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Responsible Classrooms: Unfinalizability, Responsibility, and Participatory Literacy in Secondary English Language Arts

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RESPONSIBLE CLASSROOMS: UNFINALIZABILITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PARTICIPATORY LITERACY IN SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Interdisciplinary Program in Comparative Literature

by
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Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

— Galatians 6:9 (NIV)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I approach this work, as anyone would, from an interdependent collection of identities. Each of those identities is connected to individuals who deserve much more than my gratitude, but I will start there.

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When I left teaching full time to enter this doctoral program, I thought it would require me to (temporarily) sacrifice my passion for working on the ground in secondary education. Because of Humanities Amped, I have, miraculously, been able to stay true to my calling. To
Anna, Alex, and Destiny: your fingerprints, too, are all over my work in classrooms and in this project.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines participatory literacy practice in secondary English language arts classrooms. While literacy achievement in this context is often measured according to a student’s ability to receive and repeat predetermined information within the scope of mandated curricula and standardized tests, this study attends specifically to classroom literacy practice that centers authentic, unanticipated, dialogic student response. Within its consideration of literacy practice, this study applies the Bakhtinian notion of unfinalizability to consider those conditions that allow for learning experiences that are not predetermined but are rather uniquely, unpredictably, and unrepeatably co-constructed by individual students, student groups, and teachers. These unfinalizable learning experiences make space for students to engage in not only response but responsibility, another Bakhtinian notion, both in the classroom and in the world beyond. Semi-structured interviews with nine English language arts and social studies teachers from California and Louisiana, conducted in 2021, provided insight into pedagogical approaches that, through unfinalizability, make participatory literacy and authentic responsibility possible in public school classrooms where institutional and structural barriers often otherwise limit these opportunities. This project considers the historical inheritances of American schooling that define and frame contemporary in-school practices, tracing the threads of formulae and compliance inherent in schooling structures as they are experienced by students and teachers. The study also examines the ways in which teachers use pedagogical approaches, like those connected to dialogic reading discussion and project-based learning, to carve out unfinalizable spaces for the flourishing of student responsibility and creativity. The project’s findings indicate that in order to promote classroom life through authentic student responsibility, the carving out of unfinalizable spaces must be accompanied by the teacher’s decentering of themselves. Teachers in responsible
classrooms must recognize and honor the unique identities and contributions of their individual students and be equipped to facilitate complex, unpredictable, and nuanced learning experiences in order to place students and their learning at the center of classroom practice.
CHAPTER 1. FRAMING PARTICIPATORY LITERACY

This project is about storytelling, and it is about learning. More accurately, it is itself a story about the study of storytelling, about the presence of this ancient and sacred art in the contemporary context of secondary English language arts classrooms in the United States. It is about the institutional binding and shaping of this art to fit an industrial model that is framed, most often, by four (probably cinderblock) classroom walls for a tight and arbitrary 50 or 90 minutes a day, and it is about schooling’s efficient packaging of the practice of literacy for the sake of unrelenting reproduction, repetition, and measurement. More importantly, it is about the persistent and unrestrained blooming of stories, storytelling, and storytellers even still, in these very same spaces where neat rows of desks and multiple-choice answers threaten to fill in all the gaps where there is still any air. Most specifically, it is a project about participatory literacy practice in secondary English language arts classrooms: it is about the attempt to standardize a practice that defies standardization, and, primarily, about the teachers in the trenches of this resistance.

Context and Project Overview

In the spirit of both storytelling and trenches, I will begin with a story from my own teaching, set in my 2015 California central valley English classroom and cast with about 25 high school sophomores tasked with learning all they could about the first World War. One day, in about February, my students and I were engaged in a conversation about the war’s debut of revolutionary weaponry. We were reading Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front as part of an English and World History project: in this signature sophomore project, at this wall-to-wall project-based-learning school, the students collaboratively designed museum booths about the Great War for a one-night-only, pop-up event. On this day in class, I was
prompting them to cite textual evidence to describe no-man’s land, or maybe the tendency of gas to settle into shell-holes, when a student suddenly shared with everyone that he had recently seen a photo online of a World War I soldier on a horse, and that he had it found strange because the soldier was not only holding what appeared to be a spear but also wearing a gas mask.

It sounds dramatic to say that I froze, but I did. I was a first-year teacher alone in a classroom with students and their learning, and I was responsible for both. I was faced with a choice: either continue with my reading discussion lesson as I had planned it or indulge in an impromptu conversation about this gas-mask-and-spear soldier. In only my second semester of teaching, I worried about clumsily searching for a very specific and obscure photo while a room full of teenagers stared at me and my projected computer screen. I worried about losing their attention, about giving away precious reading-discussion minutes, about showing them a possibly inauthentic artifact. But I was curious, and so I bit: a quick Internet search brought up the photo the student was referencing (Figure 1.1).

![Masked World War I Soldier on Horse](https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/german-cavalry-lances-1918/).

Figure 1.1. Masked World War I Soldier on Horse. Source: “German cavalry patrol in gas masks and carrying lances, 1918.” Rarehistoricalphotos.com. 
This divergence from my lesson plan led us to a spirited discussion about the historically situated nature of World War I: we talked about how in this photograph, the chemical warfare of the new age visually collides with the tools of antiquity. We wondered about the reasoning behind masking the soldier but not the horse. We named the unsettling feeling of seeing elements of two totally separate eras combined in a single image, coexisting in a captured threshold moment of transition from one time to another. More importantly, this was the first time, at least that I can remember, that I allowed a student to truly drive the direction of my class. Yielding to that student’s suggestion to introduce an unanticipated visual text to our conversation not only captured the class’s attention, but it shifted our dynamic. A student became a contributor, providing our class community with not just a relevant object of study but a mascot. On the night of their museum event, I printed small copies of this photo to give to each of them as a token of my confidence in their abilities. The masked soldier on the horse, in a move of relational bonding, had become “our guy.”

This moment was a small one, but it offers a glimmer of how classroom learning might shift away from traditional teacher-administered information delivery and silent student reception, and what might be gained in the process. This student’s brief elevation from receptor to contributor was only possible once I intentionally pushed my structured plan out of the way and welcomed the possibility of an end that I could not anticipate, that I had not backwards-planned for, that would be whatever the students made of it, not what any outside entity or authority, including myself, said it should be. The moment was neither unmoored nor random: it grew organically from our discussion of the novel we were reading together and represented a student’s authentic response in the form of connecting one text in the world to another. More accurately, this uncoerced response connected a verbal text to a visual text, introducing to our
literacy practice an additional, equally valid but often undervalued, mode for the purposes of classroom study.

Traditionally, schooling has positioned literacy as not only singular but as very specific, messaging to students that the only way to read and write is the prescribed way that informs (often begrudgingly endured) in-school experiences. Broadening our perspective to acknowledge the relevance of a wider variety of literacies not only better reflects the reality of the world beyond school but can open up, to use Korina Mineth Jocson’s (2018) youth media term, “spaces of possibility” for student expression that do not yet exist. When I showed the photograph of the World War I soldier and his horse to later classes in later years, the students found it interesting and engaging. When it came from me and not spontaneously from another student, however, it lost some of its impact as a representation of what students themselves have to offer in in-school spaces. This nuance helps to underscore the need to define this project’s topic as literacy that is specifically participatory. Participatory literacy demands authentic response, i.e., dialogic responses that are not a recitation of coerced and contrived expected answers. Fundamentally, it recognizes the insufficiency of reception and repetition (the literacy practices demanded and measured by standard assessment strategies). This project explores those conditions that allow for literacy practices that are participatory even within the confines of a system that is designed for a unidirectional flow of information and knowledge.

Occasionally, the conditions of participatory literacy manifest as opportunities for pure and simple storytelling. When I reflect on my teaching experience, one such project stands out to me as an example of the joyful form classroom learning can take, for both teachers and students, when we choose to embrace “spaces of possibility” for their own sake. This story, like the first, is set during my time teaching in California but takes place several years later. That original
group of sophomores had since graduated, and during those intervening years I had the
opportunity to teach and contribute to the English language arts (ELA) curriculum at all three of
Alberti High School’s grade levels, learning and growing as an educator as my students and I
worked through school year after school year together. It is worth noting that the Alberti school
community was quite small relative to others, with a total high school enrollment of about three
hundred, and I had the distinct pleasure of working with many of the same students for multiple
years. A handful of students who graduated in 2018 had taken sophomore, junior, and senior
English all with me.

I wrote the following Instagram caption in May of 2018:

I grade and hand back a lot of essays, but nothing compares to these. They are by far and
away the best set of sequenced words I have the pleasure of marking with little blue
numbers and as much as I wish every assignment were like this I am every year
reminded: my students, you are not ready for this particular challenge until this moment.
You pay your dues writing about symbols on the island, and the items in your bag, and
camaraderie and flappers and the 1919 World Series—you scribble furiously in half an
hour all you can remember about the slot machine in that dusty diner, and you whittle
down piles of research to ten pages flooded with footnotes just to turn around and use
language to explain language in books that call language into question and then…this
moment. All of that practice and revision and frustration ultimately aligns into these
beautiful expressions of your voice that are so unique to each of you, and you have
produced some very excellent work to be very proud of. And don’t get me wrong, for
every piece that’s poignant or mind blowing there are some that are weird, but they’re
each so clearly YOURS, and they say exactly what you MEAN them to say, and that’s all
I want for you, to have control over the talking your written words do on your behalf,
which (by the way, 2018), you do.

In this post I reference a variety of touchstone assignments, each an allusion to a different point
on the school’s sophomore to senior continuum. In the post I frame these writing experiences as
practice, packaged opportunities to fashion analysis out of written language, to try on voice and
try out syntax. My students, the primary audience for this particular Instagram account, were
intimately familiar with my painstaking assessment process, in which I would comb through

1 Throughout this work I will refer to specific schools by pseudonyms.
page after page of essay after essay, in batches of 100 or 60 or 30 depending on the grade level, and offer language adjustments in the form of numbers that corresponded to grammatical structures: 18 to indicate a sentence fragment, 21c to remind that book titles are italicized, 22e to remove an errant comma between a subject and a verb (this particular mistake happens surprisingly often). The numbers addressed style as well: on the reference sheet, the suggested fix for 13: Connotation reads, “Find the exact word to match the concept or tone of the surrounding words or sentences, avoiding words such as good, bad, nice…”.

My students would receive back papers riddled with these numbers, would use the reference sheet to decode the marks, and, if they so chose, re-write and re-submit for a higher grade. They and I would repeat this ritual regularly, sometimes for one year, sometimes for two, sometimes for three. All of this labor, this detailed attention, aimed at achieving my two articulated goals for the students in my senior class: that they would “feel confident in their ability to interpret and analyze complex texts” and “be clean writers, able to express their voices and perspectives in a way that demands respect.” This Instagram post, while about the second goal, was not actually about those assignments.

In this caption I was reflecting on the seniors’ final major writing assignment, which I called simply “Creative Fiction” inside a project I called “To Tell a Story.” Its requirements were just as simple: the submission was to be fictional and half a page to seven pages in length. The students were to focus on one element of storytelling we had studied together, and they were to include at least five literary devices that they were to name in a separate, brief analysis. Of all the stacks of papers I collected and shuffled from my classroom to my home back to my classroom,

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2 This editing reference sheet was originally designed by my own high school English teacher. When I wrote her to ask permission to use it in my classroom, she was quick to grant it, referring poignantly to the calling of teaching as a relay.
this set, year after year, came packaged with the most joy. The task of grading papers is a necessary and notorious burden that comes with the territory of choosing to be an English teacher, but these pieces of creative fiction were a gift, a set of one hundred stories from one hundred voices with one hundred different points of view: some were funny, some were meandering, some were explosive, many, truthfully, were stunning.

My favorite school days followed the conclusion of that joyful grading. After I handed back the work, we set aside several days to read aloud to each other. Students could read their work themselves or they could have someone else in the class read their work for them, and they could choose to be named or anonymous. Students would hand their papers to me, and I would blot out their names (or not) and distribute the pages to readers who volunteered, always feeling a bit like a casting agent trying to choose the best voice for each of these precious roles. I felt like a director, too, calling on the readers in whatever order I felt would have the greatest effect, trying to balance theme and length and style across the class period. Following each reading we would share praise for the writer, whether to them directly or to “whoever wrote this piece.” More than a few anonymous students revealed themselves at this point in the process, and more than a few initially reluctant readers eventually decided to participate once we were inside the process together, celebrating each other’s work.

To share in this moment, to me, was the point of all the writing we did at any point over the three years from their sophomore to senior year, the authentic narrative garden punctuating a path of artificial verbal steppingstones. In the post I frame the success of this assignment as dependent on that writing journey, and I claim that students did not enter their sophomore year “ready” for the challenge. On one hand, I still believe this: I believe that the skill of writing, the craft of it, is one that we developed together by doing it. I do believe that ongoing “practice and
revision and frustration” can and do culminate in sharpening and growth. I also believe that all of this practice prepared students for writing in academic contexts “in a way that demands respect”: that is, I believe the practice equipped them with the skills they needed to be able to present their ideas in those spaces that expect or require standard, academic formality. I wonder, though, what opportunities I may have missed to create experiences like these second-semester senior reading circles. The fact is, many of my students were ready much earlier to tell dynamic, engaging, stunning stories through other means and in other modes. In our project-based learning curriculum, they did have many such opportunities: writing and performing a sixth act to follow the conclusion of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, designing a walking tour of an American city set at the turn of the 20th century, embodying characters from the 1920s in stories and settings of their own design for a “magazine launch” event, or writing story-based personal statements (some for college applications). No previous project, though, was quite as open as “To Tell a Story,” with quite as few restrictions and requirements that made expansive space for student voice to stand almost completely unrestricted.

The openness of this project I see now, reflectively, as one of its strongest assets. In the time that I was living it, it was also a source of uncertainty, and the fear inside this uncertainty no doubt led me to make choices that felt safer at the expense of limiting my students’ work. In the third year I gave this assignment, one of my students asked if he could submit a comic as his creative fiction. I did not respond rashly: I considered the request, I thought about the skills I sought to assess, I engaged in a dialogue with him about it. Ultimately, though, I said no. I told him I could be convinced, but what I sought to measure with this assignment was storytelling in the context of verbal-linguistic writing, and that I thought a multi-modal format, like a comic, would muddy that objective. Although the piece he ultimately submitted was an excellent
example of nuanced speculative fiction, this is a choice I regret making, one that favored a narrow view of English class as a space for one kind of writing and one kind of writing only.

Despite the room for improvement my approach to the project certainly left, “To Tell a Story” persists in my memory as proof of what sorts of celebratory, joyful experiences are possible in the context of secondary English classrooms. From my perspective as the teacher who facilitated this writing project, the results were powerful and gave shape to the sort of learning experiences I find myself continually chasing. I am also continually reminded of how rare these moments are: if we do not intentionally identify, acknowledge, and name them, we are at risk of losing them altogether inside those schooling structures that are not designed to contain the expansiveness of their unpredictable possibility.

**Theoretical Framing**

I am grounding this project in several theoretical perspectives so that I might both define literacy as inherently participatory and give shape to those pedagogical approaches that make participatory literacy practices possible. While I will apply theoretical frameworks designed specifically for the study of literacy and education, I will primarily draw from the literary and philosophical theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, as his work provides ways of describing those structures and expectations that make space for literacy practice that is authentically participatory. Secondary English language arts classrooms promise dedicated space for adolescents to engage with narrative, to develop analytical and compositional skills that invite them to participate in the act of storytelling as it is practiced in the current world: a Bakhtinian frame allows us to consider the nature of the conditions that make this work possible. Before introducing these Bakhtinian concepts, however, I will first discuss the other theoretical frameworks that inform this project.
Because this project explores the ways in which teachers create opportunities for students to engage with literature, I draw in part from Louise Rosenblatt’s (1988) reader response, transactional theory of reading. Rosenblatt frames reading as socially situated and the reader as a participant in the process of meaning-making. She writes that when we read, “we bring our funded experience to bear” (p. 4). Because this research defines literacy as inherently participatory, I am interested in the classroom facilitation of this meeting point between student and text: I am interested in the ways that teachers recognize and encourage what students bring with them to the transaction, their strategies for facilitating collaborative discussion, and, perhaps most importantly, how they support what their students do next. What actions or responses follow the reading? Rosenblatt includes in her discussion the notion of “live ideas” as a feature of both reading and writing. She explains that:

Live ideas growing out of situations, activities, discussions, problems, provide the basis for an actively selective and synthesizing process of making meaning. Live ideas have roots drawing sustenance from writers’ needs, interests, questions, and values; and live ideas have tendrils reaching out toward external areas of thought. A personally-grounded purpose develops and impels movement forward. (p. 9)

When student experience and interest meet with and respond to a text, literary or otherwise, what do their “live ideas” grow into? What sorts of classroom space is dedicated to their flourishing?

Deborah Appleman (2009) cautions against indiscriminate application of reader response theory in secondary literature classrooms, asking, “How can literature foster a knowledge of others when we focus so relentlessly on ourselves and our own experiences?” (p. 31). She writes that when reader response is the only approach offered to students, they are in danger of relying on their ability to “relate” to a text in order to find meaning in it. These limitations can shut students off from critical engagement with not only texts outside of their experience but can also lead to their dismissal of other readers’ perspectives. Appleman calls for reader response theory
to be taught to students explicitly, alongside other theoretical perspectives: when students are invited to apply the lenses of gender criticism, social class criticism, historical criticism, or any other literary theory to a text, that are given the opportunity to take on perspectives other than their own. Importantly, though, the student and their own perspectives are not erased from the reading transaction but are, rather, positioned as agents in the act of reading and responding.

The theory most applicable to this project, then, is one I am terming reader responsibility: when students are positioned as responsible, their own experiences matter along with their ability to see outside of and past themselves. Rosenblatt calls for “the creation of environments and activities in which students are motivated and encouraged to draw on their own resources to make ‘live’ meanings” (p. 13). When students are provided with resources that include accounting for and considering perspectives in addition to their own, their “live meanings” or “live ideas” can be responsible to the world outside the classroom.

The attention I pay to students’ positioning as readers and writers grows out of New Literacy Studies. Specifically, this project will adopt James Paul Gee’s definition of literacy as “mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse” (2001, p. 529) and of Discourses as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities” (2012, p. 3). Gee frames Discourses and literacies (both plural) as inherently social: this social framing of literacy allows us to consider ideology and identity and their influence on literacy development. Because the scope of this work centers secondary English language arts, the discussion of literacy practice will focus less on learning to read and write verbal texts in the first place and more on how various literacies are developed.
According to Gee (2012), the field of New Literacy Studies emerged amidst a prevailing definition of literacy as simply “the ability to read and (sometimes) write” (p. 38). In the context of literacy education, this “ability to read and (sometimes) write” has focused almost exclusively on the ability to decode and encode linguistic, print-based texts. This specific form of literacy is clearly vital for full participation in modern communication, especially in the Information Age era of unprecedented informational plenty. The texts we and our students encounter daily are abundant and varied, and to engage with them we must indeed be equipped to decode them. The framing Gee’s work provides to literacy studies allows for expansion, though, beyond strictly verbal engagement, making valid other communication forms in which we expect students to eventually develop fluency. His emphasis on the social nature of literacy, further, makes relevant the study of Discourses that are not strictly officialized or school-based but are nonetheless relevant to our students and therefore to their development. Educators must help students reach well beyond both decoding and the limits of texts that are strictly verbal: skills for reading and writing verbal texts alone are insufficient when much of what we consume is not verbal at all, but rather visual, aural, gestural, or otherwise. To critically engage with texts regardless of their mode, to access and grapple with the stories they tell and engage in reader responsibility, readers must be able to take new perspectives, measure against what they know, and be empowered to respond. The text that caught my sophomore student’s attention, that he wanted to share with his classmates and me as an interesting and relevant historical relic, happened to be visual, and it belonged in my English curriculum every bit as much as Remarque’s novel.

This research and its emphasis on responsibility is also in conversation with the extensive work in education that has followed Paulo Freire’s (1970/2017) advocacy for problem-posing, humanizing pedagogy. Under the traditional structures of what he terms the banking concept,
students assume the role of information receptacles and wait passively to be “filled up” by the knowledge the teacher deposits. He writes that inside the constraints of this system, “the more completely [the teacher] fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled the better students they are” (p. 45). This system is based, necessarily, on an assumption that the students arrive empty, that “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 45). The banking model dehumanizes and oppresses, centering a “love of death, not life” (p. 50).

The problem-posing education that Freire calls for is a humanizing pedagogy of with, not for (p. 22). That is, students are invited to actively engage in learning as contributors and participants, not passive receivers. Problem-posing education humanizes learning and learners by “affirm[ing] men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (p. 50). Under a problem-posing structure, learning is reframed as inherently active. Freire writes that, “knowledge emerges…through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 45). That is, authentic learning experiences do not exist outside of dialogue (p. 50). Even in its state of continual becoming, problem-posing education leads to two important outcomes: first, it shifts the roles of teacher and student toward collaboration, making both “simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 45). Secondly, problem-posing education not only identifies and considers problems but leads to responsive action. Freire writes that “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 52). In contrast to the “deep grammar” of schooling (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 30), or the unnamed but influential structures which frame learning as accessed
through reading texts under ultimate teacher authority, this shift demands learning opportunities in which student work is designed to be authentically useful in community contexts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Additionally, this change features a shift away from propositional knowledge (“knowing that”) to procedural knowledge (“knowing how”) (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 167). Problem-posing education is not bound by the walls of a classroom: rather, it reaches out into the world beyond, legitimizing students as capable contributors to its shaping.

In this project I will also draw from Gholnecsar Muhammad’s (2020) response to the “deep grammar” of schooling through her historically responsive literacy framework. This framework draws on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and the history of 19th century Black literary societies, particularly their emphasis on literacy as an active, not passive, practice. Muhammad contrasts the aims and experiences of these literary societies with our current schooling contexts and the ways our approaches to literacy fail students, especially Black students and other students of color (p. 10, p. 35). Muhammad’s framework positions literacy as inherently participatory and students as inherently capable of doing, not just passively receiving prescribed knowledge in a system that was not built for them and their excellence. Rejecting the deficit-based language too often used to describe the lives and experiences of Black and Brown students, Muhammad’s framework demands recognition of students’ innate genius and is aimed at cultivating this genius through the development of their identity, intellect, skills, and criticality. Taken together, these elements position students as subjects rather than objects in classroom spaces and invite them into participation through inquiry, study, and application. Use of this framework requires that educators create space for topics that students see as meaningful to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021), center opportunities that foster response and responsibility, value student voices, and recognize individual contributions as valid.
in an institutional space that has historically acknowledged a single (White, middle-class, monolingual) way of learning and being.

Ultimately, in this project, I am concerned with classroom life, opportunities for growth and flourishing that resist the “necrophilic” (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 50) effects of educational oppression that Freire describes and the experience of “death in the classroom” so termed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014). She writes that:

Both teachers and students can be vulnerable to a sort of classroom death. Death in the classroom refers to teachers who stop trying to reach each and every student or teachers who succumb to rules and regulations that are dehumanizing and result in de-skilling (Apple, 1993). Instead of teaching, such people become mere functionaries of a system that has no intent on preparing students—particularly urban students of color—for meaningful work and dynamic participation in a democracy. The academic death of students is made evident in the disengagement, academic failure, dropout, suspension, and expulsion that have become an all too familiar part of schooling in urban schools. (p. 77)

Through this work I seek to illuminate those teaching practices and approaches that make space for teachers and students to cultivate life and joy. Although such moments are elusive, they are not fantastical. Classroom life is flourishing even within conditions that have been designed to stamp it out entirely. Bakhtin’s concepts of unfinalizability and responsibility provide framing and language with which to name the conditions and objectives that promote the kind of learning experiences that put life at the center.

**The Groundwork of Dialogism**

Both unfinalizability and responsibility extend from the groundwork of Bakhtin’s consideration of dialogism, a theoretical approach that has been often applied by scholars to the study of teaching and learning (Freedman & Ball, 2004; Lee, 2004; Greenleaf & Katz, 2004; Mahiri, 2004). Taking a position not dissimilar to Rosenblatt’s and Appleman’s, Bakhtin writes that dialogic processes of meaning making position speaker (or writer) and listener (or reader) as
both actively responsible in the process of meaning-making. Rather than framing the reader as passive, dialogism highlights their active role in relation to speech communication’s inherent anticipation of a response. Even Bakhtin’s definition of communication units emphasizes the indispensable role of response: in “The Problem of Speech Genres” he writes that the boundaries between units of speech communication, or utterances, are marked by “a change of speaking subjects” (SG, p. 71)\(^3\) and that the utterance “is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response” (SG, p. 94). Further, Bakhtin claims that “understanding comes to fruition only in the response” (DiN, p. 282), that understanding and response “mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (DiN, p. 282), and that “all real and integral understanding is actually responsive” (SG, p. 68). A dialogic approach to literacy, if it is to be concerned with understanding, must consider authentic responsiveness as fundamental to, not as an optional extension of, literate work.

Dialogism invites consideration of the heteroglot, or different-voiced, nature of speech communication and therefore emphasizes the relevance of context to interpretation. Bakhtin concretizes verbal meaning by pointing out that “it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speakers gets his [sic] words” and explaining that “rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own” (DiN, p. 293-294). Bakhtin writes that each utterance functions as a “link in the chain of speech communication” (SG, p. 91), connecting it not only to its anticipated and expected responses on one end but to those previous utterances that contributed to its existence on the other. Bakhtin explains that all words, although they manifest in our own unique utterances, were someone else’s first, that each “utterance must be regarded primarily as a

\(^3\) Throughout this project, all works by Bakhtin will be cited according to the title abbreviations as they are listed in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson’s (1990) *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics.*
response to preceding utterances” (SG, p. 91). If we accept Bakhtin’s assessment of the interdependent nature of utterances, then the practices of literacy must critically attend to context and influence. Further, it elevates the role of response and suggests that student voice, and its role in the practice of literacy, should likewise be elevated.

These theoretical concepts grow out of Bakhtin’s analysis of the unique generic capability of the novel. It is within the living and incomplete space of the novel’s openness, writes Bakhtin in “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” that the contemporary reader is privileged to meet with the human person of the author, regardless of the expanse of time and space that separates them (FTC, 253). He writes that although the text might be “imprisoned in dead material of some sort,” such as stone or paper, in the process of engaging with it “we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being” (FTC, 253). This encounter itself is likewise a living one: Bakhtin claims that “every literary work faces outward away from itself, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reactions to itself” (FTC, 257). The literature in question initiates a dynamic and dialogic interaction in which the readers, or listeners, are positioned as collaborative creators in an unfinalizable world. This world, in which all involved parties meet:

creates the text, for all its aspects—the reality reflected in the text, the authors creating the text, the performers of the text (if they exist) and finally the listeners or readers who recreate and in so doing renew the text—participate equally in the creation of the represented world in the text. (FTC, 253)

Rather than passively receiving the text, Bakhtin’s reader practices reader responsibility through participatory literacy that is active and dialogic. This living relationship between writer, listener, and text was remarkably and powerfully visible when my students read and celebrated their stories together. The experience that our collective writing and reading and listening created was itself beautifully alive. At times we glimpsed this same beauty in our reading discussions, but
only when the students’ feelings of empowerment overshadowed the expectation on them to provide the “right answer.”

In celebrating the novel’s heteroglossia, its accessibility, and its ongoing process of becoming, Bakhtin celebrates the reader. As the reader follows the manifestation of a theme through “the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia” (DiN, p. 263), they lend their own voice to the dialogic process by responding actively to this text that invites them into conversation. Bakhtin’s novel is living and participatory: it is a genre that invites engagement. And so we ask: would the average American high school student describe the novel in the same way? Or would they perhaps see novels as belonging to school and not to life, as texts that are completed successfully once one is able to name the characters and outline the plot and identify the themes that their teacher told them were there? Put another way, it is my experienced belief that by and large our students have been made to believe that novels, or at least the novels they are assigned, stand on an “utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane” (EaN, 14) and are “impossible to change, to rethink, to evaluate” (EaN, 17), a description Bakhtin applied, as a counterexample, to the removed and unreachable world of the epic. In many ways our traditional approaches to teaching novels specifically and in-school texts generally have made them untouchable in the way that Bakhtin describes the epic as untouchable. If we are concerned that young people “just don’t read,” perhaps we would do well to consider what we have told them about their role as readers, to explore the presence or absence of in-school opportunities for authentic, active response.

Responsibility/Answerability

Bakhtin addresses the nature of responsibility/answerability throughout his work, beginning with his brief but striking 1919 essay “Art and Responsibility.” In this essay Bakhtin
claims that a work of art requires responsibility from those who experience and understand it, and he concludes by writing, “Art and life are not one, but should become unified in me, in the singularity of my responsibility” (IiO). As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990) have noted, the Russian word *otvetstvennost’* [ответственность] contains the root *otvet* [ответ], which bears both the meaning of “answer” and “response.” While they attribute an ethical connotation to *otvetstvennost’* in the 1919 essay, they write that in later instances “a case could be made for either translation, ethical responsibility or addressive answerability (that is, the presence of a response)” (p. 76). Because both translations apply relevantly to the student role in a dialogic classroom—students should both feel empowered to respond and accountable for their contributions—my use of the word “responsibility” throughout this project will represent this full duality.

