text.

Methods and Modes of Inquiry

Using a case study design (Dyson & Genishi 2005) with ethnographic methods (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011), I focused on how children indexed identities through classroom writing assignments in the larger study. In this paper, I center how one student, Malik, used the mandated curriculum to speak back to power and authority and negotiate power differentials.

Focal Site and Participants

Located near a large Midwestern university, Community School J (CSJ) was home to nearly 320 students in grades 1-4. A public Title I school, it served a diverse population of students, 72% of whom received free and/or reduced lunch. White students comprised 52% of the student body while African Americans (32%), Latino (9%), and Asian American (7%) constituted the other 48% of the school's population according to official school reports. These numbers, of course, tell a limited story, especially because, as the school's principal told me, the data does not capture the of number children that identified with two or more racial and/or ethnic categories (Fieldnote, August, 2016). The

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class itself was led by a 28 year-old white teacher, Mr. Holiday—a self-identified gay man raised in the Midwestern state where the study occurred. This was his second year at CSJ and his fourth year teaching overall, though he had previously taught in another state. The youngest in his family, Mr. Holiday used personal experiences in his writing, including playful tales involving his older brothers and the misfortune of his father passing away while he was still a young child.

Mr. Holiday's instructional style mimicked what I imagined as my own. He greeted his students each morning and created engaging lessons to maintain children's attention throughout the morning. After lunch, he welcomed his students into real and imagined scenarios through a daily read aloud before turning their attention to writing. During recess, Mr. Holiday joined in the play of his students—from Frisbee and football to whole class games of tag. He laughed without worry along with his students and helped any disagreements to dissipate before the rumblings grew to anything too large.

Mr. Holiday maintained high standards for his students while attending to the complexities of students' lives, alongside their test scores. He knew the children that floated between the homes of dad and mom and those that needed additional support in getting meals for the weekend while always thinking ahead to the next book to recommend for each reader.

Malik was one of the 22 children I came to know across an 18-week case study at CSJ. At ten years old, Malik was the oldest student. Although he was smaller in stature than his peers, my fieldnotes are littered with stories of Malik acting as a budding social justice activist as he stood up both for what he believed in. From the cafeteria to the

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playground, Malik questioned actions he deemed unjust. It came as no surprise to me when he shared that he one day wanted a job helping people.

Raised by a single mother, Malik was incredibly aware of the financial stresses his mother—a Puerto Rican woman—faced and he talked with me frequently about the loss of his family’s car and home. Malik, his mother, and his younger sister resided at the home of the assistant pastor of his church. Malik noted it was likely because the assistant pastor was a veteran of the Navy that his family was financially “secure,” (Malik’s words, not my own). Malik expressed gratitude for the shelter provided by his assistant pastor and his presence in his life. He told me he enjoyed shooting hoops with the pastor and the bike rides they took.

Malik also shared with me his father—an African American man—passed away before his birth. He named this moment as the most important in his family’s history. With little knowledge as to what he was like, Malik sometimes seemed desperate to know more, yet he understood he must be satisfied with his mother’s promise to tell him more when he was older. Malik’s understanding of his racial identity appeared as a complex and central concern for his lived, day-to-day experience.

Malik told me his dark skin often launched his schoolmates into a long line of questioning because he physically appeared much different than his fairer skinned mother. He lamented to me the irritation he felt when asked if he was adopted or how it could be possible his mom looked different. I imagine these consistent inquires, paired with his raced experience of the world as a phenotypically African American boy, made him acutely attuned to issues of race and injustice.

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While this article might easily be discussed in terms of the race-based relations between Malik and Mr. Holiday, I focus this piece more on the complex roles power plays in their social interactions as student and teacher. Indeed, race and language are wrapped up in both of these participant's identities which translated into the power differentials between Mr. Holiday and Malik. Rather than ignore race as a major issue, I believe framing this article in terms of power differentials may have more direct applications to more teachers across the varying racial makeup of schools across the country and world.

Data Generation & Analysis

Participant observation was my primary data source (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I was an active participant in the school three times a week for 18 weeks (n=120 hours). I arrived each morning to join in the lunch and recess break before sitting alongside children for their daily writing lessons. I created jottings when possible and wrote fieldnotes which I paired with children's writings and lesson artifacts. I had one formal interview with Malik and three formal interviews with Mr. Holiday, but additional informal conversations peppered our time together. During individual interviews with each, I presented one of Malik's writing samples. Individually, I asked each to think aloud their thought process while re-reading the piece. The differences in these conversations inform the findings reported in this paper and make explicit the complex power differentials present in their relationship.