As previously discussed, in “Discourse in the Novel” Bakhtin presents response as not only relevant to his discussion of dialogism and heteroglossia but as a necessary component of understanding itself. This aspect of Bakhtinian theory is particularly relevant to the study of learning, which concerns itself fundamentally with whether understanding does or does not occur. It bears repeating, then, Bakhtin’s claim that, “Understanding comes to fruition only in the response” (DiN, 282) and that “all real and integral understanding is actively responsive…” (SG, 69). Opportunity to respond, authentically and freely, is a necessary condition not for the expression of understanding, but for understanding itself.

Bakhtin further characterizes the nature of response by revealing its ubiquitous presence in all speech communication. He writes that “any speaker is himself [sic] a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe” (SG, p. 69). Bakhtin’s characterization of response works in two
directions: first, it calls into question expectations of understanding for individuals who are not given space to actively respond. In the context of schooling, this manifests as Freire’s banking model, the educational approach which positions students as information receptacles and expects that they will do nothing more than passively receive (1970/2017). Bakhtin’s work suggests that under such conditions, understanding is impossible. Secondly, Bakhtin makes the act of response accessible by universalizing it: all utterances, no matter how creative or celebrated, are themselves responsive, “filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’” (SG, p. 89). If, as he writes, “Words belong to nobody” (SG, p. 85), then they are available for use by all, a truth which should be especially evident in classrooms that seek to empower students through literacy development.

**Unfinalizability**

If we recognize and accept that understanding is impossible without the opportunity for and expectation of response, we must next consider those conditions that allow for responsiveness. Bakhtin theorizes that authentic response cannot be achieved in closed, finalized systems. Morson and Emerson write that Bakhtin’s term unfinalizability, or *nezavershenost’* [незавершенность], “designates a complex of values central to his thinking: innovation, ‘surprisingness,’ the genuinely new, openness, potentiality, freedom, and creativity” (p. 37). Freedom and unfinalizability are fundamental to Bakhtin’s view of the world and of our actions in the world. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin celebrates Dostoevsky’s literary ability to grant unfinalizability to his characters (PDP, p. 63), a novelistic success that Bakhtin connects with the ongoing nature of dialogue at work in Dostoevsky’s novels (PDP, p. 252). Bakhtin further acknowledges the commentary that Dostoevsky is able to make on the unfinalizability of the world at large. He writes:
The catharsis that finalizes Dostoevsky’s novels might be … expressed this way: *nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.* (PDP, p. 166)

In this more general sense, unfinalizability, for Bakhtin, not only makes space for creativity but creates a responsibility for it, a phenomenon which he terms “my non-alibi in Being” (KFP, p. 40).

Consideration of unfinalizability, then, ultimately returns to responsibility through participation in Being. In “Toward a Philosophy of the Act” Bakhtin writes:

> I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never-repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else. In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once-occurrent time and once-occurrent space of once-occurrent Being. And it is around this once-occurrent point that all once-occurrent Being is arranged in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner. That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is compellently obligatory” (KFP, p. 40).

He goes on to add that “I am actual and irreplaceable, and therefore *must* actualize my uniqueness” (KFP, p. 41) and likens taking ownership for responsible acts to undersigning an agreement (p. 58). When applied to the context of literature study and literacy practice in the classroom, Bakhtin’s positions on unfinalizability and responsibility beg important questions: do our students see themselves as “actual and irreplaceable”? Are they given the chance to recognize that “that which can be done by [them] can never be done by anyone else”? When our classrooms are structured to expect and reward sameness and rote repetition within closed systems of single right answers, we do not make space for students to recognize the value of their uniqueness. On the other hand, when we carve out unfinalized spaces for student response, we invite these moments of empowerment into the context of school despite schooling’s best efforts to standardize and infinitely reproduce a pre-packaged version of education.
Research Positioning, Questions, and Methodology

This research project, centered on participatory literacy practices in secondary English language arts classrooms, stems from my own teaching experience and my desire to explicitly identify and name those moments of joyful learning that my students and I stumbled into on our way through traditional expectations that have defined school, for many, as miserable. At Alberti High School, a dependent charter[^4], wall-to-wall project-based learning school, we were positioned more favorably than many students and teachers. We were privileged to work inside wide pockets of curricular freedom that allowed us to find these moments together; even still, we were subject to and influenced by the historical inheritances that have dictated how public school must be for generations of students in America. I write now not as a full-time teacher but as a continuing educator who still works in secondary contexts and engages closely with the students and teachers there. I have since relocated to Louisiana, and in my position with a nonprofit have worked in local public school classrooms as both a community educator and instructional coach. The student demographics of the two districts where I have worked vary greatly in regard to the overall size of the student population, racial and ethnic identity, and household income. I bring to this work reflective experience from inside the classroom as well as a perspective at somewhat of a remove, far enough away from my own day-to-day life in the trenches (as it were) to share the stories of other educators as they were told to me.

[^4]: Although the distinction of “dependent” regarding a charter school is not a legal one (Ed-Data 2022), it is used to distinguish between schools created by a local school board and considered part of the district’s “portfolio of schools” (dependent) and schools created by other groups like parents, teachers, or outside organizations (independent) (Sacramento City Unified School District 2022). Alberti’s “About” page specifically refers to their charter as dependent. The language of the memorandum of understanding between Alberti and its school district states that the school “shall operate as a dependent, indirect funded charter school under the jurisdiction and control of [the school district]” and that “ultimate control over [the school] shall be vested in by Governing Board of [the school district]” (2019).
I entered this project by asking how secondary English language arts educators might foster students’ participatory literacy development. What has resulted is a story of how contemporary teachers are doing this work by carving out unfinalized spaces for student responsibility. This project’s data takes the form primarily of interviews that I conducted with educators who teach, or taught at the time of the interview, in secondary (6th-12th grade) humanities and social studies classrooms. This participant engagement beyond English language arts allows for a valuable interdisciplinary perspective on literacy practice, rather than adhering to the disciplinary silos that have come to characterize, and restrict, secondary schooling experiences.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for the study in April of 2021 (Appendix A), I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine teacher participants between June and July of 2021 (see Appendix B: Participant Consent Form). The interview guiding questions (Appendix C) focused primarily on the use of various texts in each teacher’s classroom and the ways that students are expected to respond to those texts, as well as the teacher’s decision-making processes in designing classroom literacy experiences and their reflections on these practices. Each of the interviews took place over Zoom due to COVID-19 pandemic safety considerations as well as the realities of physical distance between my location and the locations of the participants. After transcribing each interview, I reached back out to each of the participants for supporting materials (e.g. project guidelines, rubrics, assignment instructions). Once I had transcribed each interview, I carefully reviewed the transcripts for emergent themes and coded various relevant points in the interviews accordingly. I then clustered pieces of the interview data according to these themes, making smaller subgroups where appropriate.
The interview participants represent a variety of teaching contexts in two distinct regional locations: the school district in the California central valley where I taught English and the urban Title I district in Louisiana where I now work. The predominantly White (51.5%), Hispanic or Latino (19.2%), and Asian (14.1%) California district totals about 7,700 total students. Nearly a quarter (22%) of the students speak a language other than English at home, and 2.7% have a disability (National Center for Education Statistics). Because the participants in this district are all teachers at one single high school, Alberti’s specific demographic data is worth including here: according to the school’s Local Control Accountability Plan (2021), in the 2019-2020 school year, the total enrollment across both the high school and junior high campuses was around 600. Of the students enrolled in both Alberti High School and Junior High, 64% identified as White, 21% identified as Hispanic, 10% identified as Asian, 2% identified as African American, and 1% identified as Filipino. In this school year 1.5% of Alberti students received English Learner services and 16.5% of students received Special Education services. All of the California teachers in this study continue to teach at Alberti, and three of the four are former colleagues and co-teachers of mine.

The district in Louisiana, which is predominantly Black (74.1%), White (13%), and Hispanic or Latino (6.9%), is over six times the size of the California district in terms of total student population. In this district, 10.3% of students speak a language other than English at home, 10.8% have a disability (four times that of the California district), and 30.2% have an income below the poverty level (nearly three times that of the California district) (National Center for Education Statistics). All but one of the five Louisiana teachers I interviewed spent at least part of their teaching career in this district, and much of what we discussed was about their work at these in-district schools.
The teachers’ contextual experiences, of course, have not been static, and they represent, among their careers, various parts of the country and several public middle and high schools, charter schools, and, in the case of one of the Louisiana teachers, a university laboratory school. The laboratory school, while it is connected to a public university, represents a special case for this project in that its students pay tuition. While this research is primarily focused on public schooling, I saw usefulness in including the perspective of this particular teacher given the curricular liberties she is able to take. Overall, this variety of teaching contexts (both across participants and also in each participant’s own historical range of teaching assignments) provides multiple, valuable perspectives on the practice of participatory literacy in classrooms. Taken together, they reveal a wide range of classroom experience, particularly regarding the freedom teachers do or do not have to shape and direct their own curriculum and instruction. Despite the differences, this collection of perspectives also demonstrates much that is shared across contexts, including the frustration with structural limitations, and the justice-minded desire to provide students with the excellent educational experiences they deserve.

It is worth noting that in all but one case the participants and I entered each interview with a previously established professional relationship. This perhaps represents a research limitation: my participant sample size is limited and what I know about their teaching approaches extends beyond what is contained and recorded in the interviews. Further, the ways in which they represented their teaching practice to me were likely informed by our relationship and, for the Louisiana teachers, my role in the nonprofit organization with which they were affiliated. However, I also believe that their trust in me as a colleague and, in some cases, friend promoted a conversational ease that encouraged openness and honesty.
The teacher-centered angle of this project limits, somewhat, its analytical scope, but I do not view this as a shortcoming. One of the many lamentable institutional inheritances of American schooling is a persistent devaluing of classroom teachers and the highly skilled work that they do. This dismissal manifests concretely in pay scales, in national rhetoric about the state of our schools, and in impossible expectations paired with severe professional punishments for not meeting them. The work of this study, in contrast, recognizes the challenges faced by classroom teachers and the professional skill that equips and empowers them to overcome these challenges. Each participant’s interview responses reveal deeply professional reflective practices, indicating their own ongoing commitment to learning and to excellence. The outcomes presented here highlight the ways in which these teachers view and reflect on their own work, and it is my distinct honor to present these reflections and to analyze them as the professional considerations that they are.

**Overview of Chapters**

In this introductory chapter, I have contextualized this project both in terms of my own teaching experience and the theoretical framing within which the project is situated. I have also briefly introduced the general teaching contexts of my participants and presented my methodology and research questions.

Chapter 2, “The Formulae and Compliance of Closed Systems: Enduring Inheritances of American Schooling” grounds this discussion of contemporary classrooms inside the history they inhabit and now contribute to. In this chapter I consider contextual realities of American schooling, including its historical emphasis on efficiency models and hierarchical management, the initial and persistent use of school-specific texts, and the influential role of testing and measurement both for individual students as well as whole school communities. Exploring the
history of these inheritances helps to explain the perception that unfinalized classroom spaces are a threat to this system built on one-size-fits-all expectations and predictability. In this chapter I also introduce the ways in which several of the teachers I interviewed relate to this system, paying particular attention to the effects of mandated curriculum and standardized testing on their teaching practices.

In Chapter 3, “Responding to Literature: The Unfinalizable Space of Reading Discussion,” I turn to those approaches to classroom learning that make room for student response and responsibility between and around the limitations of schooling’s structural realities. In particular I consider the ways in which teachers use reading discussion to create unfinalized classroom spaces for student response to texts, particularly literary texts. I also discuss in this chapter the desire many of the teachers expressed to teach more relevant and diverse texts that incorporate more voices than have been traditionally included in English language arts curricula.

In Chapter 4, “Creative Responsibility: Multimodality, Project-Based Learning, and Action Research,” I explore a variety of ways in which teachers make unfinalizable space for students to express creativity and pursue their own lines of inquiry. I consider the role of multimodal texts in this context and discuss project-based learning and action research as larger pedagogical structures that intentionally center student responsibility.

Finally, in Chapter 5, “Responsible Decentering: Ungrading, Student Agency, and the State of Being Known,” I consider this research project’s implications regarding the teacher’s role. I discuss ungrading as a means of decentering the teacher and consider ways teacher control might give way to increased student agency and responsibility. This chapter concludes with the importance of relationships as a necessary component in the pursuit of educational experiences that are intentionally humanizing.
CHAPTER 2. THE FORMULAE AND COMPLIANCE OF CLOSED SYSTEMS: ENDURING INHERITANCES OF AMERICAN SCHOOLING

The story of any teacher’s work is necessarily historically situated, framed within and influenced by a multitude of inheritances. I could begin telling my own teaching story from the first moment of my first period class on my first day as a teacher of record, with my first group of students and their first assignments. The reality, though, is that on that day of firsts, those students were actually in their 11th year of compulsory schooling, I entered the room as graduate of schooling three times over, and we were all functioning together inside of a public school system that existed well before our births and will continue to operate despite our absence. To participate in the present structures of schooling is to inherit: students, teachers, and administrators currently working and learning in schools are the inheritors of persistent ideologies and structures. Recognizing the existence and influence of these inheritances will help to frame the challenges faced by teachers who seek to create unfinalizable spaces of learning in their classrooms. Considering teachers’ responses to these inheritances will also help illuminate what learning experiences are possible even within the structures as they exist.

This chapter will center the testimonials of several teachers as a window onto the current, on-the-ground experience of working and learning inside contemporary American structures of schooling. I will position the experiences they describe historically, offering a contextual framing that puts the current in conversation with the past. We will then look to teacher-identified needs as professionally informed perspectives on what types of learning environments and experiences they believe should be prioritized, and the ways in which they are realizing these priorities in their own classrooms.
The Closed System of Mandated Curricula

In a classroom space that is defined by unfinalizability, teachers are able to use structure to bound and protect student freedom, creativity, and inquiry. When students engage in learning that is not strictly predetermined, they effectively build the curriculum as they engage with it, producing outcomes that are unique to their own experiences and contributions. Unfinalizable classrooms make room for literacy practices that are participatory, inviting students to engage with, respond to, and build on what they read. These outcomes are not driven by inauthentic measures like high-stakes standardized tests but by the learning itself, or, better still, by the learning’s place in the world outside the classroom. In an unfinalizable learning environment, students are positioned as responsible to this learning and the effects their work makes on the world.

For many English language arts teachers, however, the classes they teach are rigidly defined by the parameters of a mandated curriculum. This curriculum informs the class’s content, its pacing, and its assessment practices and provides very little space for adaptation. In the closed and scripted system of a mandated curriculum, students are made responsible to standardized assessments that flatten their learning so that they might be reductively compared with every other student in the school, district, state, and so forth. Such a system restricts teachers, narrowly defining the sorts of experiences they can create for their students. Jordan, Lucille, and Isabella, teachers who, at the time of their interview or previously, taught secondary English language arts in the same Louisiana public school system, described their experiences with navigating the imposing structures of a highly rigid mandated curriculum. Their insights reveal frustration with the curriculum’s limitations but also a desire to carve out spaces for

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5 Throughout this work I will refer to teachers and schools by pseudonyms in order to protect the teacher participants’ confidentiality.
learning that are defined by their individual students and their needs, not the parameters of any particular test.

At the time of Jordan’s interview, he was teaching English language arts at a middle school in a charter network in Louisiana. Prior to taking this job he taught for several years at Northview, a public middle school. Altogether, including his teaching experiences in the New England area, Jordan’s career as an educator spans a decade. In his experience teaching in both public and charter contexts in Louisiana, Jordan explained, “teachers have very little freedom formally over the texts that they get to teach. And so on paper I can tell you what I teach by sending you a link because it’s Guidebooks, 100%.” Jordan described Guidebooks as a mandated curriculum featuring “a finite list of required texts that you can’t deviate from.” This curriculum not only determines what students read but also influences what they write. Jordan told me that:

If we want to get into the kind of texts that students are producing, I can give a … simple and finite answer. It’s three. There are three things that Louisiana wants students to be able to do and only that. There’s nothing else that is assessed.

Jordan referred to these types of writing by their assessment acronyms, the LAT, the RST, and the NWT, which stand for Literary Analysis Task, Research Simulation Task, and Narrative Writing task. Presenting students and teachers with reading and writing expectations that are, as Jordan described, finite (or rather, finalized), establishes a set of arbitrary boundaries around academic practices, like storytelling, that should be unbounded and open, recognized as continually in the process of becoming. Indeed, for readers and writers, it is engaging with and participating in this becoming that gives these practices life.

Jordan was not alone in his assessment of the curriculum’s imposing influence. Lucille, who has been teaching English language arts and reading at Northview Middle School for five years, described this same mandated curriculum as “very rigid,” saying that, “You had to stick to
the script. They didn’t like you going off the script a whole lot,” and that “you must stay on pace
and do it with fidelity.” Isabella, who at the time of the interview was in her seventh year of
teaching English language arts at Frazier High School, a public high school in the local school
system, shared that this expectation that “we’re giving you this textbook and you need to use it
with fidelity” has increased in the last three or four years. She explained that prior to this shift, “I
could say, oh, I’m using this one text from this workbook and I’m pairing it with three other
things that I chose myself, and that was always good enough.” She added that this increase in
mandated structure has come with increased surveillance and scrutiny, telling me that during one
district walkthrough, “They picked up a textbook to see if my kids had written in it, to see if we
weren’t just faking it.”

These district walkthroughs to ensure “stick[ing] to the script,” “staying on pace,” and
“fidelity” represent one arm of assessment related to the implementation of mandated
curriculum. In this case, it is an assessment of the teacher’s job to connect the students to the
curriculum as a vehicle for learning. The students’ engagement with the curriculum, in turn, is
assessed through high-stakes standardized tests. The content and design of these tests influence
which parts of the curriculum teachers are expected to emphasize and how students are expected
to engage with the content of their classes. Isabella explained that although she incorporates a
variety of writing into her classes, “Right now because of standardized testing they only want us
to focus on three types of writing, which is really only one type of writing: it’s very scripted, it’s
the five-paragraph, compare two texts [form].”

Jordan explained similarly that as far as end-of-year tests are concerned:

It’s all about this endgame of writing [in this] kind of five-paragraph-essay style. So
having paragraphs where you make some sort of assertion about the text and then back it
up with evidence and explain it. Whether you’re using something like MEAL, main idea,
evidence, analysis, link, or MEAT, which is weirder but with T for the tie-back. Or
whether you’re using ACE, answer, citation, and explanation, or CER, claim evidence, reasoning.

When I asked Jordan if “formulaic” was the way to describe this approach to student writing, he responded, “Yeah, I just literally listed out three or four formulas off the top of my head.” This rigidly formulaic view of teaching and learning, according to Jordan, is reflected in the ways that students are expected to engage with content as readers. He described that:

We immediately in middle schools just go to “You read it, now comprehend it, now analyze it.” Those are the two things. So basic comprehension questions, some kind of little analysis question, and you’re done. There’s not really any time to sit with like, “Well what did you actually just think about this outside of regurgitating something?”, just, “What was your interaction with this text, your authentic, schematic connection to it?”

Jordan’s comment reveals that within the parameters of his district’s mandated curriculum, students are not placed in a position of true responsiveness to or participation in what they read: they are responsible, then, not to the text and their place in the world in relation to the text but to the formula of “comprehension” and “analysis” that will be assessed at the end of the year. Their experiences with writing, if they are to conform to the standard set by the assessments, are not an opportunity to actively participate by responding to, critically considering, or building on texts or ideas: rather, they are an opportunity to practice generating “claims,” “evidence,” and “reasoning” (to borrow from one acronym), in a specific, prescribed order, again and again. These imposed structures leave no room for the type of authentic engagement Jordan describes as meaningful because, in his estimation, “there’s not really any time” for such open-ended opportunities for responsiveness.6

6 Jordan explained that this formulaic nature is expressed further still in the student-facing presentation of the curriculum itself. He shared that, “If you open up the Guidebooks units, every single one looks exactly the same. Every day has a PowerPoint with these weird clip arts that look like they’re from 1997. And it’s the same clip art. And I’m saying from, as far as I know from the ones I’ve clicked around on, from first grade to twelfth grade, it is the same slide everyday for your entire career. And so it’s odd, and it just seems so thoughtless.”
The stakes for teachers to support their students in learning to produce writing that fits into a highly prescribed, closed set are enormously high: Jordan highlighted this reality when he explained that, “Literally teachers’ salaries, or their money they make, is dependent on how well students can regurgitate the kind of writing they’re expected to do at the end of the year. That is what the whole game is about.” To play by the rules of this game, one must be compliant, willing to act as though one size can truly fit all when it comes to the deeply human experiences of teaching and learning, of reading and writing. Such structures leave no room for learning experiences that are responsive to the individual needs of students, that are open and unfinalized enough to be defined only as they are happening in the living dialogue that shapes a class community. In this system as it exists, students are reduced from human beings to numerical scores, responsible not to anyone or anything in the real word but only to the questions on any given year’s standardized tests.

**Inheriting Compliance: Industry, Hierarchy, and “Sticking to the Script”**

The nuances of this particular mandated curriculum, and other curricula like it, are deeply rooted in historical schooling inheritances. Pulling on this particular thread brings us into contact, broadly but necessarily, with American schooling’s very purposes and intended constituency. While the structures of American schooling have shifted over time, they have not necessarily ever been entirely remade, and the residual effects of centuries-old schooling goals still contribute to our current systems because they remain embedded in the structures educators and students presently inhabit.

One such enduring objective of American schooling that predates even the American Revolution is the development of obedience to authority (Spring, 1994, p. 5). The Puritan structures that defined education in 17th and 18th century New England are often criticized for
this emphasis on obedience to authority (and its sibling goal of strict religious piety). To describe the educational approaches of this era as once foundational but presently irrelevant (Spring, 1994, p. 6), however, assumes of American education an honest shift away from compliance toward democratic aims and ignores the rigid structures of obedience deeply embedded and continually expressed in schooling’s present iteration. Indeed, for all the ability and knowledge they claim to measure, our current system of standardized tests primarily assesses each student’s ability to follow the rules of sitting still and quiet, without disruption, for extended stretches of time (Schneider, 2017, p. 20) and, as Isabella and Jordan named, to produce a type of writing that fits neatly into a prescribed formula. The history of American education, through its pedagogical approaches, its orientation toward the production of an efficient workforce, and its hierarchical structures, seems inextricably bound up in order and compliance as among its highest implicit goals.

**Schools As Industrial Workforce Preparation**

The Lancasterian monitorial system of the early 19th-century charity school provides perhaps the most vivid historical representation of these implicit goals at work. Admission to early 19th-century public schools, including the famous and first Boston Latin School, was inaccessible for many due to the schools’ entrance requirements: unless one had the means to develop their literacy skills prior to enrolling, they could not hope to pursue an education at such an institution. In the interest of expanding basic reading ability beyond the elite social classes, charity schools opened for the express purpose of providing the poor with not only literacy instruction but a moral education (Reese, 1995, p. 10). These charity schools, intended to contribute to a reduction of crime and poverty, did not necessarily open up avenues of social mobility or inter-social interaction: they were attended by poor children while the wealthy
continued to enjoy access to private and other institutions. The foundation laid by these charity schools offered a structure out of which the American public school system would later develop (Spring, 1994).

The Lancasterian system, developed by and named for Joseph Lancaster, employed efficiency and order to beget efficiency and order. The rigidly hierarchical structure, in which instructors provided direction to student “monitors” who in turn provided direction to neatly ordered groups of pupils, was designed to inexpensively accommodate hundreds of students at a time. Because groups of students would move together to receive instruction from the monitors who were themselves “just points on the educational assembly line” (Spring, 1972, p. 45), this system required and rewarded orderly obedience (Spring, 1994, p. 46). Unsurprisingly, the Lancasterian “educational machine” was compared by 19th-century educators to a factory, one whose output was not only knowledge but the “virtues of submission, order, and industriousness” (Spring, 1994, p. 47) in anticipation of the students’ eventual work in actual industry contexts (Spring, 1972, p. 46). The Lancasterian system spread from New York schools to Boston when the Boston School Committee investigated the system’s application in 1828 and found that “its effects on the habits, character, and intelligence of youth are highly beneficial; disposing their minds to industry, to readiness of attention, and to subordination, thereby creating in early life a love of order, preparation for business” (Spring, 1994, p. 47). Marianne A. Larsen (2002) writes that the rigid system of the monitorial method “dominated teacher preparation in the United States” (p. 459) until about the 1830s. Teachers perpetuated this pattern of efficiency by teaching as they had been “mechanistically taught” (p. 459), abandoning, according to critics, any “spirit of investigation and inquiry” (p. 459) in favor of inflexible, and predictable, structure.
The inflexibility of the Lancasterian system was reflected in the physical environments of classrooms themselves. According to the architectural design of C.B.J. Snyder, early 20th century classrooms featured uniform rows of desks in specific numbers that were physically bolted to the floor. This classroom layout centered supervisorial oversight and promoted pedagogical approaches that favored standardization (Cuban, 1984, p. 49). By physically positioning students to face a single, shared direction—the blackboard and presumably the teacher—these classroom environments communicated an adherence to philosophies of teaching and learning that elevate simple knowledge accumulation over critical questioning or shared inquiry. This physical structure reinforces the banking model of education by centering teachers (holders of knowledge) as knowledge depositors and students as passive (literally unmoving) receptacles (Freire 1970/2017). While the experience of class appears collective, the learning is strictly individual, though not individualized. Whether every student or only one is present on a given day, this structure assumes that teaching and learning will look the same: knowledge will be given and knowledge will be received without any need for collaborative discussion or response. It is an efficient model shaped by industry that has had an undeniably dehumanizing effect on pedagogy. Although teachers may have had training in a variety of approaches and methods, the reality of classroom structures tacitly but powerfully supported “stimulus-response, drill, reward, and measurement methods of instruction” (Spring, 1994, p. 208) over those that expected students to interact with and learn from one another.

Although the Lancasterian system itself is no longer an identifiable feature of contemporary public schooling, and our desks are no longer (necessarily) affixed to the floor, our current system has by no means abandoned all structures reflective of the factory model. In the context of 21st century classrooms, students still often sit in rows of desks that face the front of
the classroom and still often find themselves reduced to performing the role of passive recipient, responsible only for consuming information for the sake of repeating it. The assessment of this ability to reproduce unchallenged information ultimately determines the success or failure of the student’s schooling experience, and, as Jordan explained, the measured success of their teacher.

In her analysis of American schooling, Grace Lee Boggs attributes the shortcomings of this educational approach to its being designed for an industrial world that values young people only as future consumers and producers (2012, p. 142). These schooling contexts that Boggs criticizes position students primarily as information receptacles rather than as whole humans and therefore force students into performing the rigid, one-dimensional role appropriate for assembly-line work. Boggs makes frequent use of this assembly-line metaphor in her pointed discussion of American schools, articulating that, “At the core of the problem is an obsolete factory model of schooling that sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies working-class children as if they were products on an assembly line” (2012, p. 137). In an education system that operates according to this banking concept, a student’s role is a limited one: in this system described by Freire and recognized by Boggs, “the scope of action allowed to the student extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits” (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 45) made by their teacher. This reduction of the student role to reception, with no attention to the students’ identity, culture, or capacity for unique contribution threatens not just the process of learning but the student’s very humanity.

**Compliance as an Institutional Inheritance**

American schools have historically and persistently followed industry models not only in the structures of classrooms and expectations for students but in the core design of the institutions themselves. Since the late 19th century, students enrolled in schools have proceeded
orderly, grade by grade, learning material designed in the interest of content consistency across the schools in each system. They have been taught by teachers who are hierarchically managed by principals who are managed by superintendents (Spring, 1994). Historically, individuals in these management positions have enjoyed far higher salaries than teachers (Reese 1995) without, necessarily, any “on the ground classroom experience” (Spring, 1994, p. 119). The persistence of this bureaucratic hierarchy and its application of scientific management (Spring, 1994, p. 283) has made sustainable those pedagogical innovations that fit easily into structures of observation and supervision.

For instance, the Herbartian movement of the 1880s and 1890s, named for the work of Johan Herbart, introduced intentionally structured lessons to support “mental assimilation” (Spring, 1994, p. 200). While Herbart’s work introduced the study of pedagogy to the context of formal schooling (Larsen, 2002, p. 459), the enduring legacy of the Herbartian movement is not only an educational interest in the “science of teaching” in general but the class lesson plan specifically. In the hierarchical structure of schooling, this particular intervention functions as a convenient vehicle for supervisorial oversight of teachers’ work with students (Spring, 1994, p. 199).