Focal Assignment. The majority of writing prompts used in Mr. Holiday's class came directly from *Reading Street* (Pearson, 2011), the mandated literacy curriculum used in all classrooms at CSJ. In this paper, I focused on Malik's response within the

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fourth unit (e.g., “Puzzles and Mysteries”) which began in the midst of an immensely snowy winter, one that resulted in several disruptions due to unpredicted snow days. The six-week unit first introduced children to mysteries, including identifying key features of mysteries such as the use of suspense. The unit concluded with children responding to the prompt, “Write your mystery about something that seems unexplainable” (Reading Street, Pearson, 2011, p. 35d). Once children completed the task, I read across their writings and I noted the various ways children approached their stories while making notes of the social moves they made (Brownell, 2017). I noticed a majority included their peers and teachers as characters. While incorporating characters from everyday classroom events was not new (Dyson, 1997, 2013; Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018), how the children, and in particular Malik, did so caught my attention. Malik’s text stuck out to me because, unlike the other children, his mystery story had a seemingly more negative spin (Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Malik’s Mystery [transcribed as originally written]

1. *“OWWW!!!!”, “Malik go call nine one-one I can’t move my arm & [my]*
2. *leg [is torn badly] are paralyzed. 2 weeks earlier...*
3. *“Malik clip to red!” Mr. Holiday exclaimed fiercely. “You have*
4. *misplaced your home work for 2 months straight!” “O.K. Mr. Holiday.”*
5. *Malik exclaimed depressed. He does this to me every Day. Malik*
6. *thinks sadly.*
7. *“One Day You’re going to thank me someday.” Well about 3 weeks*
8. *later the class was playing soccer and then Mr. Holiday fell into a*
9. *mutated gopher hole.*

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Reading Power Differentials in Relationships Between Child and Teacher

Across my time with Malik and Mr. Holiday, I observed their relationship to be complex. On several occasions, Malik told me he admired his teacher, especially because Mr. Holiday was the first male teacher he had ever had. I observed Malik to enjoy the company of his teacher as the two often shared playful jokes or exchanged stories about their favorite Pokémon. In both the formal structure of the classroom and the one-on-one interview, Malik told me Mr. Holiday was among his most favorite teachers.

Mr. Holiday reciprocated Malik's feelings and demonstrated deep care for his student. Aware Malik carried a lot on his small shoulders and sympathetic to the loss of a father at an early age, Mr. Holiday was in constant contact with Malik's mother and helped where he could to alleviate pressures on the family's financial situation. With a heightened awareness about Malik's daily experiences outside of school, Mr. Holiday did his best to support Malik such as providing him extra one-on-one time when possible or creating specific classroom jobs just for Malik. By positioning Malik as a class leader, Mr. Holiday told me he hoped to redirect Malik's energy to align with the norms of the figured world of the classroom.

While Mr. Holiday did his best to remain informed about Malik's out-of-school life, he was also charged with managing Malik's in-school experiences. The energetic and excited Malik sometimes frustrated Mr. Holiday. For instance, Malik would sometimes become so enthusiastic about a book he was reading or a discovery on his Chromebook that he conversed with his peers, often leaving his seat to do so. Actions like these tested the patience of his teacher and, sometimes, his peers. Still, Mr. Holiday recognized Malik's potential and took steps to help him find academic success. Some

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days, Mr. Holiday gave Malik a particular look to remind him to return to his seat. Malik was often compliant, even if Mr. Holiday needed to offer multiple reminders. Yet, Mr. Holiday sometimes found it necessary to take more extreme measures and assert his authority as teacher, a prominent role he held in the figured world of the classroom.

Mid-way into the study, for instance, Malik was positioned at a desk away from his peers, what Malik and Mr. Holiday referred to as “Malik Island.” It was meant to lessen Malik’s distraction of his peers and limit Malik being preoccupied by others. “Malik Island” was but one physical way Mr. Holiday sought to help Malik. As an outsider looking in, it is easy to cast judgement about Mr. Holiday’s actions and view “Malik Island” as an explicitly negative exploitation of the teacher’s power. However, I share the story of “Malik Island” alongside my other observations to help readers to peek into the complexity of the two’s relationship and to highlight the depth and limits of Mr. Holiday’s understanding of Malik, perhaps reinforced by dynamic power differentials inclusive of the mandated curriculum. I argue this insofar as Mr. Holiday was policed by the mandated curriculum which—alongside mandated assessments—marked his success as a teacher in the larger figured world of the school.