It bears mentioning that the distinction between administrative leadership and classroom teaching has historically been one of a gender divide (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Hiring women to fill teaching positions in 19th-century common schools cost less than hiring men (Urban & Wagoner, 2009; Reese, 1995; Moran & Vinovkis, 2015), and at the time the work of “school-keeping” represented one of the few respectable and accessible job opportunities for women. The field of teaching was easy to enter, requiring limited, affordable training through either experience as a student in the common school system itself or, eventually, formal teacher
training at a normal school (Clifford, 1978, p. 13). In the century since, oppressive factors have compounded over time and led to a gross undervaluing of teachers’ professional, specialized work. Mike Rose (1995) writes in the introduction to Possible Lives that the teaching profession “has been low-pay, low-status work, devalued as ‘women’s work,’ judged to have limited intellectual content.” (p. 3). The prevalence of this disrespect for teachers means that they are often cut out of decision-making that deeply affects their day-to-day work on the ground with students. Regarding textbook selection, as an example, Isabella shared, “They say they have a group of teacher leaders who get to decide the textbooks that we use, but I’ve never met a teacher on a teacher board.” Regardless of whether or not any teachers were actually consulted about the selection of the curriculum that Isabella and her students engage with every day, Isabella’s comment reveals a feeling that such claims of collaboration are mere illusion.

On the ground of classrooms presently, oversight manifests, in part, as “district walkthroughs,” like the one described by Isabella. She went on to tell me that in recent years, “Every walkthrough [that] I have, feedback from admin is always like, you’re doing awesome, but you’re not using the textbook, so you’re not doing good anymore.” Walkthroughs like this result, for her, in feedback on her teaching that emphasizes fidelity to a curriculum that was chosen for her and her students over any other ways she may be working to create a class environment that fosters critical inquiry, or collaboration, or a sense of trust and belonging, among other possible learning goals.

Teachers and Textbooks

Jordan’s, Lucille’s, and Isabella’s mandated curriculum experiences are deeply connected to American schooling’s long and fraught relationship with textbooks. Reaching as far back as the 17th century New England Primer, texts that offer standardized material designed to promote
an accumulation of knowledge have been a fixture of American classrooms. The complex history of texts and textbooks in schools is entangled not just with pedagogy but also with publishing and politics, all of which vie with teacher expertise for authority in the classroom.

Technological advances in book production in the early 19th century catalyzed an “explosion of print” (Graff, 2001) that introduced an unprecedented abundance of reading material to the American public. Schools, with their increased enrollment, represented an important sector of the book-buying market (Moran & Vinovkis, 2015, p. 286) and thus spurred the publication of discipline-specific textbooks for use in America’s schools. Most early 19th-century students were expected to buy their own books: the lack of standardization across texts generally impacted, then, individual classrooms, and led to reforms in the 1830s and 1840s aimed at ensuring that classrooms had uniform books (Moran & Vinovkis, 2015, p. 299).

William J. Reese (1995) writes that, of the hundreds of offerings, eventually only “a handful of textbooks in every subject dominated the national market” (p. 104). Reese also writes that, “Textbooks constituted the heart of formal instruction in the high school” (p. 104), so it is no surprise that the authors were so familiar to high school students (in urban and rural schools alike) that their names became synonymous with the study of their subjects” (p. 105). While these textbooks addressed distinct academic disciplines—such as history, geography, mathematics—they introduced students to a “uniform worldview” shaped by consistent “cultural views toward mankind, gender relations, nature, capital, labor, and America’s destiny” (Reese, 1995, p. 106). The emphasis on developing values of discipline, patriotism, and general moral uprightness were historically tied not just to schooling in general but literacy specifically (Graff, 2001).
The school-based collision of politics and publishing is well demonstrated by the content of schoolbooks, particularly William Holmes McGuffey’s *Eclectic Readers* and the later Curriculum Foundation Series, better known as “Dick and Jane.” The *McGuffey Readers*, first published in 1836, introduced an important innovation to reading instruction by centering the interests of young people through “lively short stories about children in familiar settings” (Monaghan & Monaghan, 2015, p. 315). In keeping with the intention of developing in students not just literacy but moral character, the stories in *McGuffey’s* were designed to appeal to children at the same time as they emphasized “consequences for undisciplined or immoral behavior” (Venezky & Kaestle, 2015, p. 417). The readers designed for older students “featured English and American poetry, literature, and oratory” rather than the “selections from Cicero, 18th-century English Commonwealthmen, and the Scottish Enlightenment” that had made up the contents of the previous Murray’s *English Reader* (Monaghan & Monaghan, 2015, p. 315). Economic interest, however, prevented the inclusion of any discussion of politically contentious moral issues, including slavery, in the interest of selling to schools and districts throughout the country (Monaghan & Monaghan, 2015, p. 318).

This pattern of avoiding potential controversy persisted and intensified in the 20th century as schoolbooks continued to trend away from “implicit or explicit statements of moral judgement” (Venezky & Kaestle, 2015, p. 427) due to national interest in “books that were bland in order to be uncontroversial” (Venezky & Kaestle, 2015, p. 425). As an example, Venezky & Kaestle (2015) identify that the 1942 “Dick and Jane” third grade reader *Streets and Roads*, “is silent on war, the Depression, hunger, and rationing” (p. 428-29). Despite the challenging realities of 1940s American life, in the “Dick and Jane” stories, “There was ample gasoline for the car, a full stock of toys in Uncle Robert’s department store, and a well-appointed passenger
train to carry Bob, Molly, Anna, and Patty from the Northfield station to the city” (p. 429). In the economic interest of appealing to as wide a range of schools as possible, textbooks continued to avoid the inclusion of reading selections that were received unfavorably in specific regions: Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* was one such causality, excluded from most readers before the 1920s in order to help ensure their purchase in the South (Venezky and Kaestle, 2015, p. 424). Ultimately, “Reading texts tended to be bland and homogenous because they were designed for broad acceptance” (Venezky and Kaestle, 2015, p. 424), a trend which has continued to mark the development of the textbook industry.

Bland monotony remained prevalent throughout the 20th century as publishers sought to avoid the inherent controversy of what Jonathan Zimmerman (2015) identifies as the three “Rs”: Reds, Race, and Religion (p. 306). Zimmerman paraphrases a publisher’s position that “A multicultural nation needed singularly bland texts ... because any controversial issue was certain to antagonize one culture or another” (p. 324). Rather than empowering students and teachers to navigate disagreement and conflict, and to seek nuanced and authentic solutions that consider diverse perspectives, the enduring textbook industry strategy is to offer only materials that have been sterilized against potential controversy. In the meantime, the textbook publishing industry continued to consolidate. Zimmerman writes that, “By 1988 ten publishers controlled 70 percent of the American textbook business; two years later, the so-called ‘Big Three’—Macmillan, Harcourt, and Simon & Schuster—owned nearly half of it” (p. 307). By 1998, Pearson PLC had acquired Simon & Schuster and controlled more than a quarter of the American market (p. 307). Janet Nguyen writes that while five companies shared 80% of the American textbook market in the 2010s, that portion is now controlled exclusively by Pearson, Cengage, and McGraw-Hill (2021). Because Texas and California represent such a large portion of textbook sales, these two
states effectively determine for the rest of the nation what textbooks are and are not approved (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 308).

Isabella and Lucille both attributed their district’s commitment to its mandated curriculum, demanding that teachers not only use it but use it “with fidelity,” in part to economic interests. Isabella explained that, from her perspective, “I think the district is in some sort of partnership. They bought these curriculum from McGraw-Hill, or whoever it is that they’re buying them from. They’re spending a bunch of money on it without consulting anybody.” The priorities informing curriculum purchase and enforcement, it would seem from Isabella’s description, are not grounded in a recognition of how students best learn but in economic interests.

Besides allowing publishing and political interests to infiltrate the classroom, texts designed for use in schools have profoundly influenced pedagogy. Early schoolbooks were designed for use in ungraded, one-room schoolhouses: as they progressed, students were able to make use of a single volume that featured content of increasing difficulty (Moran & Vinovkis, 2015, p. 296). According to Moran and Vinovkis (2015), many antebellum teachers, who entered classrooms with little or no training beyond their own experiences as students, “were forced to rely on books to show them how and what to teach—especially given the multiple skill levels that they were expected to address in a single classroom” (p. 298). These progressive schoolbooks, they go on to say, “contributed to the introduction of new ideas and pedagogical practices at a time when most teachers did not receive any professional training beyond a common school education” (p. 298). Under such circumstances, it stands to reason that teachers would rely heavily on the guidance of textbooks.

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7 See also Reese 1995, p. 103, regarding the structure schoolbooks offered to un-graded schools.
As enrollment in schools increased throughout the 19th century, both teacher training opportunities and textbook publishing progressed. Reese (1995), similarly to Moran and Vinovkis (2015), writes that textbooks, viewed by 19th century educators as vehicles by which to “organize and diffuse knowledge” (p. 103), deeply affected classroom pedagogy and instruction. Texts in all subjects, including grammar, history, and geography, contained primarily facts for memorization and recitation (p. 138). Reese cites that, tellingly, the “vast majority of questions in every textbook in every field started with ‘what’ rather than ‘why’” (p. 140), demonstrating an emphasis on an approach to learning that is marked by an accumulation of static knowledge rather than an expectation of critical analysis and application. Reese also writes that the primary educational occupation of students by midcentury was half study and half recitation, and that student development was measured by progress through the contents of their textbooks (p. 134). Reese cites contemporary criticism of these structures’ influence on teaching practices throughout the country:

“Our high schools do not infuse into the mind a love for learning,” wrote one observer in the Ohio Educational Monthly in 1868. “They simply grind the ax, without producing that breadth of culture which enables men to solve great problems.” A high school principal in San Francisco said that teachers were demoralized. “Teachers are ordered to give certain intellectual doses at certain times, in certain ways and in certain quantities alike to all pupils and repeat the dose at stated intervals.” Cramming was confused with education, said one educator from Maine in 1880, and the knowledge so gained soon forgotten, vanishing “like Hamlet’s ghosts at the approach of dawn.” (Reese, 1995, p. 134)

Despite these criticisms (that, incidentally, feel strikingly relevant in our current context, specifically in the way that the idea of “dosing” reflects the idea of “pacing”), reliance on the standardization and uniformity provided by textbooks continued (Reese, 1995, p. 132), propped up by industrial schooling models that were likewise designed around standardization and uniformity. By “codifying] acceptable knowledge” (Reese, 1995, p. 137), aligning
instruction with textbooks used in common allowed for efficient evaluation and comparison of student performance (Reese, p. 136, p. 141), in keeping with the era’s popular, strictly scientific view of teaching and learning.

Even given advances in computer technology and accessibility, according to Zimmerman (2015) the staying power of textbooks can be attributed to the perception of their academic authority: he writes that, “Textbooks are durable, portable, and most of all reliable: their hefty pages carry the apparent weight of authority, listing thousands of facts that can be easily presented, digested, and regurgitated” (p. 323). Harkening back to the position of the untrained teacher of the one-room schoolhouse, Zimmerman writes that, “for instructors lacking a solid background in the disciplines they teach, this emphasis upon cut-and-dried ‘information’ represents the prime virtue—not the perennial vice—of American textbooks” (p. 323). He also troubles the assumption that teachers will unquestioningly follow the rigid lanes laid out by their texts: giving professional credit where it is due, he calls for classroom authority to shift from the textbook to the teacher (p. 323).

Lucille’s experience with “stick[ing] to the script” and “keeping the pacing” reflects a significant disconnect between what the curriculum prescribes and what teachers recognize to be best for their students. She explains of the rigidity of her mandated curriculum that:

Sometimes that bothered the students. It also sometimes bothered me because if they had not gotten a concept and maybe needed to slow it a little bit then you had to look at the pacing and make sure that on the end date that you’re close to it or you’re actually finished on that particular date.

John S. Mayher (1990) questions this pervasive positioning of “coverage” as the primary goal of education, connecting it to the authoritative influence curriculum has had on our perceptions of teaching and learning. Under the law of “coverage,” a teacher’s success or failure can be measured according to how much content the class has been able to “cover” in their time.
together. Mayher writes that while teachers may make some decisions about what is to be covered (or in Lucille’s case, how much time to spend on each topic), such decisions are primarily made by individuals external to the classroom, whether through authorship of the textbooks themselves or the adoption of textbooks at the level of district administration or school boards. These entities, he writes, “have usually decided what is to be learned with virtually no reference to the particular learners in any specific classroom” (p. 66) and operate under an illusion that “each individual teacher need only march through the specified lessons without any additional planning or adjustment” (p. 66). This assumption that a one-size-fits-all curriculum can and should be universally applied to class after class, year after year, even hour after hour is indeed a farce, contrasting sharply with what teachers know to be true of how students best learn.

The Need for Unfinalizability in Classrooms

Nicole, who at the time of her interview was looking forward to starting a new social studies teaching job at a school district out of state, spent many years teaching middle school and high school English language arts in the same district as Jordan, Isabella, and Lucille. Like them, she also has extensive experience teaching a highly structured, rigidly paced mandated curriculum. Of her own teaching practice, however, she explained, “I try to be really flexible, because every year it changes from year to year and, honestly, each class has a different personality. What works for first hour may not work for third hour.” Katherine, who teaches at Alberti High School, a project-based learning school in a district on the other side of the country from Nicole, spoke similarly about the need for flexibility, explaining that her classroom structure for “the day-to-day is probably organized like, a week out. And it shifts, and it shifts even by class period. So my fifth period is not necessarily doing what my seventh period is doing
because they have different needs.” She added that, “Adaptability is huge. Especially based on the group of students in the class.”

As an example of this need for adaptability, Katherine described a significant change she had recently made to her implementation of one of Alberti’s longstanding sophomore projects. Although not prescribed by a mandated curriculum, the series of projects Katherine has inherited offer a sense of structure to her classroom. In this particular project, teams of students are tasked with writing and performing a sixth act of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Katherine explained an adaptive choice that she made in response to the needs of her students:

I didn’t want to force a sixth act down their throat because I didn’t think it was going to be a positive experience for like, three quarters of the kids. There was probably a quarter that was like, “Yeah let’s do this, this’ll be fun.” Whereas my previous [academic] quarter of kids, every single one, buy-in was through the roof. They were like, “We’re gonna do this!” And I would say things like, “We’re just gonna be goofy today,” and they’d be like “Oh, OK, let’s be goofy.” This class, if I said that they would be like, “I’m outta here, I’m done. Get out of my face, lady.” So I had to pivot quite a bit, and my pivots aren’t always as structured as they would otherwise be. Pivoting is hard, especially with projects.

Although Katherine’s curriculum is not a district mandated one, her resistance to “forc[ing]” a particular outcome onto her students, when she believed it would not benefit them, reveals a desire to be responsible not to any predetermined structure or plan but to the students themselves, even when making these adaptable changes presents a challenge.

Nicole also reported experiences with the challenges associated with making a major but responsible pivot. She told me:

Sometimes I’ve had to change stories and be like, we’re not gonna read this with third hour ‘cause they’re just not gonna get it. Or they’re just gonna miss the point and say something hurtful, and it’s just not a safe space for everybody, so we’re just gonna not do this.

She told a story about making a major change to her classroom plans based on the unique needs of her students:
One year my eighth grade traditional class was supposed to read *Night* because that’s what all the eighth graders were reading. And we had started it, and they were just not being respectful toward the text at all after we started. … We got through maybe the first chapter, and they were giggling about it. … When we were doing the background information, they were kind of not doing well, and I thought maybe once we start reading the book they might get it together, and they really didn’t. So we just said no—I just said no. We did not read the book. I gave them one more day of background information and we just left the Holocaust completely alone and moved on to something else. ‘Cause it just wasn’t worth being disrespectful towards this whole worldwide event that was traumatic for millions of people.

In this story, Nicole described the act of assessing her students’ maturity and thoughtfully weighing that assessment against the possibly damaging outcome of their continued engagement with a specific required text. She spoke to her reflective positioning when she explained that she thought the students’ behavior toward the topic would change when they started reading the book. She also described the adaptive route that she took: giving the students another day of background information before moving on. Nicole’s choice of adjustment to maintain a sense of safety in her classroom is certainly not the only possible alternative in the case she describes: what this story reveals, however, is that an adjustment was needed, and that Nicole engaged in a thoughtful, informed process before deciding what direction the class should take. With unquestioning adherence to a stick-to-the-script style, rigidly paced mandated curriculum, no such adjustments are even possible. As Katherine described at the conclusion of her explanation, “pivoting is hard,” but knowledge of the individual students and thoughtful attendance to their needs makes pivoting possible.

For Jordan, Lucille, and Isabella, these moments of adaptation, of responding to the needs of the actual students who fill their classrooms, are often covert. Jordan and Lucille in particular framed their descriptions of these instances with language of “sneaking in” learning experiences that the curriculum does not call for. For instance, Lucille described the curriculum’s emphasis on graphic organizers as a required student product. She told me that she believes that “it really
bores the students that everything is graphic organizer, graphic organizer, graphic organizer.”

She explained that for some students, particularly students she described as non-visual, “graphic organizers were sometimes just a mess for them” or even “horrible.” She then described her response upon noticing this pattern, telling me:

So I was like, OK, let’s do something else, because I think somewhere in there you do understand, but this is not the way for you to express your understanding to me because either it’s too complicated or it’s just too much or overwhelming.

Lucille described her use of Flipgrid, a video recording program, as an example of an alternative method of expression she provided to her students. Allowing students to express their understanding orally, either before or in lieu of expressing themselves in writing, helped Lucille to differentiate for her students’ various needs. She explained that:

Students who are strong writers, they usually do not have as much trouble. But students who are not, I find that they’re easier to verbally engage with and can explain a little bit better in verbiage what they’re trying to say.

Through this opportunity, Lucille opens up alternative methods by which students might demonstrate their understanding, allowing their needs to define the ways she implements the curriculum.

Later in the interview Lucille described this approach, cleverly, as “refurb[ing] certain assignments.” As another example she offered that she, “had them do a scene from Hatchet, and I told them to make it in the form of like, a graphic novel, comic strip type thing. So sometimes I can kind of get away with a few things so they’re able to use their creative pieces.” Despite the rigid nature of the curriculum, and the expectation to “stay on pace and do it with fidelity,” Lucille explained that:

Whenever I can I try to sneak in little things. Like they can do little art projects, they can do music projects, so I’ll give them a little menu of some side things they can do. Like, hey, maybe you want to do one of these for extra credit. So I kind of employ that kind of a strategy since I don’t have a whole lot of leeway.
In the cases she described, Lucille is working to open up unfinalizable spaces for her students to engage meaningfully with not only the class content but their own responses to it.

Jordan likewise used the language of “sneaking in” to describe texts, like local spoken word poetry, and activities, like creative and narrative writing opportunities, that he had introduced to his classes. In Jordan’s class, unfinalizable spaces take the form of practicing metacognitive strategies through writing in what he terms “thinking notes.” In their “thinking notes,” Jordan’s students are invited to question, make connections, state opinions, make predictions, or write summaries. He explained of this strategy that, “I like to teach writing as a way to examine your own brain and how it’s interacting with whatever text.” By encouraging his students to consider their literacy practice from this metacognitive position, Jordan invites his students to be agents of their learning, not objects of schooling (Katapodis & Davidson, 2021, p. 108). He contrasted this approach, an example of a participatory literacy practice, with the type of writing expected by the curriculum, telling me that, “If you look at the prompts, the language is so absurd and has nothing to do with the way that our students talk, or even the kind of things that students are thinking about at their age.” Jordan’s position on narrative writing is rather different from what is mandated:

I just think that often the joy of writing narrative can be the way that you kind of sublimate, or put your own experiences into the storytelling, and I think that gets lost in all this curriculum. So I try to do that.

The writing practice Jordan described here is inherently participatory, but also outside the scope of the curriculum.

Isabella’s approach to carving out unfinalizable space inside the parameters of a mandated curriculum is to turn the curriculum itself into a text and give students an opportunity to engage critically with it. She told me that she has her students read the textbook questions,
which she described as “very surface-level,” and asks them to consider not just what the answer is but why that answer is expected of them. She also supplements the textbook readings with additional readings to help frame the students’ critical engagement with the texts. As an example, she described her approach to the textbook’s Civil Rights unit, in which she asks her students to examine which figures and texts are included or excluded:

We also talk about what are the two texts [in the textbook] from Martin Luther King? Now let’s look at those. And so I’ll pair the stuff that they put in the textbook, I’ll pull excerpts from other Dr. Martin Luther King speeches. Why are we reading this instead of this other one, where maybe he’s a little bit more critical of America? Who is paying for this textbook? Why do they want you—what is the end goal of going to school? To be a worker, to be, you know—they don’t want you to think critically, they want you to just say yes…. So we do have those conversations. It can be a really good catalyst for conversations like that. They’ve been really strict about use the textbook and don’t use anything else. And so they can’t be mad at me if I’m still using the textbook, just asking other questions with it. That’s how I’ve justified what we’re doing.

Isabella’s mandated Civil Rights unit, as she describes it, seems to be born out of the pattern of “bland monotony” that has historically defined American textbooks. Her choice to engage the students in conversations that begin with “why” opens up the possibility for answers that have not been prescribed. Even within the expectation that teachers use only the textbook and nothing else, Isabella has found a way to be responsible to her students’ learning rather than to these directives.

Although Jordan, Lucille, and Isabella are engaged in this covert act of “sneaking in,” the highly structured nature of the curriculum, paired with hierarchical oversight and pressure to adhere to the curriculum “with fidelity” contribute, understandably, to a culture of compliance. Jordan told me the following story about an attempt he made to deviate from the curriculum’s clear prescription:

The story that’s coming to my mind is from when I was the English department head a few years ago at Northview and was looking through the Guidebooks texts, and there was this story, this short story that they were supposed to spend a long time on that had all
these really offensive tropes about Native American folks. I don’t remember the story, but having a conversation with my whole staff about it and folks being pretty resistant because of the idea that, well, this is the text that teaches dramatic irony. It’s a Guy de Maupassant story, I think—you know, that guy who does “The Necklace,” and like, all of his stories are dramatic irony, so you could use any of them. But there seems to be this kind of feeling that, well, this is what you use for that. And so that’s just kind of it. That moment is one I think about a lot because I was the department head at the time, and I posted it on our little Google Classroom that I was concerned about it, and let’s think about what else we can use, and I just didn’t receive any support from any staff. People were like, no, this is just what we do.

Jordan’s story indicates clear resistance among the English teachers he worked with to deviating from the curriculum as it had been prescribed not because, according to Jordan, they believed that the text included in the curriculum was well suited for the objectives, but because “this is just what we do.” Even Lucille described her class content as primarily adhering to the curriculum, telling me that her textual selections included “whatever the curriculum basically calls for.” When I asked if her students engaged with websites in class, she told me, “Not often, because the curriculum doesn’t actually call for it.” She perhaps only felt safe to tell me about her “refurbished assignments” once we were deeper into the interview, but Lucille’s early responses indicate a desire to express compliance even when “sneaking in” may be happening behind the closed classroom door.

The Dead End of High-Stakes Testing

In many cases, the pressure of district and administrative mandates to “stick to the script” and adhere to a curriculum “with fidelity” can overwhelm a teacher’s desire to provide unfinalizable learning environments for their students. Lucille attributed these district pressures to the fact that “we have measurements that the students need to meet, they have measurements, you know, the students themselves need to meet.” The reality of these measurements looms large over the decisions that teachers make in their classrooms, informing their choices about content and assignments.
Ideally, the relationship between pedagogy and assessment would flow one way: educators would develop their teaching and learning practices to honor and humanize students, to shape their curiosity into formal inquiry, and to support their development of the skills and knowledge they need to seek truth and answer complex questions. Educators would then design assessments that reflected these goals. Historically and currently, this relationship flows backwards, beginning with measurement strategies designed for efficiency and comparison and yielding pedagogy that prepares students for “success” on these tests rather than any kind of actual intellectual life. Jordan described, as an example, that although a memoir unit exists as part of the *Guidebooks* curriculum and offers students an opportunity to write from and about their own experiences, this unit is often skipped by teachers because of testing pressures. He also described the Narrative Writing Task as an “afterthought,” compared to the Literary Analysis Task and Research Simulation Task, in terms of eventual assessment. The Narrative Writing Task, importantly, seems set apart from the formulaic approaches of the other two types of writing. In our discussion of formulae, Jordan confirmed that in his many years of teaching middle school English in Louisiana, he had never encountered a formula for narrative writing (compared to the MEAL, MEAT, ACE, or CER formulae he described related to argument), likely because narrative writing cannot be so rigidly taught.\(^8\) If a form of writing cannot be taught by formula, it cannot be assessed by formula, either, and so it is not prioritized on end of year tests and, as a tragic result, is not prioritized in the classroom.

The influence of assessment strategies on pedagogy likewise represents an historical inheritance. Equally historically grounded is the positioning of testing and measurement as a response to fear, a deficit-based reaction to “an assumption of failure and decay” (Rose, 1995, p.

\(^8\) Of course, the claim that argumentative writing can be taught by formula is equally contentious.
2) that gazes outward to possible threats rather than inward to the students the system claims to serve. Whether assessments have taken the form of recitations, which remained popular into the 19th century, or written examinations, which settled into regular use by the 1840s (Reese, 1995, p. 135), American schooling has employed testing strategies designed to examine learning by way of measuring an amassment of facts. In 19th-century schooling contexts, according to Reese, “what mattered was contained in textbooks, stored in one’s mind, and recited to teachers” (1995, p. 135), and both textbooks and examinations reflected the objective that students should “gather as many facts as possible” (p. 152). The driving forces of standardization and uniformity reflected the progress and direction of the world outside the classroom: Reese writes that, “One-room schools, with their rule of thumb methods of appraising student performance, seemed antiquated in an age of machines and railroads” (p. 143). The problem with this equivalency, of course, is that children are not machines, and learning, unlike railroad tracks, does not run uniformly and predictably in one direction.

The culture of preparing for high school entrance examinations, the 19th-century version of high-stakes tests, was one of cramming and memorization over critical understanding (Reese, 1995). Reese’s analysis points toward the effects that these approaches had on pedagogy: he writes that, “Even the [19th-century] educator Emerson E. White had concluded that excessive testing had harmed public education. Increased reliance upon written examinations had encouraged ‘narrowed and grooved instruction,’ ‘mechanical and rote methods’ of teaching, and ‘cramming and vicious habits of study’” (p. 149). Reese also cites prominent educator Francis W. Parker’s 1882 claim that “the greatest obstacle in the way of real teaching to-day, is the standard of examinations” (Parker, 1891, p. 151), which, Parker laments, are aimed reductively at “test[ing] the pupil’s power of memorizing disconnected facts” (Parker, 1891, p.
151). Under such a system, teaching loses any sense of artistry, adaptability, or innovation. Reese writes that teachers “resisted more diverse pedagogical practices” because “they were too busy cramming their students with facts for upcoming tests.” (Parker, 1891, p. 141). In 1882, Parker put it this way:

> When asked, “Why don’t you do better work?” “Why don’t you use the methods taught in normal schools, and advocated by educational periodicals and books?” The answer is, “We cannot do it. Look at our course of study. In three weeks, or months, these children will be examined. We have not one moment of time to spend in real teaching!” No wonder that teaching is a trade and not an art! …The demand fixed by examiners is for cram, and not for an art…. (Parker, 1891, p. 155)

In 19th-century classrooms, as is true today, teachers felt pressured to adjust their teaching to prioritize the demands of high-stakes exams over providing students opportunities for critical engagement with content. The results are a persistent emphasis on rote memorization, of “cram” over “art.”

These inherited schooling structures that have sought to measure and categorize learning through standardized methods of testing have also resulted in enormously damaging social consequences (Spring, 1994). Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) developer Carl Brigham, for instance, used army intelligence test results to argue for the existence of inherently differing degrees of intelligence among ethnic groups. Specifically, Brigham warned that “Nordic” groups should be protected from intermixture with “Alpine” (Eastern European), “Mediterranean,” and “Negro” groups, because, as he claimed, these latter populations were responsible for the “downward spiral of American intelligence” (Spring, 1994, p. 265). Joel Spring demonstrates the racist effects of these conclusions, as such examinations were used as measurement strategies in schools to categorize students. Spring writes:

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9 “A weary observer concluded in the *National Teachers Monthly* in 1875 that creative pedagogy was rare, for teachers could not be artists in ‘our system of cram’” (Reese, 1995, p. 132).
… as the use of tests spread through the schools, serving to separate students into different curriculum groups, the tests also served the purpose of reinforcing ethnic and social class differences. For educators who adhered to the arguments of the psychologists, it appeared natural to channel children from lower economic and social groups into vocational education and those from upper social groups into college preparatory courses. In fact, the allegedly scientific nature of the tests gave an air of objectivity to ethnic and social-class bias. (Spring 1994, p. 265)

These biases, which are persistently embedded in our schooling structures, continue to unjustly impact students. Despite their intended use as objective measures, our current standardized reading tests are not designed to assess pure and simple reading comprehension, but knowledge of and fluency with speaking patterns and subject matter most familiar to those who are least marginalized (Schneider, 2017). The use of such tests to track primarily Black and Brown students out of advanced classes (Goyette, 2017, p. 106) generates a significant division among students’ schooling experiences. Continued, uncritical use of such assessments will only perpetuate the deeply rooted biases about potential student achievement that have come to define schooling outcomes in the United States. Commitment to their use, though, reaches well beyond the purview of individual school districts.

**No Child Left Behind**

The last few decades of national education reform have served to solidify the place of standardized tests as a cornerstone of American education. The transition toward the era of high-stakes testing in which we now find ourselves stems from a series of fear responses: fear of declining intelligence, of international competition, and of limited skills to keep pace in a rapidly changing world. The Soviet launch of the satellite *Sputnik* in 1957 gave physical representation to the fear that American students were set up to be outpaced by international rivals (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). The Regan-era report *A Nation at Risk* articulated these fears and called for educational reforms to ensure that the United States would remain globally competitive (Allen,
George W. Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act gave teeth to the educational fear response by instituting a system of accountability measures and punishments aimed at reforming schools deemed failing (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 414; Ravitch, 2010). No Child Left Behind appears to be a natural—and now standardized—extension of those same assessment measures that have profoundly shaped student experience for well over a century. Nineteenth-century educator Francis W. Parker’s claim that “the demand fixed by examiners is for cram, and not for [teaching as] an art” (Parker, 1891, p. 151) carries as much relevance today as it did in 1882.

No Child Left Behind has profoundly influenced both curriculum and pedagogy in ways that have not necessarily improved learning experiences and outcomes for students. For instance, since NCLB measurements considered only reading and math scores, attention to these subjects has often come at the expense of others (Ravitch, 2010, p. 108). Further, the time in classes devoted to reading and math is often focused specifically on test preparation (Ravitch, 2010, p. 107). Diane Ravitch, in The Death and Life of the Great American School System (2010), differentiates test preparation from learning, pointing out that success on a specific test for which students have directly prepared does not necessarily mean that they are skilled in that subject, only that they are capable of answering questions in the way test makers have designed them to be answered. She writes that, “When the scores are produced by threats of punishment and promises of money, and when students cannot perform equally well on comparable tests for which they have not been trained, then the scores lose their meaning” (p. 90). Jack Schneider (2017) adds that standardized test scores reflect the degree to which students are able to sit still and be quiet (p. 20), which is certainly not equivalent to much more desirable educational goals like critical thinking, skill development, or passion for seeking
truth. Regardless of these significant limitations, each student, and by extension their school communities, is then measured and assigned value according to their ability to perform as they have been trained on high-stakes, standardized tests (Urban & Wagoner, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Goyette, 2017). Again, fact accumulation and repetition reign as schooling’s perceived greatest good.

The influence of high-stakes testing directs classroom learning toward dehumanization and injustice. Ravitch warns that:

Indeed, to the extent that we make the testing regime our master, we may see our true goals recede farther and farther into the distance. By our current methods, we may be training (not educating) a generation of children who are repelled by learning, thinking that it means only drudgery, worksheets, test preparation, and test-taking. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 231)

Clearly, testing pressures leave very little room for approaches to learning that are organic, or unfinalized, as these approaches threaten efficiency. They convince teachers not to make space for critical inquiry, or responsibility, where there could be memorization. They make proficient scores, not learning, the object of education.

Further, the consequences of high-stakes testing have served to exacerbate present injustices. Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., (2009) reflect that test scores have not unearthed and reversed any hidden schooling failures, but rather “that failing schools were too often, if not always, predictable in terms of the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students rather than in relation to any specific educational concerns” (p. 414). They go on to explain that while the policies allowed for students at “failing schools” to transfer to “higher achieving schools, again most likely those with student bodies less burdened by poverty and its consequences,” there were not benefits for the students who remained (p. 414). Ravitch describes the effects of school closures and student shuffling as highly troubled: she writes that
under NCLB, high population high schools were closed for poor performance, displacing
students who, no longer able to attend their neighborhood schools, faced not only upheaval but
challenging admissions processes as well as long commutes (2010, p. 84). Many low-
performing students (that is, students with the highest needs) enrolled in other high population
high schools that soon were closed. Ravitch likens this destructive chain of events to a
computer virus (p. 84).

**Every Student Succeeds Act**

The Obama-era Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced NCLB in 2015, made some adjustments to the requirements of its predecessor. For instance, ESSA shifted responsive power back towards the individual states and introduced alternative measures to supplement test scores (Portz, 2021; Olson, 2020). The Every Student Succeeds Act also introduced the relatively flexible “school quality or student success” (SQ/SS) indicator, an opportunity to apply assessment of school climate or college and career readiness opportunities, among other measures, as school success criteria, and permits each state to weight each of the indicators as they see fit (Portz, 2021, p. 2). Although ESSA still requires yearly standardized testing for students in grades 3 – 8 and at least one test at the high school level (Meier & Knoester, 2017, p. 2), these other indicators are positioned to help offset the known limitations of standardized tests.

In his 2021 study, John Portz explored the varying weights applied to each indicator across the states, paying particular attention to the SQ/SS indicator. Notably, he identified significant variation regarding states’ continued emphasis on test scores, citing California, Illinois, and Maryland’s 20% (adjusted) weight for elementary achievement scores on the low end and Louisiana’s 64% (adjusted) weight at the high end. Regarding weights applied to the
SQ/SS indicator, Portz ultimately found that “most states are cautious and limited in their response” (p. 27) to ESSA’s newly offered opportunities for assessment. He writes that:

California and Maryland lead this group, with only 10 states allocating 15% or more weight, at either the elementary or high school levels, to this indicator. In contrast, 35 states allocate less than 10% to these measures, continuing a strong preference for test scores and graduation rates. For most states, staying close to a test-based approach to accountability remains the main path” (p. 27).

Portz also identifies that within the SQ/SS indicator, states often elect to make use of measures of individual student success, like chronic absenteeism and college and career readiness, over more collective measurements like school climate (p. 12). He notes, though, that data points for college and career readiness include participation and performance on the ACT and SAT (p. 13), reflecting a continued reliance on these standardized tests as a measure of success. In fact, ESSA leaves room for states to use ACT and SAT scores as their assessment data (Olson, 2020, p. 9).

Clearly, standardized tests and the efficiently gathered, “objective” data they presumably offer remain deeply embedded in the structures of schooling (Meier & Knoester, 2017, p. 9) despite the inequalities they perpetuate for marginalized students (Shelton & Brooks, 2019, p. 2). As an example, Meier and Knoester cite FairTest’s 2015 findings that “SAT scores were a perfect fit with family wealth,” (2017, p. 7), specifically that “Every $20,000 in family income correlated with higher test scores” (2017, p. 7). Stephanie Anne Shelton and Tamara Brooks (2019) cite FairTest’s conclusions that a commonly used standardized test question-selection process “exacerbates the existing inequalities of schooling” (FairTest, 2007, para. 6). Specifically, “at least some students who know the material and ought to pass the tests do not. Those students are overwhelmingly low-income, of color, with English as a second language, or have special needs” (FairTest, 2007, para. 6).
Lynn Olson (2020) highlights the influence of ongoing upheaval on these assessment strategies that are marketed as objective measures, noting that, “Constant changes in state assessment systems make it harder to track performance over time, create problems for state and district accountability systems, and send mixed messages to educators, diminishing their morale and ability to focus instruction” (p. 10). She also makes note of the 2020 federal testing waiver as “the first nationwide break in state testing in half a century” (Olson, 2020, p. 7) and calls into question the possible fate of the ACT and SAT following the University of California’s 2020 waiver of these tests as an entrance requirement for applicants (Olson, 2020, p. 9). While we wait for these outcomes to play out, students and teachers remain beholden to standardized testing’s inauthentic measures that uphold racial and class bias, narrow curriculum, and perpetuate misalignment with what should be the goals of education (Meier & Knoester, 2017, p. 8).

**The Cost of High-Stakes Testing**

Although he wrote *Possible Lives* several years prior to the passage of No Child Left Behind, Mike Rose (1995) pointedly highlights the costs of designing educational structures around a fear response generally and test scores specifically. He writes:

> If … we try to organize schools and create curriculum based on an assumption of failure and decay, then we make school life a punitive experience. If we think about education largely in relation to our economic competitiveness, then we lose sight of the fact that school has to be about more than economy. If we determine success primarily in terms of test scores, then we ignore the social, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of teaching and learning – and, as well, we'll miss those considerable intellectual achievements which aren't easily quantifiable. If we judge one school according to the success of another, we could well diminish the particular ways the first school serves its community. In fact, a despairing vision will keep us from fully understanding the *tragedies* in our schools, will reduce their complexity, their human intricacy. (p. 2-3)

Rose is calling here for nuance, for learning spaces that are not rigid, but open. Strict adherence to test scores removes each student’s and teacher’s humanity by assuming their
sameness rather than celebrating that which they are uniquely equipped to contribute. Rose goes on to dismiss “the security and comfort provided by the preset curriculum in which one knows in the fall what the year will entail” because “until one has met one's students, it is impossible to determine what they will need or want to work on” (p. 37). He adds decisively that, “the American dream of the curriculum where the content of each day can be determined before the first bell rights bell rings for the year has to be dismissed as the illusion it has always been” (p. 37). The world Rose imagines here is one in which teachers facilitate unfinalizable spaces, in which teachers and students build learning experiences together.

Ravitch, writing post-NCLB, shares Rose’s acknowledgement that the highest goals of education cannot be reduced to test results because such goals cannot be assessed through standardized tests. She adds to Rose’s analysis:

> Our schools will not improve if we value only what tests measure. The tests we have now provide useful information about students’ progress in reading and mathematics, but they cannot measure what matters most in education. Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his [sic] own, and to think differently (Ravitch, 2010 p. 226).

The goals Ravitch names call for responsibility, for students to answer for what they add to the world. This notion reflects Grace Lee Boggs’ call for an educational approach that acknowledges in young people the “unique capacity of human beings to shape and create reality in accordance with conscious purposes and plans” (2012, p. 137). The responsibility Ravitch and Boggs desire cannot flourish when the outcome is already set; it is only possible when the space in which it develops is unfinalized.

Jack Schneider, writing in the years immediately following passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, likewise describes the limitations of standardized tests, emphasizing the disconnection between the expectations of test performance and authentic application. He
writes, “It is foolish to test a student's ability to think like a historian by asking multiple-choice questions. Historians, after all, don't sit around reciting facts; instead, they try to solve puzzles by weaving together fragments of evidence” (2017, p. 23). Preparing students for standardized tests, then, does not prepare students for active problem solving or participatory application and creation. Adherence to an industrialized efficiency model has here not folded together multiple objectives, but, rather, selected and pursued one objective at the ultimately fatal expense of the other and has set teachers and students up to bear the weight of the system’s failure.

**Conclusion**

Unfinalizability and responsibility have no place in a schooling system designed for formulaic efficiency. Classrooms have historically, and continually, been designed as controlled environments without space for divergent thought, where the end of each course is known before it is begun: students year after year are expected to develop sets of knowledge that mirror precisely what was acquired by the class before, anything they produce a carbon copy of every other students’ work. Teachers and students are, traditionally, not asked to critically consider problems or seek and participate in their solutions, only to follow the processes established by those in authority. In fact, unfinalizable spaces, in which students are given the chance to question, to respond, to speak back, present a threat to these structures as they presently exist.

Despite the American education system’s many challenges, compounded over the last century, other inheritances include the promise of democratic engagement, participatory literacy practices, and genuine inquiry. These possibilities existed historically and persist even now, running as currents alongside those structures that have continued to marginalize and harm the already marginalized even as they claim to uplift the common good. Teachers in some
classrooms, working on the ground with actual students, are resisting the limitations of oppressive structures, carving out spaces of unfinalizable learning even within our present system. The nature of these structures, of course, varies across schooling contexts: for Jordan, Lucille, Isabella, and Nicole, their students’ and their own experiences are largely framed by the curriculum mandated by their district. The classroom reality, for teachers like Jordan, is one of resistance. He explained, “I don’t think anyone could actually implement [the curriculum] as it’s written. I’ve never been able to.” Concretely, Jordan’s resistance has looked like “sneaking in” for his students additional materials and experiences. For teachers like Katherine, the classroom’s defining structure looks more like a series of projects that have been tried and tested at the school where she teaches. Even in her much less restrictive context, Katherine recognizes the need to adapt. A successful project, one that has allowed students to engage authentically with relevant texts and to create a meaningful product with a life beyond the classroom, cannot remain unchanged for teachers who care about being responsive to their students. As Katherine explained it, “In PBL [project-based learning], (maybe in all education), it’s like a shark: if you stop swimming you die.”

In the following chapters, we will examine what it looks like to keep swimming, calling upon additional historical inheritances that promise classroom life rather than classroom death, to borrow the term from Gloria Ladson-Billings. As a matter of fact, Katherine’s statement mirrors Gloria Ladson-Billings’s position that “If we stop growing, we will die, and, more importantly, our students will wither and die in our presence” (2014, p. 77). Classroom life, as it turns out, flourishes in spaces that are unfinalized, in which students recognize themselves as “actual and irreplaceable” (KFP, p. 41) and as capable of authentic response because they know that “that which can be done by [them] can never be done by anyone else” (KFP, p. 40). In unfinalizable
spaces, teachers foster classroom life by supporting student creativity and choice, by honoring students’ questions and inspiring discussion and dialogue. They adapt their curriculum to honor the identities of their students while at the same time building relationships with them. In such spaces students are invited into authentic responsibility: their work is positioned as valuable beyond the classroom, making visible to them that they are to be responsible to their own learning, not to a test score. In the next chapter, we will explore these sorts of classroom spaces that exist in spite of and in between, particularly in the context of English language arts and literature studies.
CHAPTER 3. RESPONDING TO LITERATURE: THE UNFINALIZABLE SPACE OF READING DISCUSSION

The summer after my junior year of high school, I attended Arkansas Governor’s School, a six-week, state-funded academic summer program hosted on the campus of Hendrix College and attended by rising high school seniors from all across the state. I remember sitting in the auditorium on the first day, excited and nervous about this college-adjacent experience of meeting new people, living in a dormitory, and taking classes in a “major” that I selected and applied for specifically, when the speaker said something to the effect of, “All your friends must think you’re crazy to give up your summer break to go to school.” I think the eventual point of his message was meant to be encouraging, but it led me slightly in the direction of terror: why, indeed, would I give up my summer break to attend school? Maybe I have made an enormous mistake.

I have spent every year since the summer of 2008 chasing the feeling of learning and being a learner that I experienced in those six weeks. In (no doubt nostalgia-tinted) retrospect, my governor’s school experience made concrete for me a version of school that felt useful, expansive, challenging, and joyful. At governor’s school there were no grades, which is to say that learning was not coerced. Inside certain required pieces of the program many elements were optional: homework was optional, participation in class was optional, attendance at evening lectures and workshops was optional. I brought with me that summer an enormous literature anthology that I would read from in my spare time: it felt right to balance class time with my own study, to take the time between my obligations to read what I wanted to because I wanted to.

In a class called “Writing as Catalyst for Change” I engaged in my first visual freewriting prompt: our instructor projected an abstract image and told us to write and not stop writing, even if we were writing over and over again that we didn’t know what to write. I had never before
been asked to write so continually and with such trust in myself, and I had certainly never been asked to write in response to a non-verbal text. Speaking of non-verbal texts, I first encountered the idea that there was such a thing in “Introduction to Cultural Studies,” where we read Roland Barthes to inform our reading of strawberry-flavored candy, LEGO figures, and the design of Popeye’s restaurants. In “Writing in the First Person,” my instructor urged us to find the stories inside our “personal statements.” It was at Governor’s School where I first encountered what I have since learned is called an “un-conference,” a discussion activity in which the participants generate topics, gather in groups according to the topic that most interests them, and, once the process starts, are free to leave for new topics, or create new groups at any time. The “Writing as Catalyst for Change” instructor described the process as “organic,” and I remember thinking what an odd word that was to describe school.

Sometimes my memories of governor’s school chase me, like when I catch the distinctive smell of the hallways of Hendrix College. I have unexpectedly found that smell in the library at LSU, and in one very specific stairwell at the University of Chicago, and the associated memory always feels like learning for the simple sake of it. When I became a teacher, I resurrected these practices from my remembering to inform the classroom experiences I hoped to create for my own students. I would turn off the lights and have my students open up some digital or physical place to write. I would dramatically reveal the image of the day (sometimes abstract, sometimes literal, often weird) and set a timer. How do I respond to this! What am I supposed to write! I would tell them to just type, even if they were typing “I don’t know what to write” over and over and over, and to trust what would eventually come. As we worked on their personal statements together I would ask them to find the story in their response to the prompt; when we needed to generate essay topics, we would sometimes hold an un-conference. As a student these
approaches had made me feel unbound even while I knew that the expectations on me were high: I was told implicitly that I could produce something strong, something poignant, something beautiful, and I was given the space to do it. Inside these unfinalizable learning spaces, I was considered a responsible and capable creator.

It is easy to assume that the unfinalized classroom approaches of governor’s school, and the degree of related responsibility, only “worked” because the population of students was particularly high-achieving in the school-based sense of the word. Indeed, students tracked into advanced classes are more likely to enjoy greater opportunities to engage in open-ended projects and be trusted with space for expressive, authentic response. Meanwhile, students who are tracked into lower-level or vocational classes are much more likely to experience learning structures that are highly rigid with little room for creative freedom (Goyette, 2017, p. 36-37). In my own experience applying these and other similar practices in untracked classes, the opportunity to explore, to write, to create freely, and to be expected to follow through, is beneficial for all students. Further still, I believe that these practices contribute to the sort of learning environments that all students deserve. The uneven distribution of unfinalized learning opportunities across different types of classes serving different populations is fundamentally an issue of justice, especially when we consider that students tracked into vocational classes—and special education—are more likely to Black and Brown, as compared with those tracked into advanced courses (Goyette, 2017). Kimberly A. Goyette refers to this enormously damaging schooling inheritance as “second-generation segregation” (2017, p. 94). Any assumptions

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10 The state-funded nature of the program does take some steps toward accessibility: it is free to students to attend, and room and board are included. The length and residential nature of the program does, however, make it difficult to hold a summer job or help their families at home, and students must be nominated by their school to apply.
educators have about what different pedagogical privileges groups of students do or do not
deserve must be critically examined through a lens that acknowledges these structural conditions.

It is important to recognize that unfinalizable classroom spaces are not without structure
or expectations. In my governor’s school classes I never felt lost or unmoored or unsafe, and I
knew that there were expectations and consequences outlining the parameters of the experience. I
did, however, feel challenged: I was challenged by my own ideas and their extensions, by new
knowledges and understandings and texts, and by the potential that was assumed of me. I saw
myself as “actual and irreplaceable,” someone who “therefore must actualize my uniqueness”
(KFP p. 41). When educators provide students with unfinalized learning experiences, they make
space for authentic responsibility rather than uncritical compliance (Nystrand, 1997). In this
chapter, we will examine teacher descriptions of such learning experiences, considering the ways
that they seek to engage students in authentic classroom dialogue that positions them as “actual
and irreplaceable” (KFP, p. 41).

**Literary Presence, Literary Pursuits, Literary Character**

This chapter will consider student response to texts, especially literary texts. Specifically,
it will examine the ways in which teachers are using the dialogic context of reading discussion to
shift the monologic expectations of traditional classroom structures toward the unfinalizability of
multi-voiced, co-constructed learning experiences (Nystrand, 1997). To help ground this
consideration, we will begin with Gholnecsar Muhammad’s *Cultivating Genius: An Equity
Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (2020). Muhammad’s
framework disrupts traditional schooling patterns of marginalization by explicitly centering the
power and genius of students of color and by elevating students in the classroom to the role of
collaborators and creators. She draws much of this framework from her study of 19th century
Black literary societies, and thus positions literacy practice as inherently participatory. She writes that these liberatory groups of study and response, formed by Black Americans who were excluded from scholarly White spaces, “were more than just ‘book clubs’ or associations to engage in the study of literature. Instead, they had stronger aims of advancing the conditions of African Americans and others in the wider society” (p. 25). Specifically, these groups engaged in literary practices as action towards elevation, recognizing that literacy did not end with the ability to decode or read for pleasure: rather, they recognized that “reading and writing are transformative acts that improve self and society” (p. 9-10). Literacy in this context, then, was intrinsically wrapped up with “liberation and power” as well as “acts of self-empowerment, self-determination, and self-liberation” (p. 22).

In order to develop students’ literacy in a way that is culturally and historically responsive (and therefore humanizing), Muhammad calls for classrooms of literary presence, literary pursuits, and literary character. At the heart of literary presence is visible, collaborative participation in literary spaces. That is, literary presence encompasses not just belonging, but contribution and creation. Muhammad writes that for students to experience literary presence in the classroom, they should be provided with opportunities that call upon their “voices and visions” (p. 28). Literary pursuits make room for students to pursue lines of inquiry and to develop their thinking in response to their reading. Echoing Bakhtin’s framing of utterances as “link[s] in the chain of speech communication,” (SG, p. 91) Muhammad writes that, historically, “Literary pursuits were collaborative, embodied a chain-like effect, and encouraged others to participate” (p. 29). The direction of this “chain-like effect” led directly to social action (p. 30) and to the development of literary character: literary character manifests as not only increased knowledge but as confidence to effectively and actively use the tools of literacy (p. 31).
Muhammad connects literary character directly with “a responsibility to serve others” (p. 31). The literacy practices Muhammad calls for collectively are ultimately not only relevant and responsive (or responsible), but recenter “genius and joy” (Muhammad, 2022, p. 196) as educational aims. Further, they demand that monologic, scripted classroom practices (Nystrand, 1997, p. 8, 12) be replaced with dialogic discourses that recognize and honor the collaborative contributions of multiple voices.

For the teachers I interviewed, reading discussions, which are often conducted whole-class, represent pockets of unfinalizable possibility where students can initiate these practices of literary presence, literary pursuits, and literary character. When the space of a reading discussion is recognized and treated as unfinalized, students become co-creators with one another (Nystrand, 1997, p. 17), engaging in the act of responsive creation. Research has shown that dialogic classroom discourse, paired with high expectations, creates spaces for learning that lead to increased literacy performance (Applebee et al., 2003; Nystrand, 1997). This position is reflected in the value the teachers I interviewed ascribed to reading discussions. These reading discussion spaces, as the teachers described them, are held and protected by the teacher’s facilitation (Alston et al., 2018; Williamson, 2013; Nystrand, 1997) and, often, sets of protocols. These structures, though, stand apart from those that have traditionally defined American students’ schooling experiences: unlike mandated curricula and standardized tests, reading discussions are made as they are happening, driven and created by student voices. Despite the challenges (and, at times, anxieties) presented by the pressure of facilitation and the risk of unpredictability, it should perhaps not surprise us that the teachers identified reading discussions as sources of great professional joy.
The Unfinalizable Space of Reading Discussion

Throughout our conversations, the act of discussion again and again took center stage as a highlight of classroom life. In discussion, students are given a chance to “talk out” their ideas in response to a text in an open, but not completely unbounded, space. The teachers identified various sets of protocols that they employ to help give these discussions shape and to provide the students in them with a sense of safety. Importantly, the teachers described class discussion as not only a way to encourage engagement but as an experience in which they themselves found joy.

The importance of classroom opportunities to verbalize ideas featured in Lucille’s assessment of student engagement. When I asked Lucille what sorts of responsive assignments, from her perspective, generate the most student engagement, she answered that, “Assignments where they can verbalize or talk to me, I find that gets me a lot more engagement.” She highlighted the value of opportunities where:

they’re able to talk it out, even if they are strong writers. I don’t know if it’s because it’s just a quickest and natural way, but I find I get a lot more engagement if they’re able to talk about it. Because that way they can give their opinions, ideas, they can agree, disagree. And it seems to flow a little bit better.

Lucille’s reference to “talking it out” as being more “natural” seems to indicate that she sees value in allowing her students to verbally express their ideas without requiring that they simultaneously do the work of fitting those ideas into the framework of standard, academic writing structures. Lucille confirmed that offering an opportunity to respond verbally helps to engage students who would otherwise not participate at all if they were only asked to submit their answers in writing. Lucille went on to explain that allowing students to “talk out” their ideas better enables her to support them with their writing, or the development of their literary character. When she works with them to “translate [their answers] into writing,” she makes
grammatical structures relevant instead of arbitrary. Reviewing a student’s recorded Flipgrid response with them, for instance, allows her to point out the student’s natural pauses as grammatical breaks. Through this approach, Lucille effectively scaffolds her literacy instruction: she makes writing practice accessible by first removing barriers that could otherwise overwhelm her students and lead to their shutting down.

Jordan spoke at length about the use of discussion in his classroom. He stated pointedly, “The most reliable way I have found to generate engagement, absolutely, is circling up the kids and using those really time-honored structures of conversation together.” Jordan’s reference to class discussion in this way reveals its deeply human, elegantly simple nature. He elaborated, saying that:

Giving students that time to connect their own experiences and thoughts and everything else to a text, and then having time to listen to everyone else, and then to share. That’s the most reliable way I have found [to generate engagement].

According to Jordan’s assessment, this act of conversation is one that students are reliably eager to join. Because discussion is, as Jordan says, a space for students to engage with their “own experiences and thoughts” in relation to a text, the discussion’s ends cannot be predetermined. Until the discussion is happening, no teacher, or administrator, or textbook author can know what shape it will take, and they certainly cannot prescribe its outcome. A discussion that welcomes multiple voices in the way that Jordan describes contrasts with typically monologic classroom structures in which questions and answers are “prescript[ed]” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 12). In these prescripted, finalized contexts, the student’s role is not so much to engage but to get, or guess at, the “right” answer (Nystrand, 1997, p. 8). In an unfinishable discussion’s space of becoming, students are invited to show up and to practice literary presence by contributing as themselves.
Nicole highlighted this idea of students showing up as themselves in their own voices as an undercurrent in her description of class discussion. She began by explaining how she sets up reading discussion, telling me:

With my traditional class a lot of times if we’re reading something that’s a little bit beyond their reading level, we might be reading it out loud and then I’ll stop and pause and I’ll be like, “So what do we think is going on here?” or “Why is this happening?” And then we’ll bounce, you know, the students will give me some responses and then [say] why.

She then offered a specific example of what shape such a discussion might take:

When we were reading *The Crucible* they all had parts …, and I would be like, ‘Well why is Abigail doing this? OK, remember, Abigail’s not even in this scene! But why is this even happening? We don’t even see Abigail in Act III, but all of Act III really is all about her drama, so why is all of this going down? Well, because Abigail just thinks that she can get with John. So we talk a lot about character motivation and things like that, and they use that to inform their reading of the characters and then talk about like, well how is that going to impact what’s going to happen next …. Like, some of them will say, “She’s gonna say that he cheated” and then they’re like, “No, she’s not gonna say that because then who’s gonna be her husband? They’re gonna kill him. Adultery’s a hangin’ error!”

I want to first acknowledge that the above is not a transcription of the class discussion, but rather a transcription of Nicole’s recounting of it, and is therefore necessarily filtered through her perspective as the teacher and not a participant. Nevertheless, Nicole’s use of phrases like “all about her drama,” “going down,” “get with,” and “gonna say that he cheated,” indicate a welcoming of informal language, an invitation that likely extends to vernaculars other than just the one Nicole’s paraphrase demonstrates. Nicole does not, according to this narration, expect students to use stiff and stilted academic English in their analysis of *The Crucible*: she invites them, instead, to enter this dialogue as themselves, in their primary Discourses (Gee 2012), or something close to it. In classroom discussions that welcome vernacular phrases like “all about her drama” and “get with,” students know that they can share their thoughts without first translating their own ways of expressing themselves into the standard, academic forms in which
they are perhaps not yet fluent. Inviting students to participate in discussion as themselves means allowing them to use their own voices, not a voice that is external and imposed.

For the students who were in Nicole’s classes at the historically Black high school where she taught, these opportunities to speak as themselves, and for their identities and Discourses to be affirmed as valuable, are especially important (Nystrand, 1997; Rodriguez, 2021; Lee, 2004). Carol Lee writes that when students like Nicole’s “enter traditional classrooms, they are often stepping into tripartite territory where they must negotiate the official disciplinary language …, the community-based language through which they communicate, and their individual ways of crafting language use” (2004, p.131). Lee refers to the navigation of these multiple Discourses as double-voiced in the Bakhtinian sense, emphasizing the function of utterances as equal parts responsive to preceding utterances and unique to the speaker. In a similarly double-voiced way, Nicole pairs her invitation to students to speak as themselves with high expectations for their learning and literacy development: her objectives here include practicing the ability to read characters and their motivations and to make text-based inferences and predictions. By honoring the inherently double-voiced nature of language, Nicole communicates to her students that they can speak as themselves and also engage with and respond to the language of Arthur Miller that they find in *The Crucible*.

Nicole’s approach, further, gives her students the chance to “try on” (Landay, 2004) the language of Arthur Miller’s characters in their reading of the play and, if they so choose, when they cite evidence to support their points in the discussion. Nicole told me that the opportunity to “act out” scenes from the assigned reading is a common feature in her classroom for performance texts like plays and also for novels. She explained her use of this strategy:

Sometimes I’ll have them stand up and act it out in the front of the room, so it gets—all of the kids are paying attention when there’s people standing up …. And also I feel like
the people reading get more into it, and then they start pointing and yelling at the other person. There’s just more engagement in whatever you’re doing when you’re standing up. And you get more invested in the dialogue when they’re acting the things out than if you’re just sitting there reading in your desk.