Unsolved Mystery: Indexing Identity in the Figured World of the Classroom

As a frequent reader of Malik’s writing, his mystery story both aligned with and stood out from the other texts he composed. His story was one that incorporated “real” events and experiences (e.g., playing soccer with Mr. Holiday, moving his clip to red) as well as elements of fantasy (e.g., Mr. Holiday becoming paralyzed, the mutated gopher hole). Across texts he composed, Malik often included his peers as lead characters and wrote of them using fantastical skills such as bringing light to the world with a fireball

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thrown into the sky. By blurring what was real and what was make-believe, Malik indexed a positioning among his peers as a creative writer, well-versed in social happenings in the figured world of the classroom. Additionally, with raucous laughter often as a goal during the daily “Author’s Chair,” Malik was positioned by his peers as a jokester.

While Malik’s mystery story was very similar to others he had previously written, the text had a very different tone than others he wrote. In many ways, Malik’s story offered a much darker tale than previously was present in his texts. I was taken aback, for instance, both because Mr. Holiday appeared to be severely injured in the story and because Malik wrote of expressions of deep sadness and anger. In short, his mystery story disrupted my notion that Malik was positioned as a class clown by bringing to the fore his range of emotions, especially those less visible in his daily experience in the figured world of the classroom.

Still, the concerns I had about Malik’s text also displayed his sophisticated understanding about writerly moves. In prior class sessions, for instance, Mr. Holiday had delivered explicit instruction on the use of dialogue as an interesting hook to capture a readers’ attention. On an earlier draft of the paper (italicized in Figure 1), Mr. Holiday had even commented on Malik’s use of “OWWW!!!!”, writing “I like the lead...it made me want to read more!” Similarly, Malik demonstrated his writing prowess by enhancing the language within his story. Notably, Mr. Holiday also praised Malik’s powerful language commenting on the first draft, “‘exclaimed fiercely’ sounds so much better than ‘said’ or ‘shouted.’ Can’t wait to see what else happens.”

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I share Mr. Holiday's comments here because it is important to note that Malik understood what was required of him as a writer in the mandated curriculum—a top-down, invisible player that arguably informed the instructional happenings and power differentials in the figured world of the classroom. Malik, then, was a capable writer in the eyes of the curriculum and likely his teacher. In turn, Mr. Holiday's imprint on Malik's writing was made evident in Malik's inclusion of a dialogic lead and interesting "five dollar" language (Mr. Holiday's phrasing, not my own). Yet, for all the ways Mr. Holiday influenced Malik as a writer in terms of story structure, so too did he inform the content of the story.

I now ask readers to return once again to Malik's text and, in particular, line 7 which states "One Day You're going to thank me someday." Upon re-reading Malik's story, can you ascertain which speaker pronounces these words? Even as a reader familiar with the relationship between Malik and his teacher, I remained uncertain about who was speaking and, in turn, what might be implied by this statement. Was Mr. Holiday speaking these words as a more experienced person, well aware of the necessity of meeting deadlines in the world beyond elementary school?, I wondered. Or, did Malik voice the phrase under-the-radar of Mr. Holiday, in a frustrated tone? Knowing who the speaker was could greatly shift the story. Without a clear understanding, I set out to learn more by asking Malik directly during our one-on-one interview.

I quickly realized, however, how intricately connected the text was the larger power differentials within the relationship between Malik and Mr. Holiday in the figured world of the classroom. Then, I detail the text Malik wrote in the mystery genre and the moves he made to index particular positionings for himself and Mr. Holiday. Through

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one-on-one conversations I had with both Malik and Mr. Holiday, I highlight our divergent readings of the text it and how this text framed our relationships—to one another and to children’s writing—in new ways.

Reading the Writing to (Re)Examine Relationships

Shortly after Malik submitted his mystery story, I sat down with him to review it together. After reading it aloud, Malik quickly added onto his story telling me that “outside there’s this weird mysterious hole about this big [gestures with arms] and Mr. Holiday almost stepped in it.” I followed his lead on this and inquired what other elements of his story that were likely also informed by his lived experiences at CSJ.