Nicole’s approach extends beyond “trying on” words from the text to embodying them more broadly. Treating the Discourses invited into the classroom through the selected texts as accessible and available for student use acknowledges the presence of multiple voices in the classroom. Further, it continues to center the Bakhtinian notions that language develops its meaning in use and that all of our words were someone else’s first, present in the unrepeatable utterances which precede ours: words become ours when we use them in our own unrepeatable utterances, and they become someone else’s next. Through the marriage of these two approaches, letting students participate as themselves in their own voices and to engage in the act of “trying on,” Nicole powerfully positions “students and their discourses [as] resources rather than liabilities, in which they work productively on the boundaries between the canonical and the vernacular” (Landay, 2004, p. 124).

**Discussion Protocols**

It bears repeating that unfinalizable learning spaces are not without boundaries. In fact, pedagogical strategies that do not establish frames and guardrails for students not only lead to confusion but can create conditions that are unsafe. The use of protocols in the context of facilitating a class discussion is important for establishing expectations and boundaries. When implemented thoughtfully, discussion protocols do not function as imposing structures; rather, they protect and keep sacred the unfinalizable spaces that they hold.

One such protocol that Katherine employs asks students to come to the reading discussion with “points of confusion” and “golden lines” from their assigned text. Points of confusion, she explained, can address the questions that students found themselves asking about
the text, or moments where they recognized that they did not understand what was going on. For a quotation from the text to be a “golden line,” the selector has to be able to articulate why the quotation is important. Katherine described her use of the strategy and the way it guides and shapes her students’ reading discussion:

I start off each reading discussion with points of confusion and then golden lines. So they have to tell me what they’re confused about, and, honestly, they get all of the discussion questions that I would have otherwise asked by doing those two things usually. And then we talk about their points of confusion, [and] I usually don’t have to say anything—they are like, “Oh no, this is where that happened, you got—” and so it’s very organic. And then the golden lines—everybody drops one either in the chat box[11] or we say it out loud. And I’ll pick like, five that we talk about in depth. And again, those are usually—that does the trick. They get the most important parts, and if not then I have a couple of golden lines cued up that I’ll be like, “What about this one?” And that usually gets us to the key things.

Katherine described the discussion that results inside this protocol as “organic,” or, put another way, alive and becoming. Katherine also reflected here that her learning objectives regarding the students’ understanding of the text are not sacrificed for the sake of opening up an unfinalized space for dialogue: rather, they are met as a product of conversation, of the responses that students offer one another. The “organic” nature of the process she described here is inherently embedded in the act of dialogue, of learning that is allowed to be collaborative, social, and expansive.

Katherine later reflected on how engagement with this process has impacted her students’ writing, particularly their ability to make inferences about a text. She explained:

I feel like that [starting discussion with points of confusion and golden lines] has been helpful in getting them to being able to analyze literature more so than if I give them a discussion question. Because with the discussion questions I was always like, “Alright, so, tell me how this character changes and then give me a piece of textual evidence.” And so they were always kind of—it is what I was asking them to do in writing, but the inference piece was always present, and then they kind of had to backfill, they weren’t ever sure. The evidence piece was always a little weak, or they just wouldn’t have a quote

By shifting from pre-drafted discussion questions to this points of confusion and golden lines protocol, Katherine positions the students themselves as the first respondents to the text. Katherine’s reference to the students’ “more logical flow of ideas” reflects Lucille’s perspective on allowing her students to “talk out” their ideas. In both contexts, the students’ analyses and their arguments become their own, born out of their own observations and reactions. In scaffolding the development of their students’ literary character in this way, Katherine and Lucille support their confident use of the tools of literacy to make and support arguments.

In his comments on discussion protocols, Jordan compared several he had tried throughout his teaching career. His reflections highlight the possible pitfalls of debate protocols, particularly ones in which students move to various sides of the room according to whether they agree or disagree with certain positions. He pointed out to me that, “If you’re introducing texts that are relevant and matter to kids, there’re going to be a lot of things that shouldn’t be really up for debate.” He told me that he had grown resistant to a protocol that resulted in students “visually making this representation of like, who is affirming of X identity.” He has come to prefer, instead, processes that communicate to his students that, “We’re not trying to debate or to win, but we’re just listening to each other and practicing that.”

Jordan attributed this shift in his classroom approach to his involvement with Humanities Amped, the nonprofit organization through which he and I met. He told me:

That circle structure that Humanities Amped teaches I have found to be helpful in all kinds of contexts, not just culture building or setting norms or resolving conflicts, but also just academically. Like, the protocol [where] we’ll sit in a circle and take turns and listen and build.
I am deeply familiar, as a practitioner, with the process he referenced here. The circle process he described is a restorative justice practice, one that provides intentional, dedicated space to each voice in the group. Restorative practices, generally speaking, center the building and maintenance of relationships among members of a particular community (Clifford, 2013; Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). At Humanities Amped, we offer training in facilitating circles as one such way to build classroom community and, at times, to respond collectively to challenges or conflict. When applied as a means to achieve academic outcomes, like Jordan mentioned, circles can do the powerful double work of giving students space to engage with not only an assigned text but with one another.

The Humanities Amped circle guidelines (Fig. 3.1), adapted from Amos Clifford’s *Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles* (2013), include the expectations that participants speak from the heart, listen from the heart, and speak one at a time. In our work with students and teachers, we have found that these guidelines help to establish a collaborative space marked by both trust and courage. We have also found that circles, through their physical, equal positioning of participants, can disrupt the traditional power dynamics that center teachers as holders and distributors of all the valid knowledge and experience in the room (Cooper & Gist, 2021). Especially in circles where turns proceed sequentially, by making it clear that each participant is entitled to speaking time that is reserved for them and them alone, and during which all others are responsible only for listening, the circle protocol makes space for voices that are often silent in discussions that are less structured. This commitment to sharing the space, and to listening deeply to one another, helps to develop community through the promise of being known, not overlooked, in the classroom. Inside the structure of a reading discussion circle, each
student is recognized as an individual and is invited to contribute their own unique thoughts and responses to the effort of collaborative textual response.

![Circle Guidelines](image)

**Figure 3.1. Circle Guidelines**

The positioning provided by Katherine’s and Jordan’s protocols contrasts sharply with the role students are expected to assume under the oppressive structures of mandated curricula and high-stakes testing. Under a system built on these elements, a student’s personal response to the text is of little consequence compared to the “right answer” as defined by the test makers. Because the topic at hand is, fundamentally, about whether the students in our classrooms are humanized or objectified, it is important here to differentiate between “authentic discourse” and
“pseudo-discourse,” or recitation that masquerades as dialogue (Nystrand, 1997, p. 72). The distinction lies in the difference between a student thinking for themself as opposed to reporting on the thinking of another (p. 72), or the difference between remembering and reflecting (p. 91). Authentic discourse is also marked by authentic questions, or “questions for which the asker has not prespecified an answer” (p. 38). Authentic questions stand apart from questions designed to test comprehension and recall (the sort that most often show up on assessments). Nystrand et al., (1997) write pointedly that, “Authentic questions invite students to contribute something new to the discussion that can change or modify it in some way” (p. 38). Authentic questions reflect the development and expansion of lines, or chains, of inquiry, which mark the presence of literary pursuit in the classroom. This definition emphasizes the organic nature of authentic discussions, to borrow a description from both Katherine and my instructor at governor’s school. The organic possibility of classroom life, when held against the culture of test preparation, underscores the deadness inherent in the latter. For teachers who seek to resist the encroachment of “death in the classroom” (Ladson-Billings, 2014), we must ask ourselves who (or what) is at the center of our curriculum: our students and their learning, or the answers to our test questions.

**Student-Generated Questions and the Act of Creation**

Several of the teachers I interviewed cited their use of student-generated questions as an influential aspect of the discussions they facilitate. Esther, who at the time of her interview was teaching government and economics (as well as some electives) at Alberti in the ninth year of her teaching career, referred to this shift as allowing the students to participate in an act of creation together. She described her use of reading discussions as an opportunity for students to engage in “processing” and “making the connections” in response to the texts she assigns about governmental and economic theory. She explained, “changing it to being about them creating
the questions and those questions then guiding the conversation, and they could kind of build it from wherever they wanted to go, that’s their product.” By allowing student-generated questions to drive dialogue, Esther sets herself up for a series of outcomes that are “unique and never-repeatable” (KFP, p.40), that are different class to class and year to year. Even though the John Locke and Karl Marx texts she assigns may remain the same, the various students’ responses inside such a structure cannot be predicted. Esther’s own relationship to the texts, as she facilitates these discussions, is likely itself ever in the process of becoming, no doubt reshaped by each students’ thoughts and contributions.

Isabella described her use of a scaffolding structure that categorizes questions at three levels. She explained:

With my 9th and 10th grade students, I walk through [how] there’s a level one question, where if it’s like, “What color is the sky?” there is one correct answer, we can go and find it. And then there’s a level two question: it’s in the text, but it’s more about the text, you can’t necessarily go in and find it, there can be more than one correct answer. And then a level three is about the themes but not about the characters of plot or anything specific. So like, “Is jealousy ever justified?”

Through this framework, Isabella is able to support her students’ creation of their discussions. This unfinalized space, again, is not without parameters. Isabella reflected on other boundaries she likes to set up around conversations she facilitates, explaining that, “I like to keep it at a discussion so that it’s not like, ‘You’re wrong, this character sucks.’” Even when the students direct the conversation toward a debate, as she described here, she views this as still valuable:

But if that’s where it goes, then I always think that’s positive, too. They’re still really passionate. That means that the characters are well written. If it gets heated, we kind of talk about like, why do we have different opinions? That means, you know, this really struck something with us. Good books don’t tell us how to feel.

Isabella describe here a flexible relationship to her discussion structures, one that recognizes discussion’s organic nature and allows for it to grow into unpredictable shapes.
Dara, who teaches at Alberti with Katherine and Esther, described her use of leveled scaffolding to support students’ development of questions. At the time of her interview, Dara was in her fifth year of teaching and had spent the majority of that time at Alberti. Dara explained that she set up reading discussions in her classroom according to what she was seeking to measure: if critical thinking is in the assessment mix, she asks the students to “make their own questions.” Similar to Isabella’s approach, Dara supports this question drafting with the level structure. Much like Esther, Dara described the resulting “informal discussions” as an act of creation, as well as a source of joy for her:

Those [informal discussions] are my favorite. And I think that they get onto their own groove, and I find it way more interesting than any question that I can create. And they start pulling in their personal experiences, and I think that it just—when you look out onto the class, it’s like they’re building a little community on their own, and you’re not really having to do that. And I like that it’s student-centered and, you know, they are the ones sharing those intimate experiences that they’ve had, especially with things like Just Mercy where they do talk about experiencing racism and you’re like, thank you so much for sharing that. And, you know, I love it when they open up in a very informal way, and I don’t think that they can … in like, a discussion post or in just giving me what I want to hear on the questions that I make for them. They don’t expand like they do in person.

For Dara, a student-centered learning experience is one in which students can use conversation about a text to negotiate identities (Reeb-Reascos, 2016) by “pulling in their personal experiences” and in which she, as the teacher, is not the primary builder of what results. Compared to more formalized spaces for expression, like a discussion post or a conversation framed by inauthentic questions with predetermined answers, Dara sees the reading discussions she facilitates as encouraging expansion rather than restricting response.

In our conversation, Dara also reflected on the challenges she faces as a teacher when it comes to facilitating discussion. For one, when students enter a reading discussion without having completed the assigned reading, the discussion, necessarily, is negatively impacted since students cannot respond to a text they have not read. Dara described the impossibility of “really
get[ting] into what they think about it” when students have not first read the text that she expects them to engage with. Katherine likewise reflected on this challenge, explaining that she uses reading quizzes “to measure did they read or not” so that she might establish “a baseline in order to proceed with discussion.” She added, “If they’re not reading, I need to do something differently, otherwise the discussions aren’t going to work.” Dara told me she sometimes uses the strategy of reading altogether in class to mitigate this effect of students not reading on their own.

When I asked her what assessment looks like in the context of these “informal discussions,” Dara told me:

I think that is something that I still am working on. Because it is kind of—it can get to a point where I feel like those informal discussions are going so good, but then I realize, oh god, only, like, six kids are talking and everyone else is listening. So I think that those kind of things are things I’m continuing to work on and develop to just make sure that, you know, I might be having a good time, but making sure that everybody is engaged and that I’m also working at the same time, not just having a discussion. … I don’t always, and this is something that I have mixed feelings about, but I don’t always call on people during those big discussions. I don’t ever say like, [to one student], what did you think about [this other student’s] point? I don’t love doing that.

Dara’s reflective comments provide a glimpse into the disconnect that often exists between a teacher’s perspective on an unfinalized learning space and, potentially, the students’. It also reveals, though, Dara’s commitment to stepping outside of her own viewpoint to consider what alternative experiences her students might be having. She also mentions her own process of continual becoming, of “still working on” her approaches to assessment when it comes to these informal discussions. Dara’s point that “just having a discussion” might not line up exactly with “working at the same time” is an interesting one: it positions her in a role apart from the students, not as a participant with them. This distinction raises questions about the teacher’s role in holding unfinalizable spaces, a topic we will consider more deeply in the chapter five.
This issue of discussion participation can sometimes be addressed by dividing the whole class into smaller discussion groups. Speaking aloud to a smaller audience can sometimes feel less intimidating than addressing an entire room and may encourage otherwise reluctant speakers to share.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, alternating between whole-class and small-group discussion structures is important for meeting students’ various needs. In both large and small group contexts, the circle strategy Jordan referenced can likewise encourage reluctant speakers by clearly designating space for each voice. When circle responses proceed sequentially, each individual has a moment with the talking piece and the choice to either speak or pass. Often students who pass initially will choose to speak later in the discussion, once they hear from others and develop trust in the structure. Jordan identified the need for attention to classroom culture generally in order to establish spaces that are affirming of each students’ voice. Structures like circles can provide some of this important groundwork.

For Dara, her positionality as discussion facilitator and sense of responsibility within that position is certainly at the forefront of her teaching considerations. In our conversation we discussed the challenges she faced transitioning from teaching 7th graders to seniors when she began working at Alberti, and about how her age and lack of experience with several pieces of curricular content made her first year difficult. We will explore these reflections more deeply in the final chapter, but for now we will focus on the influence of fear as a challenge in the context of class discussion.

Much of our conversation centered around Dara’s work with \textit{Just Mercy}, a nonfiction text by attorney and Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson that considers the deep and

\textsuperscript{12} Dara noted, though, that, “One of the things that’s difficult about them talking about it [a text] in little pods is that they have to read. So it can be kind of hit or miss. If some of them don’t read, then it’s only really one person carrying the whole conversation.”
persistent inequities in the United States justice system. Stevenson’s work focuses primarily on how these injustices impact Black Americans (as well as other marginalized groups) and deals with many deeply troubling but important topics. We began using Just Mercy in the senior curriculum during my third year at Alberti,\(^{13}\) and Dara inherited the book as part of the curriculum when she assumed the teaching position I once held. I asked Dara to elaborate on some initial concerns she described having about using this particular text in class. She told me, “When I read that book I was like, ‘How am I gonna teach this?’” She described feeling “nervous to say the wrong thing,” and mentioned her knowledge of teachers who have been involved in lawsuits as a reason for this feeling.

We can attribute Dara’s worries, at least in part, to the inherently unpredictable nature of unfinalizable spaces generally and reading discussions in particular: when teachers allow their fears about unknown outcomes to force them into reclaiming control, and when they lack confidence in the content they are teaching, they are more likely to resort to pedagogical strategies that are more predictable and less dynamic (Williamson, 2013; Basmadjian, 2008). The challenges associated with the unpredictable elements of reading discussion extend even to the level of teacher preparation. For instance, novice teachers, in their own schooling experiences, have not necessarily been exposed to unfinalized discussion spaces (Basmadjian, 2008), and unpredictability within the conditions of high school classrooms is hard, if not impossible, to simulate (Williamson, 2013). Dara underscored the challenge of facilitation when she described the common experience of realizing that what seemed like a successful discussion is actually being carried by only a few voices. Her reflective analysis reveals a commitment to continuing to

\(^{13}\) Succeeding in getting Just Mercy through the laborious approval process to get it designated as a district-approved text is, to this day, one of the achievements I am most proud of in my life.
grow in her skills as a facilitator, but in a way that seems to be based in her own classroom experiences.

Despite her fears, Dara did teach the book, and not, according to what she told me, in a way framed by high levels of control to mitigate any unanticipated outcomes. When I asked if she would describe the discussions she facilitated as successful, she answered, “Totally. And it was amazing.” She attributed this in part to her commitment to “just really listening to the kids and what they had to say and what their questions were” and “having them create the questions and then being in a big circle and just talking about, ‘What did you think about this chapter?’” Dara highlighted the importance of “leaving it super, super, super open-ended. And then getting into all the things you get into, you know, when you are discussing it.” She also remarked that “I think also like, at Alberti we do have harder conversations and I think that’s a reason why I really enjoy teaching here.” The harder conversations are often the conversations that are the most transformative, and Dara’s willingness to persist in spite of her fear provides her students with learning experiences that give them room to practice deep consideration, listening, and empathy.

**Amplifying Joy**

Within systems that so often produce feelings of deadness for students and teachers, to make space for moments of joy is a radical act. Dara told me that those opportunities “where we read in class and we just talk about it—that’s like, my all-time favorite thing to do.” Dara is not alone in this feeling: Jordan spoke similarly when he told me that circle discussions where students talk out their responses to a text are his “favorite, favorite thing to do as a teacher.” He added that, “those skills of really actively listening and synthesizing a whole roomful of people’s ideas I just think is huge and really inspires me. Like, it’s what I love the most.”
In February of 2018, I made an Instagram post addressed to the Alberti graduating class that reflected sentiments similar to those expressed by Jordan and Dara (Fig. 3.2). In the first lines of the caption I wrote:

Hey 2018, thanks for talking about books with me for the last three years. I understand that it’s part of your grade, but you should know that it is in these discussions that I most clearly remember why I chose this job.

I intended to express here that in those moments of discussion, when we arranged our chairs in an enormous circle, where we were each seen and being seeing by each other and given the space to articulate our infinitely varied responses to a single, shared text, my joy and my work were one and the same. I posted about this experience because I recognized it as a rarity, a feeling to cherish inside of an intensely challenging job that can so easily feel completely deadening.

Figure 3.2. Instagram post about reading discussion
The experiences and reflections of teachers like Dara, Jordan, Lucille, Esther, Katherine and myself demonstrate that classroom life flourishes in unfinalizable spaces like discussion. In fact, the diversity of speech (разноречие, or heteroglossia) inherent in a dialogic, unfinalized whole-class reading discussion reflects those elements of the novel that Bakhtin so celebrated (and, in many cases, the text at the center of such classroom discussions is often a novel). In his “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin considers the misuse of “stylistics” as a method by which to analyze novelistic discourse. Employing a musical metaphor, he likens the application of traditional stylistics in the study of novels to transposing a symphony so that it might be played on the piano: this process collapses a nuanced, layered, multi-voiced composition for expression by one single, isolated instrument (DiN, p. 263). Bakhtin explains that while stylistics might be applicable to single-voiced textual forms like epic poetry, it is ill equipped to address the novel (DiN, p. 266), which he defines as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of language) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (DiN, p. 262).

When educators opt for monologic approaches to the teaching of literature, they effectively collapse symphonies into one single line of melody. Martin Nystrom relates this collapsing effect to the pursuit of “coverage” that has so dominated our approach to schooling. He writes that:

Literature teachers who merely ‘cover the man points’ trivialize literature instruction into sets of poor reading lessons. Classroom discourse that is confined to recitation misses the character of literature; hence, good talk about literature is stifled when the official mode of response is multiple-choice tests and short-answer questions. (1997, p. 106)

When class discussion falls into a series of interactions that follow an “initiation, response, evaluation” pattern (Applebee et al, 2003, p. 689), where a teacher’s initial question is followed by an expected student response which is then evaluated by the teacher, the “discussion” is
nothing more than a thinly veiled version of information transfer. When teachers act as discussion facilitators rather than knowledge gatekeepers, we step out of the oppressive expectation to be “automatons” (Reese, 1995, p. 137) or worse yet “mere functionaries of a system that has no intent on preparing students—particularly urban students of color—for meaningful work and dynamic participation in a democracy” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77). We instead become space-keepers, guardians of dialogic exchange and student expression, and, many times, beneficiaries ourselves, like audience members at the symphony.

**A Call for Cultural Responsiveness**

While the teachers I interviewed felt strongly about the possibilities inside the reading discussions they are having, they also expressed a desire to assign texts that reflected a greater diversity of voices. The reasoning behind these desires followed two complementary lines of thinking: on the one hand, the teachers see a need for more texts that reflect the identities of the students they teach, or, as Isabella put it, “diversifying my texts when I can to match the identities in the classroom.” On the other hand, they also recognized literature as an opportunity for exposure, to support the expansion of their students’ understanding beyond themselves. Isabella connected these thoughts to a training she had engaged in as a member of the Humanities Amped Learning Community:

> I’ve been thinking a lot about last year the speaker they had at the Amped program where she was like, you have to have windows, doors, and … mirrors …. You can see yourself, you can go through it, or see the other side. And I’ve been really trying to incorporate that in all the stuff that we read in my classroom. So giving them texts by and about people of the same race and culture, ethnicity, whatever it is, and then also who are people that aren’t represented?

Isabella was likely referring, here, to a workshop at the 2020 Humanities Amped summer institute led by Lorena Germán, one of the co-founders of #DisruptTexts.
Lorena Germán, along with Tricia Ebarvia, Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres (2020) call for an antiracist expansion of English language arts curricula that is inclusive of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) voices to “address historic violence and the erasure of marginalized communities, resulting in a pathway toward healing for all students” (p. 100). Their work draws on Rudine Sims Bishop’s metaphor of literature’s function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (referenced by Isabella). In Bishop’s metaphor, windows provide a view onto experiences outside of our own, sliding glass doors invite readers into imaginative participation in the stories of others, and mirrors reflect readers’ own experiences, allowing us to see our own lives in a context that expands beyond just ourselves (1990). When we consider the traditional “canon,” those texts most often featured in English language arts classrooms, Bishop’s framing reveals that mirrors, whether physical, cultural, or emotional (Johnson, Koss, & Martinez, 2017), are hard to come by for BIPOC readers. The work of #DisruptTexts seeks to address this injustice.

Jordan spoke at length about his commitment to incorporating texts produced by local youth poets in order to affirm that “texts that we’re creating in our community are just as valid as, and more valid in many cases, than anything else.” He described his use of the local spoken word poem “I-M-A-N-I” as a way to address identity and names with his students. He told me:

That text is very explicitly about having a Black name and having White teachers butcher it in racist ways, and so that cuts at me as well, which I think is a really strong thing to bring up in a day one in a classroom as a White teacher with predominantly students of color. And again, that text is from right here.

He told me that he used this text not only as a way for students to see their own experiences reflected back at them, but as a way to build up empathy in anticipation of reading The Birchbark House, a story with Native American characters by a Native American author. He told me:
We’re gonna do ‘I-M-A-N-I’ as a way to talk about our own names and also all of the different-sounding names and words that we’re going to encounter in this text and how to respond appropriately when a name doesn’t seem familiar to us and those sorts of things.

Importantly, this spoken word poem is a text that Jordan has managed to “sneak in” because he recognizes the literary value it offers his students.

Lucille also expressed a desire to teach more diverse texts so that her students’ experiences might be reflected back to them. She cited the mandated curriculum as a barrier to achieving this goal:

I would like to teach more multicultural and diverse texts, because I find that students, they really enjoy engaging in those. Right now because of the curriculum we do a lot of classical, canonized type literature. … But if I could, it would definitely be something that would be multicultural and diverse. Definitely to fit some of the students and their own lifestyles and characteristics.

Toward the end of the interview, Lucille paired this desire to teach texts reflective of the identities represented in her classroom with a desire to use the study of literature as an avenue for greater exposure to the world, in the way of Bishop’s windows or sliding glass doors. She reiterated to me that, “I think on the diversity and inclusion note that more needs to be done or advocated for” because, as she put it, “exposure is very important, … and I just think for them to be culturally responsive adults or teens that they need to actually be introduced and in some way engage with it.” Lucille’s call is one toward responsibility, and she situates English class as a space in which students might be invited into this responsibility.

Nicole grounded the ways she would like to use more diverse texts within the scope of 11th grade American Literature. She explained:

I primarily in high school have taught 11th grade, so that is American Lit, it’s gonna be about America. But even within American Lit, there’s not much outside of the colonizer and imperialist perspective. You don’t really get a lot of the Native American writings, or the writings of the people who are not the people in power. Like, that doesn’t really exist. You might get that one excerpt with the piece of Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or maybe a poem from Phyllis Wheatly they’ll throw in there in the beginning,
and then it’s like nothing happens with Black people again ‘til the Civil War and then they’re just slaves, and then we gloss over that. And then we don’t talk about them again until the Civil Rights movement, if you ever make it that far.

Here, Nicole emphasizes the ways in which the writings and experiences of Black Americans are traditionally excluded from the curriculum’s assigned texts, or, rather, how the experiences that are included seem curated in the service of checking a diversity box in the name of “culturally relevant” teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014). For her students at historically Black Frazier High School, and for herself, this means a lack of engagement with texts by and about their own culture and heritages.

When BIPoC students are asked to engage with a set of texts that do not include mirrors, their role, implicitly and explicitly, becomes one of assimilation into the system that was built to frame White, middle-class culture and Discourses as standard. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) calls for a shift to culturally sustaining pedagogy, one that positions students “as subjects rather than objects” (p. 77). Culturally relevant texts, then, must be more than a means to “hook students, only to draw them back into the same old hegemonic, hierarchical structures” (p. 82). That is, including texts that act as mirrors is a necessary but insufficient shift: positioning students as subjects rather than objects in classroom spaces means inviting them into participation as contributors in a way that not only acknowledges but honors their varieties of expertise, experiences, cultural understandings, and voices.

Like Isabella, Jordan, and Lucille, Nicole paired her analysis with a call for exposure to the experiences of other non-dominant groups. She went on to say:

But that totally even ignores everything else, right? They don’t talk about any of the immigrants coming, really, over to this country at Ellis Island, they don’t talk about anything that’s going on on the West Coast with people coming in from China and Japan and the Asian Pacific at Angel Island—there’s nothing of that. They don’t really talk about the Japanese internment. When I taught the Holocaust and paired my Holocaust unit with a book on the Japanese internment, it blew my kids’ minds. They were like,
“That never happened.” I was like, “Baby, I grew up in California. These camps were by my house. I promise you it was real.” So it’s like—they have no idea.

Nicole identified here specific gaps in the curriculum that, if allowed to persist, represent a threat to our collective historical knowledge. Nicole sees her English class, and the literature she assigns, as an opportunity to fill in this gap by providing students with texts that function not only as mirrors but as windows and sliding glass doors.

In an interview with R. Joseph Rodriguez, Tricia Ebarvia framed the value of literary windows by explaining that, “We are not preparing students for the world as it is and should be if we are not also supporting them to understand others who may not necessarily share their lived experiences” (2021, p. 26). Nancy J. Johnson, Melanie D. Koss, and Miriam Martinez (2017) describe a student’s experience with a literary window as inherently additive, writing that, “When books are windows, readers walk away with more than they brought to the book. They learn something new about the world beyond the one they know” (p. 572). They expand this analysis to highlight the transformational value of literary sliding glass doors, noting that the key difference between the experience of these texts and those that serve as windows is that “the reader is changed by the book” (p. 572). These changes, they explain, lead to action in the world. Importantly, they identify well-facilitated discussion as a key element of engagement with sliding glass door texts.

**Conclusion**

Inside Isabella’s, Lucille’s, Jordan’s, and Nicole’s reflections are the promise of English language arts classes: dedicated space to collaboratively engage with narratives that make the world accessible to students, that challenge their thinking, and that give a landing place for, and words to, their own experiences. Under the best circumstances, students’ engagement with these narratives is transformational, not only to learning and understanding but to responsibility.
Mandated curricula make delivering on this promise challenging, but that is by no means the only barrier. Nicole and Dara both named the financial limitations that make purchasing class sets of novels difficult. Dara and Katherine both identified that even when a teacher is given the freedom to choose their own texts, their professional (i.e., compensated) time and attention is often drawn elsewhere.

At the conclusion of her interview, Katherine, who also recognizes the need to incorporate more diverse and relevant texts into her project-based learning curriculum, confessed:

I feel so overwhelmed by having to choose texts for students to read. There’s so much out there, and … there’s not enough time in the day for me to read all of the things, all of the possibilities, obviously, … and it’s just really hard to zero in on the thing that I should be investing their time in.

In a follow-up e-mail, I reflected Katherine’s statement back to her and wrote:

It is clear that you ARE making a point of seeking out new texts to introduce, and you’re doing it in a way that’s really thoughtful despite how overwhelming it is. So my follow up question for you is why? Why is it important to you to take so much care in choosing texts?