Cassie: You talk about having your clip moved to red. What does that mean?

Malik: Well, red’s the worst color. When I clipped down, I was upset, and I told him [Mr. Holiday] that, like, you’re doing all these bad things to me, but one day I’m going to help you and you’ll forgive me for it.

In the middle of Malik’s story, the clip—a part of Mr. Holiday’s behavior management system—served as an artifact in the figured world of the classroom that physically positioned Malik within his classroom. As Malik elaborated, moving the clip to red was a sign a child made a poor choice within the classroom. The clip’s placement on the chart was a physical marker of Malik’s status at a given time of the day, but the consistent positioning of Malik’s clip day-after-day directly informed how Malik’s was identified by his teachers and peers as a “class clown”—a seemingly negative position in the class that differed from his preferred positioning as a “jokester”. In many ways, then, it is not

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surprising that, while the situation outlined in Malik's story was fictional, he desired for something similar to happen in real-life.

Cassie: Is that [needing Malik's help] something that only happened in the story or is that something that happens in real life too?

Malik: That only happened in the story. I wish it happened in real life though.

I interpreted Malik's comment (paired with his written words) as an attempt to reclaim power from his teacher. Likewise, I viewed Malik's desire for the story to be 'real' as a means to upset the established norms of the figured world of the classroom (e.g., teacher has authority as adult and can control student as child, but in his writing, child has the power).

Malik and I also discussed the decisions he made as a writer about word choice as he included strong language that alluded to his emotions in the story and, in turn, situated his feelings as informed by the norms of the figured world of the classroom. We discussed the idea of his teacher being paralyzed through the gopher hole accident he described in his story and I asked if the emotions evoked in the piece were real feelings Malik had when 'clipped down' by his teacher.

Cassie: So, it seems like in this middle paragraph especially you use a lot of emotions. Is this how you feel when Mr. Holiday talks to you? When he tells you to clip down?

Malik: Sometimes.

Cassie: Can you tell me a little bit more about that [being clipped down]?

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Malik: Yeah, like the part when he said that I've misplaced my homework. Well, I don't misplace it all the time, but sometimes I don't finish it because like, today, we turned in our yellow folder and I forgot to read last night and I forgot to get parent signatures all week so I got some points taken off. That was part of my grade.

Malik made mention of several artifacts in the figured world of the classroom that hold particular weight and informed his relationship with his teacher. Specifically, he discussed the homework folder as well as the associated parent signature document, and, once again, the behavior management clip chart. Together, these latter artifacts reify the power differential between not only Malik and his teacher, but also Malik and his parent; these artifacts reestablish the dominance adults often hold over children (in schools and homes). I suggest this because the parent signature document, for instance, marks children as only truthful or dependable when supervised by another adult. With respect to the homework folder and parent document, however, the child without these important artifacts on the daily suffers the consequence of moving their clip—an act that reauthorizes the teacher as more powerful than the learner in the figured world of the classroom. Yet, in what ways do such management tools—meant to support young learners—instead impact students in negative ways we—as teachers—never intended? For me, this discrepancy became more evident in the latter part of my conversation with Malik when we discussed the expressive language he used in his writing.

Cassie: You said, “Okay, Mr. Holiday, Malik exclaimed depressed. He does this to me everyday, Malik thinks sadly.” Is that kind of how you feel? Do you feel like it’s something that happens every day?

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Malik: Uh, yeah.

Cassie: Do you feel pretty down about yourself when that happens? Or sad about the situation?

Malik: Sometimes. Sometimes I get mad at him and I choose not to participate in things. Like, when we're doing a project I chose not to do it. Like, one time I got mad at him when we were doing a group project and I didn't really participate in it.

Here, Malik made explicit decisions about his participation in class related to how he was feeling about Mr. Holiday at the time of their conversation. For example, Malik mentioned that he sometimes chose to opt out of whatever task was at-hand. As a past elementary educator, I was aware Mr. Holiday may not realize Malik's rationale for not participating. I asked Malik if he ever told Mr. Holiday how he felt at such moments, but he stated he did not because he worried Mr. Holiday would become upset. Consistently, Malik shared concern about how sharing his feelings or frustrations with Mr. Holiday may impact his teacher. I asked Malik if he thought about who might read this piece, including Mr. Holiday. "Not really," Malik told me. "I thought it was just a story for credit." Malik did read the story aloud to his peers and, "The whole class, even him [Mr. Holiday] started laughing."