In her response she wrote, “I want them [the students] to see themselves in the literature we read.” She also explained:

I want students to read. I want them to want to read. If they don’t read, it is always partially on me- I didn’t make it accessible enough, exciting enough, relevant enough… And if the book I select leads to them thinking they aren’t a good reader or that they don’t like reading, then I have failed!

Katherine’s response not only captures the nuances of her role as a facilitator of learning and participatory literacy, but also an important key to the success of an unfinalized learning space like a reading discussion: if the students do not read, if they do not share a common grounding in the text to be discussed, the discussion becomes something other than a responsive opportunity to practice participatory literacy.
Katherine’s choice to share in the responsibility of her students’ relationship with reading, rather than to blame the student for their failure to engage, is a powerful disruption of the persistent lament among educators that students just don’t read. Her analysis turns our attention from what we might term laziness or lack of drive to the relevance of what we are asking students to spend their time doing. If we want them to believe that their learning experiences are meaningful, we must make them meaningful. If we succeed, genuine inquiry is sure to follow.

The next chapter will turn to student creativity and creation as a responsive act. We will continue to explore how literary presence blooms into literary pursuits and literary character when students are given space to respond authentically, through “action and reflection … upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 52). We will consider various forms of response that have a life beyond the classroom walls, that center student voice as valid and valuable and their action as meaningful. In a classroom framed by unfinalizability, the text is not the end; it serves, rather, as a dialogic launching point, an utterance in a chain whose responsive links belong to the students. It asks, “Now that we have read this text together, what is our response? What might we do?” It invites students to pose and solve problems, to consider how they might act in ways that influence the world, and to tell their own unfinalized stories.
CHAPTER 4. CREATIVE RESPONSIBILITY: MULTIMODALITY, PROJECT-BASED LEARNING, AND ACTION RESEARCH

Old houses were scaffolding once
and workmen whistling.
—T.E. Hulme
“Image” (c. 1910)

I first read this poem by T.E. Hulme in the literature anthology that I carried around the summer I attended governor’s school (and every year since: each time I have moved to a new city, the volume has moved with me). When I taught senior English at Alberti, I used this poem as one of the grounding texts for our discussion of imagery in the “To Tell a Story” project. The minimum length for the students’ creative fiction assignment was half a page, and I find this poem to be an incredibly effective demonstration of how much can be said in only a few words. I also used this poem in class because I love it, and, for me, there is much joy in sharing what I love with my students. It is an act that allows me to be myself, separate from the performance that teaching so easily becomes.

Hulme begins with a familiar object, one easy to imagine: old houses. He then invites his reader to time travel, telling us that these old houses were, once, entirely contained in the framework that enabled their construction, the temporary structures surrounding what would eventually become each anticipated (now old) house. Hulme’s past tense form of “to be” does us one better after the line break: these old houses were not only “scaffolding once,” but also, we are perhaps surprised to learn, “workmen whistling.” Our time traveling suddenly brings us face to face with living people and their manipulation of breath into song. Perhaps they work—they are, after all, “workmen,” and if the houses have aged they must have first been built—but they also make music for the simple, joyful sake of it. We meet them, and for a moment we see and hear them in the soft alliteration of the poem’s last two words (and in the final articulation of the
letter S, a sound that itself mimics whistling). Then the poem ends: we return to the present, and the houses are, again, just old houses.

The assignments we assess as part of our coursework were scaffolding once, and, sometimes, students whistling. Or chatting, or laughing, or whispering, or crying. In unfinalizable classrooms, students are engaged in building something, and their learning occurs in this part of the work that is alive and unfinished. It is to this act of building, of *doing* in the classroom that we turn to now, the act of responsible creation. It is in this act of doing (not the act of test-taking) that students draw their knowledge and understanding and literary encounters up from off the page and into the world. In his 1919 essay “Art and Responsibility,” Bakhtin writes that, “Art and life are not one, but should become unified in me, in the singularity of my responsibility.” (IiO). When we give our students opportunities to create, we invite them into responsibility, into dialogue through the answers they speak (or write, or draw, or construct) in response to what they read.

Further, when we ask students to create we give them space to develop their skills in context rather than isolation. In *Experience and Education* (1938/1998), John Dewey laments the decontextualized learning experiences inherent in the traditional schooling structures of his time (a feature which, unfortunately, persists). He writes that when the goal is simply to “pass examinations” (p. 48), the ultimate usefulness of learning is undercut. He writes that when learning is decontextualized, understanding is “put, as it were, in a water-tight compartment … and hence is so disconnected from the rest of experience that it is not available under the actual conditions of life” (p. 48-49). Nearly a century later, Gholnecsar Muhammad (2020) addresses the ongoing problem of decontextualization in her Historically Responsive Literacy framework. She writes that skills, one component of the framework, should not be taught in isolation, but
rather “alongside other pursuits” (p. 96). Reflecting the problem of inaccessible knowledge expressed by Dewey, she writes that, “Students need the skills to access the knowledge learned; otherwise, knowledge is a confused mass without useful application” (p. 97). She pairs this discussion of skills and application with the pursuit of intellectualism, another component of the framework. She writes that, “When students develop intellectualism, they can express their ideas, work through justice-centered solutions to the world’s problems, and expand their mental capacities” (p. 104). In short, “intelligence is connected to action” (p. 104).

In this chapter, we will consider student action and creation as manifestations of responsibility. While I continue to position unfinalizability as a precondition for the expression of responsibility, I will also discuss pedagogical approaches, namely project-based learning and participatory action research, as learning structures that carve out generative space for creative responsibility. Importantly, the participatory literacy practices I address here are not verbal, written practices only. Rather, these literacy practices result in multimodal compositions that reflect those texts and expressions that comprise communication in the world, not just in the English language arts classroom as we have come to reductively define it.

**Unfinalizable Learning Experiences and Student Creativity**

In their discussions of student creativity, the teachers I interviewed often referred to ideas of freedom and choice as fundamental prerequisites. Such expansive opportunity to pursue one’s own lines of inquiry, to create something new and unanticipated and never-repeatable, certainly, for students, carries with it an element of risk that can be overwhelming or frightening. Despite these challenges, though, the teachers consistently identified opportunities for creativity as not only the learning experiences that generate the most engagement but the ones that they themselves most enjoy assessing.
For some teachers, offering opportunities for creativity looks like offering choice. Nicole and Lucille, for instance, described their use of “menus” to present their students with multiple options to express their understanding. This critical opportunity to exercise agency by making any choice at all (Germán, 2020) contrasts strongly with the one-size-fits-all nature of mandated curricula. Lucille told me that her menus included choices like art projects or music products as avenues through which her students could demonstrate their knowledge. Nicole described a genre project she assigned when she was teaching eighth graders, explaining that the various options she gave to her students to show their understanding included journal entries, poetry, or other forms of writing. She cited one student’s work, telling me, “One girl picked arranged marriages, and she presented it as a wedding cake, and inside of the little wedding cake were recipes and journal entries and letters and poems.” Nicole and Isabella both identified and celebrated that, as a result of providing students with various options, they escaped the monotony inherent in, as Isabella put it, “grad[ing] the same thing over and over again.” She added, “If they’re all writing the exact same essay on the exact same topic it gets super boring to read.” Nicole added to her expression of a similar position that she is most interested in grading work that allows students to demonstrate their own interests.

For some students, the opportunity to choose how to express their understanding creates an unfinalized space big enough to encourage the kind of creative flourishing that has the capacity to authentically surprise and delight. Lucille described one such instance:

I had a student, she was an excellent artist. And what she loved was anime. And so whenever I would ask her to respond, I mean, she was OK with video and written assignments. But I just found [that] when she was able to use that skill she really excelled. In fact, one of her projects I actually kept because I was included in the project. They had to do this ABC autobiography and she used watercolor and she did all of these beautiful cards and one of them was Mrs. Carter for C. And so I thought that was so neat. … And I really enjoyed that.
I asked Lucille how she navigated assessing a submission that was very different from the others she received. She told me that she leaves a part of her rubric open-ended and gives herself the flexibility to make note of and give credit for the students’ creativity. She told me, “Normally somebody probably would be like, ‘OK, this is great but you didn’t do it within the format I asked.’ Then no, I open that up to be where it’s a little bit of leeway.” Lucille’s flexibility on grading for format compliance ensures that students are not discouraged from creative expression but are rather encouraged to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding and thoughts in ways that are authentic to their own voices. The unfinalizability within her assignment is paired, strategically, with an element of unfinalizability in her grading process.

Isabella emphasized the fundamental role of creativity in her classroom and her use of options to generate both creativity and engagement. She also reflected pointedly on the challenges associated with the element of risk that is wrapped up in creativity. When I asked how important student creativity was in her classroom, she told me, “I feel like it’s probably one of the most important things in my classroom,” and explained that, “I try and give them as many opportunities to be creative in whatever way they feel comfortable” because “I want them to always feel safe.” She balanced this need for safety with a desire for her students to take “risks of being creative, of showing off things if they’re willing to.” Isabella’s comments underscore the challenge of creativity, highlighting its inherent riskiness.

For students as well as teachers, fear of these risks is connected to the unknown, the unpredictable, the unfinalizable, especially since these open spaces appear infrequently within the structures of schooling. In Isabella’s words, “The freedom of anything at all can be really scary for students and teachers.” Isabella explained that while “school can be anything, it doesn’t just have to be yes and no answers and taking notes,” that “a lot of the students are like, but
that’s the only thing I’ve ever had. There has to be one correct answer.” Isabella added that these assumptions often manifest as students thinking, for instance, “Just ‘cause I think something, the author obviously wants us to think something else.” Isabella even goes so far as to say, “If you think outside the box it’s punished, you know, in other places.” This student assumption that there must be one right answer follows strictly in line with the implicit (and explicit) message of standardized tests, and the culture surrounding them. As Isabella described, for students the process of school often looks like, “We come in, we don’t talk, we take our notes, we take our test, we have to memorize the words or the dates.” A student’s privileging what the “author obviously wants us to think” over what they actually think, and their reluctance to intellectually extend beyond what’s given, reflects the message of schooling structures that inherently devalue student voice and perspective.

Isabella is committed, even still, to carving out unfinalizable spaces for student creativity in her classroom. One way she does this is by providing choice. In her experience, she has found that choice generates both creativity and engagement:

To me I think that the ones [responsive assignments] that create the most [student engagement] are the ones with the most options. And so giving students the most amount of freedom to where they feel the most comfortable. Where, you know, you can do a dance, you can write a poem in response to this thing. You can write an essay if you want to. You can create a dress or a book jacket. Whatever it is where whatever they feel their strongest suit, or their strongest skill, is they can show it off while also incorporating whatever they’re responding to. I always find those to be the ones where the kids get the most into it. And they get really creative, too …. I did something like that with my students … when I was teaching 11th grade. … I told them they could do anything they wanted to [in order] to show that they understood … Southern Gothic literature. And I was like, you can choose any of the texts and then do anything with that text, and they got really creative.

In the context of an assignment like the one Isabella described here, the responses will be as unique as the students themselves, reflective of their own talents as well as their own dialogic responses to the assigned texts. Isabella’s students are positioned here to recognize that, “that
which can be done by [them] can never be done by anyone else” (KFP, p. 40), an experience which differs significantly from aiming to turn in test responses that exactly match those reflected in the answer key.

Isabella pointed out that offering an abundance of choices to students must come alongside abundant support. She explained:

There’s always those kids where that kind of paralyzes them, like, “Oh, it’s too many choices.” And that’s a one-on-one conversation I have with kids where it’s like, I can tell, we’re day two and you haven’t picked anything you want to do yet, you haven’t turned in your plan assignment. And I always try and do it in steps so they’re still being held responsible and accountable for each part of it. And so I’ll check in with the kids throughout and if I know a kid’s like, “This is too much freedom, I can’t figure it out,” I’ll give them three options. I’m like, “OK. It seems like you’re interested in these three kind of things, let’s kind of brainstorm together. How could we make this a comic book, or how could we make it this thing?”

Here Isabella emphasized the role of scaffolding to support unfinalized learning experiences, or the structures and boundaries she puts in place to support her students’ work. She described, firstly, that she must pay close attention to her students and their engagement with various benchmarks. She described breaking the one large outcome down into smaller, more manageable goals, and she described how she employs her knowledge of the students as individuals in support of their decision making. She told me that she sometimes frames these check-ins by:

hav[ing] them just list off stuff that they like. What are your interests when you go home from school? … If you could do anything in my class right now, would you watch a movie on your phone? Would you listen to music? … So could you write a song about this?

Through these questions, Isabella centers the student and their talents and skills, their unique state of being “actual and irreplaceable” (KFP, p. 41). Further, she socially situates their literacy practice, validating their out-of-school engagement with texts as worth bringing into the classroom. None of these strategies diminish or reduce the unfinalizable nature of the assignment: her students are still free to craft their responses as they choose. She applies these
structures for the sake of the safety that makes taking risks possible, not as a means of oppression.

Like Lucille, Isabella uses rubrics to assess her students’ work. She described, also, giving each student personalized written feedback in addition to a numerical grade. She provides this feedback not just once the work is complete, but throughout the process, assessing the smaller scaffolded steps that she described. These assessment strategies demonstrate to her students that she values their work and is, indeed, willing to honor what they create. Isabella reflected that despite the persistence of barriers like fear and a lack of familiarity with unfinalized learning experiences, these creative outcomes are achieved in the context of community. She explained that the students’ relationships with each other and their teachers can be strong enough to overcome the fear of the unknown that threatens creative expression, telling me:

I think that kids as learn as a community if they see everybody buying into like, oh, there can be more freedom, or oh, this teacher is willing to ask me why I don’t like this thing instead of punishing me for not doing it, if they see it more than once and if they see other people buying in. Then the barriers start to come down way faster.

With the barriers removed, the students’ responsive creativity has space to grow.

**Multimodality and Student Creativity**

These examples from Nicole’s, Lucille’s, and Isabella’s classrooms have several defining features in common. For one, they start and end with the student and their learning: the student chooses a mode of expression that excites them, and they submit a product that reflects not only their learning but pieces of themselves. Additionally, the teachers value the work the students create, and they demonstrate this value by offering the students scaffolded support and by using assessment strategies that allow for variation. Additionally, these examples each make space for student expression that is multimodal. Rather than limiting their students’ expression to a form of
“writing” that is strictly defined, in these assignments the teachers ask their students to “compose” more broadly, to demonstrate their learning through visual art, through song, through performance, through movement, or through writing in various genres. Nicole’s student demonstrated the results of her research about arranged marriages through letters and poems that she assembled within a wedding cake of her own construction. Lucille’s student found an outlet for her watercolor expression in her ABC book assignment. Isabella invites her students to consider their own interests, the modes of expression they engage with by choice, and then she invites those modes into her classroom as valid in-school expressions.

By taking a New Literacy Studies (NLS) approach to literacy practices, we, too, can extend naturally to embrace multimodal composition as a valid form of in-school literacy (Bailey, 2009). New Literacy Studies not only fundamentally recognizes literacy as socially-situated and culturally-based (Gee 2012), but also disrupts the commonly held orality-literacy binary (Street, 2001; Gee, 2012), another persistent inheritance of traditional schooling structures. James Paul Gee (2012) writes that, contemporarily, this divided view of orality and literacy manifests in distinctions “between groups with ‘residual orality’ or ‘restricted literacy’ (usually lower socioeconomic) and groups with full access to the literacy taught in the schools (usually middle and upper-middle class)” (p. 70). Through institutionalization, the privileged literacy of schooling begets more privilege at the expense of other literacies of both non-dominant cultures as well as non-dominant modes. As a general rule, the privileged texts that are read by students in English language arts classrooms are verbal, written expressions: novels, plays, articles, short stories. Further, these texts are treated as though they are monomodal even though they truly are not: when the texts contain other modes, these modes are considered secondary to the words that students are expected to read and understand. The in-school texts
students produce (e.g., five-paragraph essays, short answers on tests), especially in the context of mandated curricula and standardized testing, likewise fit this mold of monomodality and represent another persistent schooling inheritance.

James Collins (1995) offers an historical analysis of the development of Western literacy ideology by tracing the institutionalization of literacy through schools. He points out that while 18th and 19th century social histories reveal “diverse common or popular literacies” (p. 82), institutions of schooling limited their recognition to a single “standard” literacy which in turn generated a cultural value of one form of literacy over others. Collins writes that school did not fill a literacy void but instead replaced “heterogeneous domestic, religious, and workplace literacies … with that particular shaping and standardizing of scriptal practices we can call schooled literacies” (p. 82). As a result, this form of literacy became valued as standard and preferable in contexts outside of the school as well (p. 82). The manifestation of this ideology in and through systems of power has served to establish a relationship between officialized literacy and a person’s perceived worth (p. 83). Collins adds that, “One result of modern schooling has been a profound discrediting of the practical knowledge and out-of-school literacies of nonelites … and an enduring working-class ambivalence about schooled literacy as impractical and unrelated to life and its struggles” (p. 84). Although Collins attributes this ambivalence to “the working class” generally, it manifests day-to-day in individual students in individual classrooms who enter with a variety of primary Discourses and who see the work they are assigned, and the literacy they are expected to acquire, as largely irrelevant to their lives and ambitions.

Gee addresses student reluctance to engage with in-school literacy, writing that the acquisition of a new literacy “is heavily tied to identity issues. It is tied to the learner’s willingness and trust to leave (for a time and place) the lifeworld and participate in another
identity, one that, for everyone, represents a certain loss” (2004, p. 282). School, of course, is in the business of providing students with the experience necessary to develop new literacies, of preparing them for meaningful, authentic participation in a variety of contexts. If students see those contexts as contrived, as belonging only to the world of school and not useful beyond it, they are unlikely to engage. Gee writes that:

> People can only see a new social language as a gain if they recognize and understand the sorts of socially situated identities and activities that recruit the social language; if they value them or, at least, understand why they are valued; and if they believe they (will) have real access to them or, at least, will have access to meaningful versions of them. (p. 282)

On the one hand, Gee’s position calls for educators to evaluate how we invite students into school-based literacies: are we transparently foregrounding the usefulness of standard, academic language while also recognizing those contexts in which it loses its usefulness? “Ambivalence about schooled literacy as impractical and unrelated to life and its struggles,” as teachers well know, looks like disengagement: it looks like reading discussion questions that are met with silence, it looks like plagiarized papers, and it looks like “Is this going to be on the test?” Gee’s analysis prompts us to question if the literacies traditionally celebrated in school have taken up more space than they are worth, space that might be better spent on the institutionally devalued literacies that students recognize as useful without any convincing.

Taking an ideological view of literacy (Gee, 2012; Street, 2001) makes visible the ways in which literacy practices are inherently socially and culturally embedded (Street, 2001, p. 433-36, 437), and prompts us then to consider the texts that we and our students actually engage with in our daily lives. These sorts of texts are distinctly multimodal: we scroll through Instagram (linguistic, visual), we listen to our favorite artist’s new album (linguistic, aural), we attend a presentation at work and review the slide deck afterwards (linguistic, aural, visual), we watch an
episode of television (linguistic, visual, aural, gestural). If our English language arts curricula do not address multimodality, we are effectively confirming the claim that “literacy” practice has no place in the real world. We prepare students for success only in school as it has been defined, not for the world beyond it. We must expand our definition of literacy (singular) to address literacies (plural) in the interest of both relevance and equity. To engage students in literacy practices that they recognize as useful in the world, we must treat orality and verbal-textual literacy as more than just ends of a continuum: rather, they are representative of a range of multiple modes, including non-linguistic modes, that interact variously in the media that young people consume and create, as well as the media we hope to empower them to consume and create.

Allowing students space to create is a liberatory practice, especially when this space exists inside the context of school. In *Youth Media Matters: Participatory Cultures and Literacies in Education*, Korina M. Jocson presents several case studies of youth-driven multimodal composition. She writes that the youth media her research centers is “embedded in the everyday lives of young people who are engaging in media production on their own, collaborating with each other, and distributing their work to reach a wide audience” (p. 11). This engagement, Jocson continues, is socially-situated and is influenced by the “historical, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts that shape education” (p. 11). Jocson highlights the liberatory power of youth media, writing that “youth media can produce spaces of possibility for historically marginalized populations, including youth of color and youth from low-income backgrounds” (p. 11). She goes on to add that these:

spaces of possibility … are very much present in the teaching, learning, and production processes where changing technologies and changing literacies are demanding renewed ways of thinking about young people’s stories, their use of media and digital technology, and the manner in which they are claiming their right to speak and be heard. (p. 11).
Incorporating these “spaces of possibility” into classroom instruction demonstrates that the expression of youth voice matters. It recognizes and communicates to students that they have thoughts and perspectives and ideas that are worth expressing, even inside systems that have not traditionally asked for or expected authentic student participation.

Carol Bedard and Charles Fuhrken (2010) present an example of youth media in classroom practice, describing the outcomes of creative writing and English students’ engagement in a six-week screenwriting program. In this program sponsored by the Austin Film festival, students were exposed to a particular genre of writing that is often an invisible component of film and television. In the Storytelling Through Film program students explored screenwriting as a genre, learning about mechanics including specific terminology, the application of imagery and point of view, and techniques like camera angles and lighting. The students then engaged in prewriting sessions, writing workshops, and storyboarding (p. 48). After the students completed their screenplays, the Austin Film Festival staff selected several for production (p. 47). In a general summary, Bedard and Fuhrken identify that the experience enabled “[some students’] voices to be heard by a wider audience. For others, it required them to reflect on and adapt their writing process. And remarkably, it caused a few students to consider a future in the field of screenwriting” (p. 47).

Bedard and Fuhrken write that as a result of the program and the opportunity to produce a high quality, public product, the students were willing to engage in challenging, sustained writing (p. 49). Further, they write that, “The teachers attributed the students’ amazing willingness to revise their work—without any prodding—to the connection that the students felt to their texts” (p. 50), many of which they based in their own experiences. Additionally, Bedard and Fuhrken found that the project empowered the students to become more critical consumers
of film and television media: students not only used film and television examples as models to support their own work, but also reported viewing practices that include thinking about scripts while watching films. As examples, Bedard and Fuhrken write:

David said, “Recently, when I was watching a movie, I thought about what the script would be like for the action in the screen.” Amber shared, “Everything someone says or does I can imagine on a piece of paper and now I focus on simply movements and dialogue rather than on a movie as a whole.” (p. 51)

Bedard and Fuhrken report that following their involvement in the program, some students continued to engage in screenwriting even outside of the classroom (p. 52).

This experience created a participatory culture in which students could practice creating multimodal texts. For one, the authentic audience provided by the Austin Film Festival made clear to students that “their contributions matter” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3). Further, the structure of the project, in which students engaged in a weeks-long writing process with plenty of built-in “think time” (Bedard & Fuhrken, p. 51), indicates a commitment to procedural knowledge (“knowing how”) over propositional knowledge (“knowing that”) by the end of the project (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 167). Not only did the students in the study become more critical consumers of media, but they were also introduced to, and given a chance to practice, a genre of writing that is responsible for much popular media.

**Project-Based Learning: Unfinalizability and Multimodal Creativity**

To continue this discussion of authentic creativity in the classroom, and to explore those in-school circumstances that make this radical sort of work possible, we will now consider more deeply the pedagogical field of project-based learning (PBL). For Katherine, Dara, and Esther, who teach at a wall-to-wall project-based learning school, PBL’s underlying philosophies influence all aspects of their work in classrooms. PBLWorks, formerly the Buck Institute for Education, defines project-based learning as “a teaching method in which students gain...
knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge” (PBLWorks, n.d. c). In practice, students in a project-based learning context work collaboratively to answer the project’s driving question, and they present this answer through the creation and presentation of some sort of final product. Katherine explained this culminating piece of the process:

So project-based learning is at the very center of everything we do, and so there’s always some sort of presentation or demonstration of learning at the end of a project that is supposed to be highly professional and engaging and demonstrating their critical thinking about whatever the assignment was. And so there’s usually a mass composure there, right? They’re putting together Google slides, or a video, or some speech that they deliver, or any variety of authentic outcomes.

Other final products in the Alberti curriculum have included the design and plans for an original business relevant to the local area, the development of a superhero (with accompanying comic book pages) created to address some real-world, contemporary issue of injustice, and large on-campus events to educate the public on historical topics. Each of these products are developed collaboratively among team members and demonstrate learning through a variety of modes beyond verbal, written expression. Most of the projects are conducted across English and social studies classes, disrupting the discipline silos that frame much of our students’ in-school learning experiences. PBL moves learning beyond the isolated flatness of printed pages (or computer screens) and makes it (in many cases literally) three dimensional.

Although project-based learning emphasizes the importance of final products, its radically responsive approach to learning is embedded in the process itself, in all the work that leads up to those final presentations (that is, in the scaffolding and the whistling). The planning and structure of projects, while often all but invisible to everyone but the teacher, sets up important boundaries for protecting spaces of unfinalizability and eventual responsibility. As Katherine explained it, many of the Alberti projects are “really tried-and-true projects that we’ve
been doing forever, and that are really finetuned and work and the kids always talk about them the day they graduate.” While the project itself is typically designed by teacher teams (and refined over time, or eventually replaced by something new), ideally as the project progresses the control shifts from teacher to student, turning the “scaffolding and whistling” into “old houses” that are the students’ own.

The structure of projects generally flows through four phases, which are outlined in the PBLWorks Project Path (2019). The first phase, the project launch, includes the introduction of the driving question and often some sort of event designed to get the students engaged, even excited, about the project. In the second phase, students “build knowledge, understanding & skills to answer the driving question” (PBLWorks, 2019). During this phase the students develop content knowledge through reading, discussing, or engaging in other scaffolded steps that help them prepare for the final presentation. In the next phase, the students apply their knowledge and understanding toward developing their products, or answers to the driving question, and engage in a process of critique and revision to refine their work. At Alberti, a mini-presentation often falls somewhere between these two stages, giving the students and teachers a chance to check the students’ progress well in advance of the final presentation. In the fourth phase, the students present their multimodal products to a public audience (PBLWorks, 2019). This final phase is then followed by reflection before the students begin the next project. Importantly, this path is not linear: between building knowledge and developing their products, students and teachers cycle through feedback and revision. In some cases the feedback is provided by the teacher, but in many cases the students provide feedback to one another. This chance to assess and adjust inside the learning process is a key unfinalizable feature of project-based learning.
Esther, who has been a project-based learning teacher for close to a decade, reflected on the need for unfinalizability within each project’s structure. She explained:

So, the structure is when is the final presentation date. That’s the structure. And there’s things I know that happen along the way. But to pretend like they’re locked in stone is just—the longer I teach, the more silly that concept is. … Say we’re at the mini-presentation stage. And whether it be the kids are just … not being as productive as they should be, or if it’s literally that they’re just struggling, I couldn’t get it, there’s too much content that I needed to get through myself and I didn’t give them enough time to work, or whatever, there’s times where all of the sudden we’re supposed to start mini-presentations and I know I’m about to get 18 crap presentations. Why force that? Who wins? I know I don’t win, that’s for damn sure, listening to all that. So there’s quite often when I’m like all, “OK guys, I realize where we’re at, I’m gonna have to cut this one thing out of the project coming up the road, you guys are gonna get the next two days to work this out, you guys better get it done, presentations start Monday.” And they’re usually very responsive to that kind of stuff.

In the way that Esther describes her approach to project-based learning, her students and their needs come before her plans. Because she recognizes the damaging effects of valuing pacing over the learning that is or is not happening, Esther gives herself the unfinalized space she needs to be authentically responsive to her students.

In her description, Esther went on to position herself as responsible for making these adjustments:

So I’m pretty adaptable and pretty flexible based on needs because I find no reward in setting kids up for failure …. And that’s project design error, 100%. … There’s always gonna be … a couple of kids who blow it, or whatever. That’s unavoidable in life. But nonetheless, if it’s the collective, that’s my fault. So I’m pretty responsive to needs, but there is always that one thing that I can’t bend and that’s the final presentation date, usually, because we’re trying to have something so big and special, or something like that.

Inside the structure of these projects, Esther’s students are given the unfinalized space they need to create. They are also held accountable to the demonstration of their learning when the time comes to present their final products.
It is worth highlighting what Esther’s comment brings out about the reality of the scaffolding and whistling of a project-based learning product’s early life: the work is almost always messy. Inherent in such unfinalizable structures are unpredictable twists and turns, for both students and teachers, on the way to the project’s culmination. There often are, as Esther says, “a couple of kids who blow it,” who disengage and let down their teammates. There are students who complain, who miss deadlines, who struggle. Project-based learning is not a magic cure for classroom ills. What project-based learning structures do provide, though, is the promise of relevance. Recognizing student agency means recognizing that the responsibility to engage belongs to them and them alone. Facilitating projects, or at least facilitating them well, is challenging, requiring deep reflection, adaptability, and content knowledge from the teacher. The work of a project-based learning teacher, as Esther described here, is to create conditions that make the work’s “why” visible and accessible, and then to adjust to ensure that whatever the students themselves eventually decide to do, they have been set up for success.