By making others laugh—through a joke or perhaps unintentionally as through the focal story—Malik's positioning as a humorous child was clear. This positioning appeared to both benefit and constrain him. Malik experienced popularity and social success for continually pushing the boundaries of acceptable humor as a "jokester" (his

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phrasing), but his positioning as a “class clown” (Mr. Holiday’s words) sometimes constrained his ability to be taken seriously by others.

Reading the Writing to (Re)Examine Power Differentials

When discussing Malik’s text with Mr. Holiday, I positioned Malik’s writing sample as one that was funny, a character trait of Malik that Mr. Holiday and I often discussed in our informal conversations and one I described as both a gift and limitation for Malik. Yet, I gingerly tried to draw Mr. Holiday’s attention to Malik’s writing about moving his clip to red because, for better or worse, the behavior management tool was a physical ranking/marker of the daily status of students in the figured world of the classroom.

Relatedly, I reverted back to Malik’s consistent positioning of Mr. Holiday, outside of the writing sample, as his favorite teacher. I made moves to provide Mr. Holiday an ‘out’ when our conversation continued after he re-read the writing sample. I wanted to soften the blow to not make Mr. Holiday feel as bad as a teacher; in part, I knew he came to teaching well-intentioned and was worried how he might respond in seeing first-hand how his social power in the figured world of the classroom was perhaps stronger than he realized as detailed in Malik’s comments about their social interactions in the text and my previous interview with him. Aware of Malik’s intense feelings of frustration about his positioning within the class, however, I wanted to be sure Mr. Holiday engaged with Malik’s voice in the piece.

Cassie: I know many days Malik would tell me his clip was on red. So, this is probably not too far from the truth. I don’t know. I’m interested both in your perceptions of this as a teacher who’s

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reading it, but also in terms of your own emotions as you read it.

Because I think that this one puts you in a place that teachers don't like to be in.

Mr. Holiday: Uh-huh.

After he confirmed that he recalled reading Malik's piece, Mr. Holiday then shared additional details he remembered from when Malik was writing. For example, Mr. Holiday thought the piece was "meant to be playful" because Malik showed him it right away and seemed to have "a good time writing it." Mr. Holiday stated it was interesting Malik wrote about a student without their homework because Malik was, at the time, "a kid who does not do his homework" and who could be "moved to red". Mr. Holiday's tone then shifted as he turned towards the powerful language Malik used in his writing piece. Mr. Holiday began thinking more deeply about why Malik would write "explained depressed".

As we continued, we discussed how Malik acted as a leader among his peers because of how he treated them (and how he wished for them to be treated). In his focal writing, Malik positioned himself both in terms of how he was consistently perceived in the classroom while also flipping the script to be read in a new way. He attempted to assert power through the line--"One Day You're going to thank me someday." Malik wrote this line as something he said to Mr. Holiday. However, when Mr. Holiday and I discussed it, Mr. Holiday told me he had read the phrase as something that he [Mr. Holiday] said, not that Malik said.

Mr. Holiday: See, when I first read this just now, I assume that was me saying that.

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Cassie: Oh, yeah?

Mr. Holiday: Being on him about, “Okay, I’m making you move red. I’m making you move to red. I’m giving you grief about your homework, but you’re going to thank me for doing that.” Because I talk to them [the students] a lot about, “Okay, you’re going to middle school next year. They’re not going to remind you about these things. If you don’t do your homework, they’re not going to say anything, they’re not going to call mom, you’re just going to get a zero,” type of things. So, that’s where I went.

Cassie: No, I mean, that’s so helpful because honestly, in some of the writing samples, they mimic teacher talks so greatly that I didn’t see it at all like that. So, that’s a really interesting way to be reading it, too.

I interpreted Malik’s move as a way to flip the rule of power and authority that was standard in the classroom. I told Mr. Holiday how children attempted to index new positionings and enact identities that resisted the dominant power structures in the classroom. In other words, my own initial reading of Malik’s text was that while he often forgot his homework and Mr. Holiday could respond by putting him on red, there would come a day when Mr. Holiday would need Malik in the same way that Malik had relied on Mr. Holiday. While this was not how Mr. Holiday had first interpreted the writing sample, he was interested to hear more from me about alternative reads of Malik’s piece.