The project design practices that PBLWorks identifies as “gold standard” (Fig. 4.1) reflect key components of unfinalizable classrooms that create opportunities for authentic student response. Opportunities for critique, revision, and reflection underscore the unfinalizable nature of learning as a process of continual becoming, while the eventual creation of a public product positions the students’ work as authentic, with a life beyond the classroom. When the act of responding to a challenging problem or question through sustained inquiry is likewise authentic, the student’s role becomes a responsible one.
Figure 4.1. *Source: PBLWorks. (n.d.). Gold standard PBL: Essential project design elements. https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl/gold-standard-project-design*

Fundamentally, “gold standard” project-based learning centers student voice and choice. Dara described that the voice and choice inherent in PBL allows students to tap into their individual talents and skills in a way that reflects Isabella’s approach to multimodal projects. Dara explained, “I think project-based learning in itself, it allows a lot of choice. If you’re an artist you can really take on that role of web developer or magazine designer. So I think it’s innately kind of in our school.” In Esther’s experience as a project-based learning teacher, the “voice and choice” component is a key feature from the students’ perspective as well. As evidence of the link between freedom and engagement, she shared:

When you do project debriefs, that’s always the thing that comes up, if you’ve got a good project, that they liked: one of the top five things they’re gonna tell you, it’s because of
voice and choice. Because they got to create the thing they wanted to create. So that, in my opinion, I think is the most important.

The multimodal nature of project-based learning makes space for a variety of student expression that does not often exist in traditional structures. Further, “web developer or magazine designer” are not just project roles, they are careers that students might choose to pursue. By both making space for the practice and development of these skills and framing the work as worthy of public attention, these structures hold both freedom and relevance as valuable classroom assets.

The project debriefs referenced in Esther’s comment help teachers to revise and refine the projects for subsequent years. As stated previously, Katherine noted pointedly that “in PBL, (maybe in all education), it’s like a shark: if you stop swimming you die.” She added that projects only work if they are regularly updated and refined to maintain their relevance.

Christopher, who has been teaching history (and other subjects) at Alberti for well over a decade, explained that in the case of a well-designed project:

The structure allows the adaptability, which makes it flexible, which then makes it allowed to be structured. So it’s a weird circle in my mind. That we’ve got a solid foundation and pieces on which we work, but also adapt, or respond, hopefully, and go OK, this works, let’s keep this part, how do we improve this next one.

In the context of this approach to pedagogy, unfinalizability not only features within the projects but in their implementation. Unlike a mandated curriculum that is designed, printed, and shared once and for all, the curriculum at a school like Alberti is itself unfinalizable, in a continual state of becoming. In an adaptable and reflective project-based learning context, teachers are set up to be actively responsive to the needs of their students not only in each class but year after year.

The structures of project-based learning set up unfinalizable spaces inside which students can engage in creative, multimodal expression. Christopher framed the possibilities for student
creativity inside the parameters of projects by explaining that students in these contexts can and
should “be bold, you know, dream.” He added that as a facilitator of this type of learning:

You try to make the projects guided-ly open-ended. You know, you give them the
bumper rails, like you’re playing bowling—you might hit a strike, but you’re not gonna
hit a gutter ball because we’re gonna give you those bumpers. And then of course, as you
know, by the time they hit senior year, ah, you’re stepping back more and more to
hopefully allow more creativity because they’ll understand more about their limits and
sort of expectations.

This approach to learning represents structure designed in service of creating unfinalizable
spaces for authentic response, rather than structure designed for oppression and compliance. A
well-designed and facilitated project is like a house that’s somehow bigger on the inside: the
room for creative flourishing inside a project expands with the students’ voices and perspectives,
pushing outwards and upwards in the directions that they determine, As Katherine described, the
best reward as a project-based learning teacher is the experience of being blown away by what
the students create when they are given the space and support they deserve.

Research on PBL has demonstrated its positive influence on learning. Research reveals,
for instance, the possibility that project-based learning can support the development of students’
“conceptual understanding” over rote memorization (Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016),
metacognitive and higher-order thinking, and problem solving (Zhang, Basham, Carter, &
Zhang, 2021). Project-based learning can also lead to higher motivation in students (Kokotsaki et
al., 2016; Scogin, Kruger, Jekkals, & Steinfeldt, 2017). Styla and Michalopoulou’s (2016) study
revealed project-based literature study enhanced collaboration, empathy, and socialization skills
in the students they surveyed.

Scogin, Kruger, Jekkals, and Steinfeldt’s (2017) exploration of an experiential learning
program rooted in project-based learning demonstrated benefits including increased
responsibility. One student participant shared that the expectation of responsibility “really
pushed me to be more responsible than I am. Like taking my work to a deeper level” (p. 53). Because of this expectation to practice responsibility, the student saw value in unfinalizable practices like “re-doing, putting extra time to research…[and] asking more questions” (p. 53). Scogin et al., also noted that engagement in the experiential learning program made visible to students those elements of expertise that their fellow students brought to the collaborative table. According to one student, “In a group, I feel like everyone has their point of view and their perspective in what they want in the project, and they combine them all together to make a bigger project” (p. 50). It is worth noting the consistent call among researchers for more studies aimed at exploring a directly causal link between PBL and these benefits. Nevertheless, the results of the current research are encouraging.

**Project-Based Learning in Practice**

The Alberti project-based learning curriculum is punctuated by a set of signature projects and culminating night events. Each year, sophomores look forward to World War I Museum Night, a collaborative World History and English project in which student teams design one of nearly twenty museum booths centered on some aspect of the Great War. In addition to researching their topic, each team is responsible for collecting artifacts, designing materials, developing a series of talking points and, ultimately, facilitating a dynamic visitor experience on the night of the event. While many students take an interpretive approach, role-playing as soldiers or medics or family members on the home front, many others engage with their visitors in the role of modern-day docents, escorting the audience through the booths they have built, offering a contemporary explanation of the events and technology they describe.

When I asked Christopher if he had a story to tell about a time when he saw student creativity explode (in a good way, he had me clarify), he told me about his experience with
Alberti’s second museum project but first museum night event, which, as he put it, “helped me understand it as a teacher.” He told this story:

I kept telling them “Dream big,” and when they were saying, “Yeah, we’re building a plane,” and “We’re building trenches,” and I wasn’t checking in in the same way, so when they were talking about it, I went, “Sure, you’re building this plane.” It’s gonna be made of, you know, Pepsi bottles. … And then when they asked to be let in to the campus, on the old campus with the gate code, and I went, “You just walk around, why do you need that?” Well, “Because we built a three-quarter-scale Sopwith Camel that my parents need to bring in on a trailer.” And I remember, just, my draw dropping and going, “I’m sorry, what happened?” Then I started going, wait a minute, and I turned to another team: “When you tell me that you built a balloon—” They’re like, “Yeah, it’s about eight feet tall and we’re gonna try to fill it with—” and I went, “What?” And then someone went “How big is that trench?” “Well, you know, it’s like 8 feet by 15 feet and we’re—“ and I went—and it exploded. … And so, that was kind of a night of oooh, creativity, and what it really means …. I don’t know, to me that was huge.

Christopher’s story reveals that inside unfinalized spaces, where a teacher encourages their students to “be bold” and “dream big,” students will, in fact, be bold and dream big. Not only will they boldly dream, but they will creatively produce, and the results, more often than not, are astounding.

Katherine also spoke passionately about the possibilities inside spaces that honor and celebrate student creativity. When I asked her what sorts of responsive assignments, from her perspective, generate the most student engagement, she told me, “When they are asked to put their own creative spin on what they’ve read, that is where I get the highest level of engagement.” When I asked what sorts of responsive assignments she most enjoyed assigning and assessing, she told me:

Same answer, right? I want to see what they think. And they blow me away, every time. I am always so impressed by what they come up with when you open up this highly creative window and just let them interpret and create.

Night events at Alberti continue to represent “highly creative window[s],” or pockets of explosive creativity. The experience as a participant, or interactive audience member, at one of
these events is entirely immersive. In their junior year, the students engage in a project centered on the American culture and politics of the 1920s. Again divided into nearly twenty teams, the students build and operate a booth during the event. Rather than a museum, 1929 Night is framed as a magazine launch party: each team shares with visitors the first issue of a period-appropriate magazine, collaboratively written by the team members. For this event, the students role play for visitors as citizens of the 1920s and invite their audience to do the same. We must provide code words to enter speakeasies, we are asked our opinion on women’s fashion (bobbed hair and knee-length hems), and we discuss the merits of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, a recent best-seller.

Both of these projects run for well over a month, and in the course of less than one day the school space—including classrooms, multi-purpose rooms, outdoor areas—is completely transformed from a school campus into another environment entirely, one that draws visitors in, swallows them up, and invites them into participatory engagement in ephemeral, small-scale spectacle. Truthfully, the experience is magical. Classrooms become ice cream parlors or croquet-covered lawns or hole-in-the-wall restaurants populated not with sixteen-year-old American Studies students but with living, breathing representatives of the Roaring Twenties, ghosts made corporeal for one night only. When I attended these events as an Alberti teacher, I was of course intimately familiar with the project’s design, with the numerous deliverables that precede the event and the students’ often reluctant willingness to engage with those deliverables. I was apprised of team conflicts, of complications, of revision processes, I brainstormed with them, rehearsed with them, prodded them to hide their backpacks and fast food trash (anachronisms!) before the event’s official start. Despite, or perhaps because of, this deep relationship with the scaffolding and the whistling, suspending my disbelief, entering this
student-created world, and playing along with them was not only easy but authentically delightful.

The success of these events is dependent on a strong commitment to story. For instance, a significant amount of preparation and execution goes into establishing a setting to create whatever environment the students have chosen. The student teams consider layouts, the flow of visitor traffic, props. It is not unusual for teams to construct temporary walls using materials supplied by the school (two storage containers on campus are dedicated to housing night event walls), to bring in furniture from all over campus (or their homes), to borrow projectors and lamps from teachers. While necessary, the setting is of course insufficient—dollar store tablecloths can cover large spaces and help us forget that we are in the biology classroom or presentation room, but the space is only really transported by the dynamic action of the student ambassadors. For the most part, students prepare scripted dialogue in the voices of the characters they design, but many quite skillfully play off of visitors’ responses, able to deftly share the content information they have spent the last several weeks learning as they invite the visitor to engage in the narrative their team has built. At these night events, we are plunged into unfinalizability together, constructing a “once-occurrent and never repeatable” (KFP, p. 40) series of moments collaboratively.

Importantly, these events provide invaluable space for students who may not traditionally excel in school settings to shine. When else is construction talent appreciated in connection with English language arts content? When else is excellent in-character monologuing and improvisation celebrated in a social studies class? Final products like these night events require students not only to develop an understanding of content, but also to engage in world making and
storytelling, processes that deepen critical understanding and reintroduce joyful whimsy to the experience of learning (for all involved).

**Project-Based Learning and Relevance Beyond the Classroom**

Project-based learning invites students into creativity by offering unfinalizable space for creation. Project-based learning invites students into responsibility by positioning their work as relevant beyond the walls of the classroom and past the traditional structures of schooling. Relevance beyond the classroom becomes most visible in the fourth phase, when students present their public products to authentic audiences. In the case of the night events, the authentic audience is the members of the community in attendance: Christopher frames the purpose of this sort of presentation as “educating the public.” When students demonstrate their understanding in such a dynamic context, they must be able to do more than memorize and repeat. Instead, they must use what they know to engage their visitors in conversation, in dialogue, about their topic. It goes without saying that the outcome of these conversations is, of course, unpredictable. There is no answer key for the students or teachers at a night event: the outcomes are generated as they are happening, they are once-occurrent, they are unique, and they are never repeatable.

Reflecting on and celebrating these once-occurrent moments represents a significant part of the joy inherent in project-based learning. The simultaneous best and worst day of the Alberti academic calendar is, in my humble but informed opinion, the Friday after Museum Night. We would all come to class exhausted but also exhilarated to tell our stories. On this day, sophomore English class was about swapping tales from the night before, reveling in each small and large success and marveling at the unanticipated challenges that the students overcame. There was always someone who asked a lot of random, weird questions, or a visitor who ended up being a history professor specializing in 20th-century European warfare (gulp!), but on this day those
challenges had been conquered, past perfect tense: the students were on the mountaintop. This day was special, too, because it also marked a turning point for our tenth graders: they saw their success and knew they could be successful. Their buy-in to project-based learning as a whole always seemed to me to proceed upwards from this moment.

In order to assess these final presentations of understanding, the teachers rely on rubrics. These rubrics are divided by category and include descriptions that sketch out high, medium, and low achievement in each category. Christopher explained that rubrics help to scaffold the students’ responsibility to their work, telling me, “You want to give them stakes. And so we use the rubrics and we try to drive it with some real life tie-in to those things.” While the descriptions themselves must be open-ended enough to allow for the student work to take multiple shapes, Christopher explained that they can also be drafted with industry expertise in mind. He told me, for example, about working with museum professionals and with experts he reached out to at DC Comics to inform the rubrics for World War I Museum Night and the Next Superman project respectively. He explained that when he and his co-teachers engage experts, “We let the kids know this isn’t from us, this is from the industry people. … And so that makes the kids feel like, oh, this is a legitimate skill.”

Beyond informing the content of the rubrics, industry experts are also called on by the teachers to attend and sometimes help assess the final presentations. Katherine narrated what this involvement looks like in the context of the Next Superman project:

They [the students] are creating a comic that designs a superhero for a current, modern world problem. And the comic showcases their research, there’s high levels of creativity, I mean, they have to design this hero from scratch. But then the comic is displayed at ComicCon and then sent off to DC Comics where actual, real life comic experts review this work and they give feedback.
The students know that the work they create in this project will be viewed not only by their peers at the on-campus ComicCon but also by experts in the field of comics. These opportunities to share their work with more than just their teacher legitimize the students’ literacy practice.

Project-based learning not only creates conditions for student work to be viewed in the world, but for that work to have an impact on the world. In his Letters to Leaders project, for example, Christopher’s students apply their understanding of and response to World History class content (e.g. the U.S. Bill of Rights) to the writing of letters to an international and domestic leader (e.g. a congressperson) of their choosing. Christopher contrasted this practical, real-world act of composition with more traditional processes in which students simply “[fill] in the blank.” He told me that engaging in this project helps the students to see themselves as writers and their writing as valid communication, especially “when they get the validation of a letter back from someone, I mean, look, you wrote, people understood you, you communicated, and they responded positively.” Whether or not a leader responds is of course not an element of the project that Christopher can control: it is itself an unpredictable outcome. This element of unpredictability, though, makes room for results that position students, legitimately, as actors in the world. Christopher shared that:

One of our kids recently got an invitation from her local mayor. The mayor … invited her to city hall for a sit down because he was so moved by what she wrote that he wanted to hear student opinion from a citizen, and so she got an hour … with the mayor of Vacaville.

Not only did this student’s work impact a powerful member of her community, but it served as an entry point for continuing to share her voice in a space of power.

Esther also discussed with me her involvement of experts throughout the course of Dino’s Nest, a project in which students apply economic theory to design a business for their
Throughout this project, businesspeople in the community serve as mentors for the students, visiting class and providing feedback on the students’ work as it is in process. The student response to these mentors reflects what Christopher said about their reaction to the influence of industry experts on the presentation rubrics. Esther explained that:

The value in that [the mentors’ feedback] is that I could say all of those same things to those students, about what my questions and wonders and pushback on any of their stuff. But as soon as they [the mentors] say it, all of the sudden, oh, I need to change that.

She added that since the senior project takes place in the spring, “I’m the Charlie Brown teacher at that point. So any other human in the world that can say the words instead of me is what’s super valuable.”

Perhaps, also, the misalignment of the students’ responses to Esther and the mentors is due to what the students have been taught to assume about the structures of schooling. Teachers, in these traditional structures, are not connected to the world outside the classroom but to the machinery of school itself. The Charlie Brown teacher drones on about nothing: their words are coded as nonsense because they are meant to reflect meaninglessness. When mentors visit the classroom, they disrupt the isolation that keeps school separate from life. Unfortunately, Esther’s position, for many of her students, may still represent one end of the dichotomy, rather than a bridge between their classwork and the world.

By bringing the mentors in as support and eventually to help assess the students’ work, Esther is, indeed, building a bridge that allows the students to traverse the gap between school and the world beyond it. She told me that:

One of the teams actually came up with this idea to do this water collection thing out of the atmosphere, and it’s gonna help farmers, and it’s pretty legit. And [one of the mentors] has already talked to one of his investor buddies, and they want to meet with the team and write the team a real check. Just saying. … So that kind of stuff happens.

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14 This project was originally modeled after (and called) Dragon’s Den, the British version of the reality television show Shark Tank.
When given the chance to create authentic work and the connections to give that work life in the world, students are able to respond authentically, through “action and reflection … upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire 1970/2017, p. 52).

Esther shared with me her plans to continue refining her projects to make them even more relevant in the world, and to connect the students directly with this relevance. She explained:

I’m already gonna play around a lot more with pushing them out into the communities and doing surveys. Which is a big thing I started with the Vote Local [project], which I’m going to do with both projects this year. But I’m gonna do a whole tutorial ahead of time because I really want them to canvas the school and also survey and kind of canvas their community. I want them to realize the demographics, the people, the composition, the trends, and all that kind of stuff so that when they are deciding what the problem is for their civic action project that it’s relevant, right? Or, when they’re picking out a Dino’s Nest business idea, that, again, it’s relevant.

Here Esther reveals a desire to move beyond the “simulation” approach that has defined many of the Alberti projects. She seeks, instead, to make the projects’ relevance clear to her students, engaging them in information gathering processes that will root their work in the community first and the classroom second.

Mercy, who teaches English at a tuition-based, university lab school in Louisiana, told me about a project she leads that engages her students in relevant, real-world outcomes. Using *The Kite Runner* as a literary launching point, Mercy asks her students to consider the issues of social justice addressed in the book, which she says include “racism, gender discrimination, and class, and education, and poverty,” among others. She positions her students as responders, asking them, after they have read the text, “What do we do now?” She explained:

So now that we know that human trafficking is a huge issue, now that we know that people are trying to educate girls in Afghanistan and they’re being stopped by the Taliban—what are some things that you, as an eighteen-year-old kid, can do about it? I
mean, obviously I don’t expect you to go to Afghanistan and fight the Taliban, so, tell me what are some of the things that you can do in [this city]?

Mercy explained that she does not provide high levels of guidance for this particular project, allowing her students’ creativity to drive their work. The nuances of this approach manifest in her rubric: while the rubric features descriptors for the levels “below standard” and “approaching standard,” she told me that the section representing “above standard” work is “totally blank. And so, they basically have spelled out for them what they need to do to get a B, but what they need to do to get an A is blank, so like, that’s the part where the creativity comes in.” This rubric, which Mercy gives her students when she launches the project, frames the project’s outcomes as unfinalized and the students themselves as responsible for the direction they choose to take.

This open-ended framing naturally allows for a vast range of student responses. Mercy told me, for example:

I had some kids do a book drive, and they focused on, there’s a refugee and immigrant outreach center in New Orleans, and so they went down there and they met with the director and they asked what they needed, and she said, we just need books, like kind of as a classroom library. And so these girls were able to, I think they donated like three thousand books.

As another example, she shared that she:

had a group of kids get together and create a painting, and they ended up asking all of the art classes to get involved in this one painting … of … something that was symbolic in *The Kite Runner* that kind of met a larger theme, and they used that painting to donate it to an auction for CASA [Court Appointed Special Advocates].

Mercy spoke highly of this project, telling me, “I really do love it.” She attributed this assessment to the project’s openness and the space it creates for her students’ creativity to flourish in the real world: “For some kids it’s just the time to shine, and it may be that they choose something that is kinda off the beaten path, but they get a chance to show me something that I would otherwise not have seen.”
Recognizing Students as Creative and Responsible: Participatory Action Research

In order to engage students in responsive work that authentically reaches out into the world, our pedagogy must position them as capable agents of change, not as objects of learning in the way that schooling structures have defined. Gholnecar Muhammad (2022) writes that educators must recognize the genius in their students “and then teach to their genius—giving them the education they deeply deserve. When a teacher recognizes the genius that already exists within a child, they are in a position to water and cultivate” (p. 201). Watering and cultivating looks like trust: it looks like high expectations and abundant support, and, in Esther’s words, it looks like giving students the unfinalized space they need to “create the thing they wanted to create.” If we want our students to be responsible, we must let them be responsible.

This shift in our view of students and their potential represents an important turn in the field of youth development. Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2002) trace the transition of a deficit-based framing to an asset-based framing in the world of youth work but argue that not enough attention is given to the overarching ideological structures, or “social, political, and economic forces” (p. 87), that influence and impact students’ lives. They call for a still further step in youth development to “include practices that encourage youth to address the larger oppressive forces affecting them and their communities” (p. 87). They offer as an example a distinction between “service learning” and the “social awareness” inherent in developing critical consciousness. They explain that, “a service learning approach might encourage youth to participate in a service activity that provides homeless families with food, while social awareness encourages youth to examine and influence political and economic decisions that make homelessness possible in the first place” (p. 90). Twenty years after their writing, we are still
trying to learn how to recognize youth, especially youth in schools, as authentically capable critical thinkers and problem solvers.

Project-based learning most powerfully disrupts traditional structures of schooling when it invites students to ask and seek answers to their own questions. Participatory Action Research (PAR), which I am framing as a specific form of project-based learning, is defined, in part, by the recognition of individuals’ expertise in their own experiences and their ability to engage in reflection and action within their own communities (Cammarota, 2010; Torre & Ayala, 2009; Carrión, 2020). When youth engage in participatory action research (YPAR), they assume the active role of not only “knowledge holders but also builders because they become part of the research process with responsibility for framing, collecting, and interpreting data alongside adult researchers” (Ayala 2016, p. 202). Caitlin Cahill (2016) writes that the framework of participatory action research makes students more than just assistants in the research process and instead “pr[ies] open a space for youth agency” (p. 157). The language she uses here underscores the difficult labor associated with carving out these spaces of unfinalizability. Indeed, much of this difficulty is attached to the “tolerance for a high level of uncertainty” (Lang, 2016, p. 155) that youth-driven and -determined projects require.

Cahill (2016) reflects this inherent uncertainty when she describes a PAR project she facilitated with a group of young women between the ages of 16 and 22 as “undefined” but not “unstructured” (p. 160). She goes on to write that, “precisely because it was collaborative I could not plan and structure the process ahead of schedule and the research evolved in a slightly messy, organic way” (p. 160). Once again, we encounter the word “organic,” alive and becoming, as a way to describe positive learning experiences. Interestingly, it is this factor of unfinalizability
that distinguished the PAR project from school for one of Cahill’s youth co-researchers. The co-researcher commented about the project:

If it was more structured it would have felt like school to me, and I know Caitlin was worried about coming off as a teacher but she wasn’t. … For me the unstructuredness helped me to develop ideas on what to do and made it easier to work knowing there were no barriers. The most important thing for me to be able to do this work was it not feeling like school. (p. 160)

The fact that having unobstructed space to “develop ideas” felt distinctly un-schoollike to this young person represents a tragic failing of education.

Cahill writes that participatory action research “recognizes young people’s agency and competency and very directly privileges their voices and develops their capacities and is potentially open enough to allow young people to challenging [sic] accepted points of view” (p. 166). For many students, tragically, these possibilities, indeed, feel nothing like school. Even still, there is hope: under the right conditions, project-based approaches to learning that center students as legitimate problem solvers can happen in schools. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) provides an example from her own classroom observations. She describes how a high school student’s claim about the unfair application of the school’s hat rule (which he believed was disproportionately applied to Black students, who were subsequently punished more harshly than the White students) developed into a class research project. The students and teacher developed a survey, collected and analyzed data, and ultimately found that the students most likely to be reprimanded for indoor hat-wearing were “Black male students on lower tracks” (p. 7). These students were also more likely to be punished with detention or a visit to administration (p. 7). The students drafted evidence-based recommendations and shared them with the principal and teachers. Ladson-Billings writes that although this student-selected problem may seem small, engagement in “the problem-solving process is crucial to the development of democratic
citizens” (p. 9) and adds that what matters is not the size of the problem, but the students’ interest in it.

Beginning with an initial class at Frazier High School in 2014, Participatory Action Research (specifically Critical Participatory Action Research, or CPAR) has been a fundamental approach of Humanities Amped. Over the years, students in Humanities Amped have conducted action research on the school to prison pipeline; the availability of mental health supports in schools; issues of poverty, racism, and sexism; and other relevant topics. In the CPAR process, students share their own stories to generate topics and drive their inquiry; they analyze the roots and symptoms of the problems they identify; they draft hypotheses and review relevant literature; they collect and analyze data; and they write up their findings that lead to action (Humanities Amped, 2022). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Humanities Amped students presented their findings at a research conference on a university campus to an audience of peers, family, and community members.

Jordan described an action research project he and a co-teacher facilitated with sixth and seventh grade students. He told me:

We had a little team of students that we brought together that interviewed pretty much all the students on campus about if they felt respected by teachers. We brought some articles to students that were intended for teachers around like, “Here’s what it means to respect your students” and some of these things, and really kinda took a temperature check on what students need to feel respected by adults and whether they were receiving those things. And then they got to go and present that at a conference at [the university] thanks to all the work that HA [Humanities Amped] does behind the scenes to create this kind of authentic experiences.

Just like Ladson-Billings, Jordan recognizes the importance of allowing students to grapple with problems that matter to them. In the 2019 spring semester, I served as a Humanities Amped research mentor for student teams exploring student and teacher relationships, their school’s public image, and police brutality. The student groups chose these topics because the problems
they identified mattered to them: when they presented their work at the annual Humanities Amped research conference, the topics demonstrably mattered to the community.

In our discussion of the project he facilitated, Jordan emphasized the importance of allowing students to choose topics in a way that meets them where they are (literally). When I asked him what application his students’ responsive work had outside the classroom, he responded that, “Outside of the classroom is kind of an interesting way to frame that question because when you’re in middle school a massive part of even your non-academic life is about what goes on in that building.” With this framing in place, he explained:

I think that’s where my head typically is at with what kind of authentic effect might this work have, [which] is looking to shift school culture for the better and empowering students to advocate for themselves in the context of the classroom. Because our students … are institutionalized, and so students deserve the tools that are going to allow them to make that the best experience that it can be in spite of all the failures of the way that we educate our kids.

Kimberly Goyette (2017) notes that the institutionalization of learning limits our view of it, writing that education “is no longer perceived as something that occurs organically when a child talks with an adult or observes an insect and makes a conclusion about it’s behavior” (p. 5). Or, in Jordan’s case, when a child considers the conditions of their learning environment and how they might be improved.

Although the work of Humanities Amped demonstrates that facilitating participatory action research in schools is possible, it remains enormously challenging. For one, the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated every aspect of schooling, and classroom work is no exception. Further, the realities of the institutionalization that Jordan described, and all those structural inheritances that favor efficiency over deepened learning and elevated student voice, paired with the pandemic, have limited what CPAR work Humanities Amped has been able to do in the last few years. Nevertheless, the organization remains committed to providing these project-based,
action research opportunities for students because we recognize the transformative power of classroom experiences that are rooted in justice. When we provide students with the learning that they deserve, we all flourish.

**Conclusion**

In the context of project-based learning and action research, creativity and authenticity function together. While many teachers perhaps value both of these elements, their partnership is not necessarily a given. Katherine explained:

> I feel like creativity is a double-edged sword almost, because a lot of times teachers will use it for inauthentic outcomes. Like, “Oh, I’m going to have you design a book jacket for this”—but why? Why would you do that? So maybe they make these great book jackets, or maybe they don’t because they don’t care because no one’s ever going to actually see it. So my goal is to make really authentic outcomes so that the authentic outcome is attained by creative measures.

As Katherine’s comment underscores, the marriage of creativity and authenticity is not a naturally occurring given: in order for unfinalized learning experiences to create meaningful opportunity for responsibility, they must be skillfully and intentionally designed and facilitated. These opportunities for authentic creative expression must not simply be the “hook” that coerces students into participating, but the thing itself. This shift has the power to transform the experience of classroom learning for students who see through the arbitrary nature of the receive-and-repeat banking model they are used to. Its implementation, though, requires a commitment to educational justice, pedagogical artistry, and a willingness to not always know exactly what is going to happen next.

Offering unfinalized learning experiences, ones that create room for authentic response and responsibility, clearly requires a significant shift away from the parameters and expectations sketched out by oppressive schooling structures like mandated curricula and standardized testing. In the next chapter, we will consider how a commitment to unfinalizable and responsible
learning affects and reshapes the role of the teacher. In a pointed moment of reflection on her practice, Esther shared:

I really try to go back to the idea that I don’t like to be the creator of the thing, and then you’re just putting the paint on it for me. I want the students to figure out what the thing is, and at best maybe I tell you what color to paint it, you know? That’s where I’m trying to kind of flip it.