Cassie: I thought it’s him saying like, “You’re going to thank me one day.” And so, about three weeks later, the class is playing soccer and you

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fell into a mutated gopher hole. And so, this incident in the middle happens first. Then, about three weeks later is the next part and then he jumps back. But his story is not necessarily linear in the way that Sydney's [another student] was, but that's how I read this.

Mr. Holiday: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I see that now. Did you talk to him about this piece?

Although I had not planned prior to my conversation with Mr. Holiday about whether or not I wanted to share verbatim what Malik had told me during our interview, I opted to read aloud to Mr. Holiday portions of my conversation with Malik about his intentions while writing after Mr. Holiday asked. Mr. Holiday maintained his poker face while I read aloud to him Malik's words from our interview, but once I inquired how he was feeling after listening, his face fell.

Cassie: So, I guess hearing that, how does that -- and then looking at this piece, I don't know if you have reactions as you were listening to that and what he was saying about it.

Mr. Holiday: Well, now, I feel like a terrible person...

Cassie: But you shouldn't be a terrible person. I think that this is something that happens a lot in writing. For me, this idea of going from this perceived troublemaker to being the person who is powerful also really speaks to a lot of the things because he didn't have power over a lot. That's one of the things I'm thinking about writing about Malik, it's about this desire to take back some of this control that he doesn't have in his life and to assert himself.

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By flipping the script in his writing, Malik attempted to alleviate some of the frustration and tension he felt based on his identity and positioning in the figured world of the classroom. In other words, he used the mandated prompt to index a preferred identity and positioning in relationship to Mr. Holiday, even just for the day or in the imagined world of his story. Although many of his peers also wrote about Mr. Holiday in this genre and others, Malik's representation of Mr. Holiday, as well as the precarious situation of the mutated gopher hole, stand apart from the writings of other children in the class. Malik responded to authority in a respectful manner--following the instructions laid out for him by figures of authority even when he saw their actions as unjust. Instead, Malik resisted in new ways, often under the radar of Mr. Holiday and others at CSJ as through his mystery story.

Conclusion

With the pen in his hand, Malik disrupted inherent power differentials in the figured world of the classroom through his writing. In his writing, he could exert control over his teacher in his imagination and, potentially, through reading his story aloud in the classroom. Additionally, Malik's writing balanced his desire to both please his teacher and to index a positioning of someone who also had power and agency.

In accomplishing both tasks, however, Malik's intention to call attention to or transform the power dynamics between him and his teacher initially went unnoticed by his teacher. His teacher did not 'read' himself [Mr. Holiday] into the text in the ways Malik intended, but rather, based on their shared experiences in the figured world of the classroom, Mr. Holiday read the text with the lens of an authority.

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As a past early childhood educator myself, and one that made use of a similar clip chart in order to ‘manage’ learners, I recognize the ways I assumed neutrality in children’s text. Like, Mr. Holiday, I did not always intentionally make space for or consider how children like Malik might reposition themselves through their writing. Thus, I close this story by once again calling attention to who Malik was in the space of Mr. Holiday’s classroom and how his writing was a vehicle to make clear to his teacher the troubles he had with the power differentials within their classroom. In turn, I ask educators to attune themselves to the diverse power dynamics in their own schools. As teachers, we must recognize that, no matter how well intentioned we may be, “it is easier to do more harm than good” because “There are always unintended consequences to our actions, and the stakes are exceedingly high because we have other people’s lives in our care” (Fendler, 2011, p. 7). By learning to recognize how power masquerades in our classrooms and in our own actions in order to create space for students to invoke agency as Malik did through his writing.

While I can make suggestions that teachers like Mr. Holiday pay attention to not only the mechanics and conventions of their students’ writing, but also the social moves they make, resolving inner conflict and learning to be an ally, an advocate, and an activist across contexts feels to be a much more abstract task. Hence, I leave this inquiry with more questions than answers. Specifically, I wonder how, in an era of increased standardization, educators might challenge policies and curriculum that do not account for children of right now, but only for a child of the future workforce. I wonder how we—as adults—might learn to read beyond the words of a child’s text to see the complex social worlds they are navigating as they learn to negotiate varied positionings and enact

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identities in the moment. If we might do so, I imagine we might be better equipped to offer a more equitable education for all children.

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