It is to this flipping, or decentering, that we will turn to next.
CHAPTER 5. RESPONSIBLE DECENTERING: UNGRADING, STUDENT AGENCY, AND THE STATE OF BEING KNOWN

Classrooms that create unfinalizable spaces for students to practice authentic responsibility are incompatible with many structures of traditional schooling. I have already considered, at length, constraints imposed by standardized testing and mandated curricula. I turn now to teacher-centered instruction, an extension of those elements. The current project on participatory literacy practices in secondary English language arts classrooms leads to this implication: teachers who wish for their classrooms to lean into the unfinalizable, unpredictable aspects of learning that lead to authentic response and responsibility must decenter themselves.

Esther referred to this act of decentering as a kind of “flip.” She shared:

I really try to go back to the idea that I don’t like to be the creator of the thing and then you’re just putting the paint on it for me. I want the students to figure out what the thing is, and, at best, maybe I tell you what color to paint it.

When she capped this statement by adding, “That’s where I’m trying to kind of flip it,” she was acknowledging the disconnect between the present assumptions of schooling and what she believes should be. For many of the teachers I interviewed, these considerations about the nuances of their role came up in their moments of reflection, of projecting their desires toward tending to life in their classrooms. This concluding chapter will consider these reflections both in the context of traditional schooling structures and with hopeful anticipation that what should be, can be.

Reflections on Decentering

When I asked Esther what sorts of responsive work she most enjoys assigning and assessing, she responded frankly, “Where they work and talk and then they present. When I do as little as possible.” For Esther, “do[ing] as little as possible,” actually means doing a lot; she’s just not doing it from the center. When I asked her to elaborate, Esther explained that decentering
herself looks like “when I get to help them and answer questions and they’re guiding their work” and when “I get to cruise around to their tables or to their breakout rooms” to serve as a thought-partner or a connection to further resources. She added that this approach allows her “to be doing what I should be doing, which is helping them figure the thing out as opposed to sage-on-the-stage, they’re locked and they can’t do anything until I say ‘do the thing.’” Being a “sage-on-the-stage” is, in educator lingo, most often paired with the alternative of being a “guide-on-the-side.” Esther’s position is far from the side, though: even as she decenters herself as the distributor and director of knowledge, she stays very much in the mix, engaging and coaching (PBLWorks), working and learning alongside her students.

Esther offered a concrete example of the sort of assignment that enables her to move away from the center of the classroom. The assignment she described began with giving student teams a question, like “What’s bitcoin?” or “Is Amazon good for the economy?” and an article making some claim in response to the question. The student teams were then responsible for reading the article, discussing among themselves, and then finding another source that either corroborated or disputed the one they had been given. The students were then responsible for building a small set of slides (between one and three), which they used to present an economic advisement to the class the following day (e.g., “Yeah, bitcoin’s good, invest” or “No, Amazon’s terrible, you should stop shopping from there.”). Following each presentation, Esther’s students could ask questions of the presenting team. Esther explained that the teams would “answer a couple of them, or they would admit they didn’t know any more. And it was low stakes, and it was fine.” Esther explained that she often did not assess these presentations for a grade, an approach that contributed to their being, and feeling, low stakes. She added, “If I felt like I needed to add something on, maybe I did know the answer, or whatever. But quite often I would
notice them, just people in the audience, started doing extra research to find stuff out. So, win-win.”

Esther’s assignment places students and the center and gives them space to pursue their own lines of thought and inquiry. It positions them first as collaborators and then, to the rest of the class community, as the ones with knowledge to distribute. The students who elect to do their own follow up research assume permission to continue beyond the content presented by the team. Learning, in this context, is an act of responsive dialogue, a dynamic exploration of ideas.

Esther has also found that this approach makes space to honor the knowledges that students bring into the assignment, not just those they gain from it. She reflected, “You never know how much background knowledge some of them come into it with.” She mentioned, for example, students with Robinhood accounts who already understand quite deeply, through their own experience, elements of the economics content she is seeking to introduce. She described how these students are able to bring in resources they found useful in supporting their understanding to share with each other.

Another example from Esther’s classroom that highlights the impact of decentering was her description of an assignment in which students engage in playing a stock market simulation game. She told me that to receive credit for the Stock Market Game assignment, she requires that the students engage in the game to the level of making at least two trades. Usually, she said, there are only “ten or fifteen kids who play” beyond the two trades she requires for credit. She added that in the most recent school year, though, “thirty or forty of them played.” She offered the following explanation for this increase:

I think it’s largely because a few of them got really good at it, and they were constantly talking about it, and people were seeing all the money that was—and so it was just spreading. … I found I saw a lot of the kids, from the little gurus who were killing it in the game, I watched them teaching other kids in between class, after school, I’d hear
about it at home. And they would have Zoom sessions and they would get each other all set up. It had nothing to do with the assignment, the grade, anything. So that’s what happens when you get out of their way.

Esther’s examples bring out two key points related to teacher decentering: the role of student agency, and the role of grades. We will now explore each of these aspects more deeply, considering how we might shift the balance in favor of the former rather than the latter.

**Grading and Ungrading**

Both of Esther’s assignment examples, the economic advisement presentations and the stock market game assignment, necessarily raise the issue of grades. The student-generated peer support for the stock market game, she pointed out, was not compelled by the threat of a grade. Esther told me that she believed the success of her single-topic, economic advisement assignment lay in its relevance and accessibility, telling me that, “It has to be palatable, it has to be small, it has to be relevant.” She further explained, “If it’s short and quick and small like that, they’ll do it and they’ll all participate, and you don’t always have to grade that. Quite often I don’t grade that.” Not assessing the presentations for a grade no doubt contributes to the sense of them being “low stakes,” a feature that leaves space for students in the audience to ask questions without fear of putting their peers on the spot, and for the presenting students to authentically say when they don’t know a certain answer.

Grading, the structurally embedded system in which teachers assign numerical value to student work, effectively ranks not only the work but the students themselves when we follow the extension of these metrics to their accumulation in grade point averages and class rankings. This approach to assessment has not always been a fact of American schooling: descriptive assessments of student performance, which were once the norm, were not replaced by percentage-based grades at the high school level until the 20th century (Brookhart, et al, 2016).
The specific use of the now ubiquitous letter grades A-F as codes to mark levels of academic achievement, for example, was only widely applied in the 1940s (Strommel, 2020; Brookhart, 2016). Grading has, however, been a feature of schooling long enough to seem inherent. Jesse Strommel (2020) describes the arrival and staying power of this particular schooling inheritance, writing:

An “objective” approach to grading was created so systematized schooling could scale—so students could be neatly ranked and sorted into classrooms with desks in rows in increasingly large warehouse-like buildings. And we’ve designed technological tools in the 20th century and 21st centuries, like massive open online courses and machine grading, that have allowed us to scale even further, away from human relationships and care. In fact, the grade has been hard-coded into all our instructional and technological systems, an impenetrable phalanx of clarity, certainty, and defensibility. (Strommel p. 26)

While the underlying pursuit may be toward efficiency, the supposedly “objective” quality of grading as an approach to assessment is often presented as a reach toward fairness. Grading in practice, however, is often far from fair. Peter Elbow (1993) cites research from as far back as the 1910’s that demonstrated the range of grades that various, equally qualified educators will give to a single essay. He goes on to add, “We know the same thing from literary criticism and theory. If the best critics can’t agree about what a text means, how can we be surprised that they disagree even more about the quality or value of texts?” (p. 188). He goes on to write that in circumstances of holistic scoring, graders must be trained in a highly artificial form of reading in order for their assessments to come into alignment with one another (p. 189).

In Susan Blum’s words, “Grading requires uniformity. It assumes uniform input, uniform process, and uniform output” (2020, p. 55), an extension of the artificially contrived approach to learning that makes standardized writing assessment “possible.” In addition to silencing and devaluing expressions outside the bounds of this determined uniformity, as Marcus Schultz-Bergin explains, grades “increase anxiety, place the focus on extrinsic rather than intrinsic
motivation, and encourage strategic performance …. Each of these takes away from learning by
discouraging a focus on what you are doing and discouraging taking risks that may lead to
failure” (p. 175). Schultz-Bergin also writes that, “Grades end learning opportunities by
essentially saying, ‘This is done’” (p. 175). In short, grading finalizes learning. A dialogic
approach to assessment, in the form of descriptive feedback, however, “continues the
conversation” (p. 175). Comments uncoupled from grading can also lead to increased student
motivation (Butler 1988).

Grading distracts from learning by ensuring that school is not a nurturing place to pursue
inquiry but rather a game to be won. In this game, the student role is not to be a learner, but to
decipher what each individual teacher wants and expects and to deliver on those often
idiosyncratic expectations (Elbow, 1993; Elbow, 1997). Further, grades establish a system of
rewards that encourages students to do just enough, and no more (Blum, 2020; Kohn, 2013). In
addition to limiting extension in this way, grades reduce the chance that students will ever take
risks (Blum, 2020; Gibbs, 2020; Kohn, 2013) because, effectively, grading “teach[es] students to
avoid mistakes at all costs, rather than encouraging them to use mistakes for feedback and further
learning” (Gibbs, p. 97). Laura Gibbs refers to this as the “specter of perfectionism,” the allusive
badge of complete and finalized achievement lurking in the mark of 100% (but not, of course, in
any percentage below, from 99.9% downward).

In our conversation, Jordan reflected on his experience with the disconnection between
learning and assumptions about assessment. In response to my question about what sorts of
responsive assignments he most enjoys assigning and assessing, he said:

I don’t like assignments very much. I really don’t like assessing them, and that just may
be me, but I find it tiresome. The juice for me is what happens in the room between us all,
and a lot of times I don’t really think of English class, of my class, in terms of
assignments. Which can be a real shift, I think, for some students that constant[ly ask]
“Well is this for a grade?” “Is this for a grade?” … Students definitely come in with those questions if they’re used to a context in which this is kind of a job and there are deliverables that are assessed, and I’ll be ranked based on if I produce something that is sort of what this authority figure was expecting.

Jordan went on to tell me about how his own experience as a student has influenced his attitude toward grades. He told me:

When I was in middle school my favorite thing to do with assignments I was given was to do something that was as far away from what I could tell the teacher was expecting but still in some way technically met the requirement.

As a student, Jordan fell into the trap of playing school like a game, a game he sees he own students playing now.

Tragically, schooling’s demand for ranking positions students and teachers as opponents in this game that neither side actually wants to play. In my own classroom, the game was about coercing students into reading what I assigned. The students’ objective was to convince me they had read the assigned pages when they had not, and my role was to catch them in the act of not reading. I designed discussion questions; they would respond according to what they had gathered from a summary they accessed online. I administered reading quizzes; they would cheat off each other. None of us were idle—in fact, we were all engaged in an arduous attempt to “win”—but none of this labor served to achieve our goals of truly engaging with the literature or strengthening literacy. The transformational goal, here, is to get teachers and students onto the same team.

Jordan went on to say, about the act of grading:

Maybe I’m also just kinda lazy, but I’m not a good grader. I love to sit and read a kid’s work and chat about it with them, but I just never have found grades to be very meaningful and I make a lot of it up.

We might read the end of this comment as confirmation of Jordan’s perceived “laziness”: if the grades he gives are not meaningful, this must be because he is failing to fulfill his job
requirements. If we look, though, at what he says that he loves to do, “read[ing] a kid’s work and chat[ting] about it with them,” we can see that Jordan is not actually lazy or underachieving at all, but rather is deeply committed to providing his students with feedback aimed at helping them develop and grow, not at ranking them. He later added that:

Probably some of the most meaningful assessment I do is just in those like, “Come on back, let me see what’s going on. This is cool, here’s a suggestion.” And a lot of times I just tell students right then and there what the grade’s gonna be. Just like, “Yeah, you got an A. Cool. Work on this.”

In this form of assessment, the student’s grade becomes secondary to their writing and, importantly, how they can continue to improve and grow.

Jordan’s approach also reflects the shift away from ranking toward evaluation that Peter Elbow calls for. While ranking reduces a student’s writing (and by extension the student) to a single number that allows for sorting from best to worst, “evaluation means looking hard and thoughtfully at a piece of writing in order to make distinctions as to the quality of different features or dimensions” (1993, p. 191). Evaluation is much more complex than holistic ranking and takes more time (that is, it is not an approach for the “lazy”). For Jordan, assessment must be framed within the complex, and very human, nature of learning, not in a way that ignores that nature. In our discussion of assessment, he reflected:

People are so complicated, and so I find it really frustrating when teachers look at those things and it’s just this kind of banking model, right? Apparently we have not found the correct stimulus for you in order for us to receive the output that we’re expecting, but people aren’t machines and especially in humanities contexts, that just, I think, really kills not just even joy but the real meat and potatoes of what the discipline is.

Jordan called, here, for an approach to teaching humanities that allows space for unfinalizability, for the unpredictable nature of learning. Susan Blum (2020) speaks similarly, writing that:

“Any approach to something as complex as human learning—emphasis on human—must accept that unlike factory products, humans bring multiple and often unpredictable dimensions to the
adventure of learning” (p. 219). She adds that “Any classroom…has both foreseeable aspects and completely magical alchemy” (p. 219). If we eliminate the unpredictable, we miss out on the magic.

Ultimately, grading externalizes learning. For many students, the grade, not the process, becomes the primary purpose of their in-school performance. The “ungrading” movement, so termed by Blum (2020), seeks to shift responsibility away from external determinants back toward the student and what they are studying. The ungrading movement does not call for a reduction in assessment; rather, “ungrading asks us to question our assumptions about what assessment looks like, how we do it, and who it is for” (Strommel, 2020, p. 36). Peter Elbow (1997) calls for approaches to assessment that are more horizontal than vertical: whereas a vertical approach reduces a work’s complexity to a single point in a stack of points (e.g., A to F, 0 to 100), a horizontal approach allows for nuance, for a work’s multiple dimensions. He writes that, “with the vertical emphasis, all the multiplicity is piled on top of itself—and undefined; with the horizontal emphasis, the multiplicity is laid out side by side—and defined” (p. 138).

In the context of a tool like a rubric, elements of a work’s multiplicity are defined by the teacher in the descriptors. When parts of the rubric are left blank, though, those elements are ultimately defined by the student’s work. In taking ownership of their products and those products’ multiple dimensions, students assume responsibility, undersigning (to borrow once again from Bakhtin, [KFP, p. 58]) what they create. Other opportunities for ungrading include conferencing with students to co-determine their grades (Kohn, 2013; Chu, 2020), portfolio assessments (Elbow, 1993; Blum, 2020) and “do-review-redo” processes (Riesbeck, 2020). Ungrading might also look like grading fewer assignments or using minimal marking categories, like a two-leveled pass/no pass (Elbow, 1997). These approaches offer the possibility of
positively shifting teacher-student relationships (Blum, 2020, p. 219), but because they are out of the norm they can often feel too risky to try.

When I was a first-year teacher, I could not see beyond grades. I remember an after-work conversation I once had with Christopher and another co-teacher about this challenge: I told them that at that moment, I saw grades as the only classroom capital I had any access to, the only form of bargaining chip I could play. I don’t remember exactly what my veteran teacher friends told me, but I do remember the two-part sentiment: it definitely does feel that way at first, but it can’t always feel that way, and it was up to me to make the shift. The way I played grades was a form of coercion, a move in the game of student versus teacher. This strategy, unfortunately, is not uncommon: teachers often use the threat of grades, particularly failing grades, to coerce students into following our directions and completing our mandated deliverables. In this case of alignment with schooling’s structural inheritances, our grades do not track learning but instead measure compliance (Strommel, 2020, p. 28). Again, we see the need to get ourselves onto the same team as our students, to engage their interests and agency with them, not for them.

In Pursuit of Student Agency

In decentering herself, Esther makes room for her students to practice agency and develop expertise. She invites them to bring their out-of-school knowledges into the classroom, recognizing that they enrich, rather than detract from, her curriculum. In a teacher-centered classroom, on the other hand, outside knowledges can seem like a threat to teacher expertise (or, at least, the expectation of teacher expertise).

Dara reflected on her first year at Alberti and how she has since shifted her expectations of her own expertise. She told me:

When I first got into teaching and then also my first year at Alberti I really thought, dang, I need to … know everything, and I need to know all the questions, and if they ask me
about Chicago Style I need to know exactly where the period goes and all these things. And now I’ve taken a little bit more of a support role in the sense that you guys are freaking leading the project, I’m just the one to push you along and direct you which way to go, but kind of I’m putting it back on them. … I think personally you develop a lot when you’re in your first five to ten years of teaching because it really makes you reflect back on you and back on your own ignorance and thinking you have to be this authoritarian. When really you can be more supportive in a way.

Dara’s comment demonstrates the way that many teachers, especially new teachers, believe that they must have all the answers and hold all of the knowledges. Of course, this is an impossible task; the system that expects this level of complete intellectual authority from teachers has set them up to fail. This is not to say that teacher knowledge is unimportant: Gholnecscar Muhammad writes that, “To teach geniuses … charges teachers to cultivate their own genius that lies within them” (2020, p. 14). She adds that “teachers need to be truth and knowledge seekers” (p. 15) and that “If teachers do not recognize their own genius, they need to be striving each day for it. Mediocrity is not an option” (p. 15). Dara’s reflectiveness on her “own ignorance” is not a surrender to mediocrity: it is an opportunity for growth and a chance to practice humility inside structures that have taught us to ignore student voice. Dara’s position on teaching itself is one of continual becoming.

Esther likewise shared how recognizing her students’ talents, skills, and knowledges has led to shifts in her teaching practice. She explained:

They’re curious, and so they’re doing their own research about a lot of this stuff. And that’s what I would say—definitely by the time they’re reaching me [as seniors], if kids have interest in something, they are already little wizards and experienced at it because they can research everything on the Internet. We are no longer the holder of the information at schools. All we can do now is just try to create some systems so that whatever the thing is that you’re into, that you sound competent and that you know how to get better at it. That’s all we can help do. We can’t slow this piece down. … I just try to get out of their way half the time, you know? I don’t have a whole lot of pride or ego in those pieces. I don’t feel like I have to be the smartest person in the room. And I think it gets a lot easier for me to realize that nine times out of ten I’m not.
Esther spoke here about the act of recognizing and cultivating student genius, to borrow from Muhammad (2020). Whether or not she is “the smartest person in the room” (as traditionally defined by existing structures and measurements), her teacher genius manifests in this act of cultivation, of making unfinalizable space for her students to develop and grow.

A structure that decenters the teacher is an important feature not only of project-based learning classrooms like Esther’s and Dara’s, but also its historical precursor, the project method. William Heard Kilpatrick’s (1918) project method framed schooling as an opportunity not for coerced preparation for a future life but for practicing life in the present (p. 7) through authentic engagement. It also presented “the hearty purposeful act” as the method’s basic unit. A “hearty purposeful act” has a clear end that offers a challenge, requires the thoughtful application of a range of skills, and develops resilience all while honoring the student’s innate inclination to achieve the goal they set and to be publicly acknowledged for their work. This approach echoes John Dewey’s call for an approach to learning that is grounded in experience (1938/1998).

Kilpatrick warns, though, against project method learning experiences that are driven by coercion. He writes that, for example, a young person who makes a kite because they are told to make a kite will not experience the same learning benefits as a young person exercising their agency toward a self-driven goal (p. 10). Extending his analysis into the context of schooling, Kilpatrick compares the self-driven student, who “looks upon his [sic] school activity with joy and confidence and plans yet other projects,” (p. 11) to the coerced student, who “counts his [sic] school a bore and begins to look elsewhere for the expression there denied” (p. 11). Perhaps more importantly, to the coerced student, the teacher becomes an “enemy” (p. 11), not a source of support.
Notably, Kilpatrick writes that the role of the teacher inside the project method is not one of leading and dictating but of scaffolded facilitation. He writes that, “The teacher’s success—if we believe in democracy—will consist in gradually eliminating himself or herself from the success of the procedure” (p. 13). According to Dewey, this “gradual elimination” cannot end, however, in removal: designing learning experiences that are both grounded in experience and that aim at the development of new knowledges and ideas remain the teacher’s responsibility (1938/1998, p. 96-97). John L. Pecore (2015) traces the development of Kilpatrick’s project method into its current life as project-based learning, paying special attention to Kilpatrick’s concerns regarding incompetent teachers (p. 167). Pecore emphasizes the need for a skilled teacher in the successful implementation of the project method, one who is able to encourage authentic student agency while providing adequate support (p. 159). Pecore writes, “Despite the number of positive benefits, critics of PBL mainly cite the challenges for teachers, especially if PBL represents a substantial change from a consistent teaching perspective and a dramatic departure from the theoretical basis of established practices” (p. 165). Importantly, students who engage in project-based learning are not abandoned to their own devices and pursuits. Rather, in the best of circumstances, they are guided and supported by a trusted teacher through meaningful inquiry, critical consideration, and authentic contribution to the world in which they currently live.

The benefits associated with the inherently student-centered nature of project-based learning require that the teacher’s role shift away from the didactic distributer of predetermined knowledge demanded by traditional learning (Scogin et al., 2017, p. 40). Zhang et al., (2021) write that because “he core concept of student-centeredness highlights learners’ active roles in constructing knowledge and skills through actions in learning activities (Mascolo, 2009)” (p. 2),
teachers in such contexts create effective learning environments by “act[ing] as facilitators who understand how and why students are learning [in order] to guide students’ self-directed and self-determined learning (Friedlaender et al., 2014; Wehmeyer, 2019)” (Zhang et al., p. 2). Styla and Michalopoulou (2016) write:

Projects require that teachers know their learners’ interests. Teachers must listen when learners become excited about a topic, and start asking questions. Facilitating project-based learning requires the kind of leadership skills that allow teachers to help a group of learners to move in the direction that they want to go, without getting defensive when students decide they like their own ideas better. (p. 308)

To be an effective project-based learning teacher, the educator’s expertise must be in both content and in the facilitation of student-driven inquiry and creation (Styla and Michalopoulou 2016; Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

Katherine spoke about the value of knowing her students, particularly in the context of her work at a project-based-learning school:

The connections with students at Alberti is not, I think, average. It seems like the teacher-student connections are stronger and more authentic than other maybe teacher-student connections, from what I’ve seen. And that being said, the feedback piece feels also much more personal. So when I type in feedback about an essay, I feel like I really know the student, and so I can incorporate that into the feedback that I’m giving.

When Katherine assesses students’ work as she described here, she is more than a faceless distributor of numerical values. She supports the development of her students’ writing as a partner instead, someone whose care for her students is demonstrated in her commitment to getting to know them for who they are, not just what they write.

As stated previously, Esther attributed the success of her economic advisement assignment to its being “palatable… small… [and] relevant.” In this assignment, she is responsible for determining the initial topics and gathering relevant resources. She uses her expertise in her content and her knowledge of her students to thoughtfully set up circumstances
that make space for learning to happen. Then, she uses her skills of facilitation to support her students as they engage with the assignment. That is, in decentering herself, Esther does not turn over her work to the students: rather, she does her work in a way that invites her students in as active participants.

Esther reflected to me that she is actively seeking to balance what she brings to the classroom with what the students bring, a shift that represents a significant departure from the assumed balance of knowledge in schools. She explained:

I’m working really, really, really, really, really hard to create activities and learning opportunities that I don’t care what the outcome is. I don’t want to even pose a question that the only way for you to answer it that feels right is no, this, or yes, that. So I’m really trying to kind of back that off because I think too often that’s what makes us look biased. And I feel like that’s not really learning, we’re just trying to set the stage and they can tell: they feel like we’re tricking them. And especially being in a liberal town, your conservative kids, they just feel like there’s an agenda now, right? And they don’t have a voice. And, I mean, you’ve gotta be careful with your topics you still pick, don’t get me wrong—that being said, I don’t go into it with an agenda hoping that they’re gonna reach some specific conclusion, which I think is really important.

Esther’s reflection reveals that in this assignment, and in her teaching generally, she is working to move away from coercion toward student agency, away from what might feel like trickery toward a space where students contribute what they think, not just what they think the answer is.

For Jordan, “authentic engagement” is the outcome he is most often looking for in his classroom. This goal is quite distinct from the “no, this, or yes, that” answers teachers often look for. He also separates this objective from the more typical goal of skill development, telling me, about his own experiences as a learner:

I feel like I’ve got most of those skills and I don’t have them because I was drilled on them. I have them because I had regular, authentic experiences with texts that got me excited in a community that felt safe.

He acknowledged, though, that engagement “is kind of a squishy thing to assess.” When I asked for more clarity on what he would count or consider as authentic engagement with a text, how he
knew it when he saw it, he responded honestly, “I don’t always know. I think it’s really hard to
know.” He added, though, that one way he identifies authentic engagement is by looking for
whether or not a student is “writing sentences that match [their] own voice and who I know
[them] to be but are also about this text.” He added:

Because I do a lot of work outside of just responding to texts and having students write
about their own thoughts and their own experiences and stuff, I do get a sense for how
students write, what their voices are. And I think that’s the thing I’m looking for the
most, is I know how you write when you care. So did you put some real writing in? Or
are you doing this regurgitating thing that you’ve been taught to do?

I told Jordan that what I thought was beautiful about this approach is that it cannot be bottled. He
replied, “That’s it. You can’t—you have to have those relationships.”

When the role of the teacher is not to develop student agency but is primarily to assign
grades, to rank and sort students in a way that reduces them and their work to the flatness of a
single number, our relationships are under threat. Although Peter Elbow favors evaluation over
ranking, he warns against even evaluation’s over-application. He writes that in such
circumstances, “Students fall into a kind of defensive or on-guard stand toward the teacher: a
desire to hide what they don’t understand to try to impress” (1993, p. 197). Jesse Strommel
2020) writes that the “hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages
competition by ranking students against one another” reduces any chance for “agency, dialogue,
self-actualization, and social justice” (p. 28). He adds that “grading is a massive coordinated
effort to take humans out of the educational process” (p. 28). When I said that Jordan’s
assessment strategy cannot be bottled, part of what I meant is that it cannot be automated: only
humans can develop the human relationships that make it possible for our students to know that
they are known. Teachers know that it is these relationships that keep the collective heart of a
classroom beating.
Conclusion: Relationships, Identity, and Being Known

Unfinalized learning experiences allow for students to be responsible to their learning, not their grade. Unfinalized learning experiences also make room for teachers to be responsible to their students directly, not through the channels of imposed structures or methods. This continual process of becoming is in favor of and shaped by the students themselves; the outcome is once-occurrent, never-repeatable, marked and shaped uniquely by the class community that produces it. Unfinalizability leads to learning when teachers know their students and respond to them.

Nicole described to me how she learns about who her students are as people, not just names on her roster. One Humanities Amped strategy Nicole started using when she and I co-taught together, and has continued to use since, is opening meeting. During opening meeting, students and teachers take about five or ten minutes at the beginning of class to share praise, needs, and announcements with each other. The simple structure allows for a wide range of conversations and topics and gives students a chance to share parts of their out-of-school selves with one another and their teacher. Nicole explained that her students:

like to get to talk about their day, and I have kids who will come in and they’ll be like, “I can’t wait for opening meeting because I want to tell about what I did this weekend” or, like, “I got a turtle,” and they’ll tell me about it in the hallway, and they’re like, “I can’t wait to talk about it in opening meeting.”

These topics, weekends and new pet turtles, usually have no place in the classroom, especially when every instructional minute is accounted for within the script of a mandated curriculum. They are, however, the stuff of students’ lives, contributing to who they are and representing what they care about.

Nicole continues in this same spirit throughout class time. She also told me about the way she arranges her desks:
I try to put an extra desk in each group so that I have somewhere to sit when I come float to them so that I can sit with them and engage with them. Sometimes even just while they’re working independently I can—I guess I shouldn’t do this, but I will talk off-task with them. Which maybe is terrible but it also does help them decompress. I feel like, especially in middle school and high school when they’re on that block schedule, they have so much academic time, no downtime, that they need to know it’s OK, as long as you’re not off-task the entire time, you can take a few moments to be a real teenager.

Nicole clearly sees value in providing students an opportunity to be not just students, but people. She also wants to make this value visible. Her hedging, saying, “I guess I shouldn’t do this” and “maybe this is terrible,” reveals that she is deeply aware of how incompatible this value is with those imposed by traditional schooling structures. To an administrator or district representative, these off-task moments might seem like a waste of valuable “instructional minutes.” If Nicole’s students were machines, perhaps it would be a waste. But, of course, they are not machines, and if Nicole wishes to shape her curriculum and teaching to best serve the humans in her classroom, she needs to know who they are. Nicole explained that what she learns in these informal moments ultimately informs her teaching. She told me, “I’ll find out things about them that I didn’t know, and then [that] I can use to talk about or as an example in class.” Because of the time Nicole takes to learn about her students, they have the important opportunity to see themselves and their interests reflected in her course content.

Isabella likewise makes space within her approach to content to learn about her students and their identities. She told me:

If we’re reading a poem about identity, what are three of the identities that you value the most, or that you present most to the world? What are the three that you identify with that maybe you don’t show the world? And then we’ll read a poem about the different identities that we have.

Like Nicole, she applies what she learns about her students toward their learning. She told me that:
One of the things that I try to do with identity is I have them fill out a survey, and then they can continually add to it. But the survey is basically like, ‘What is the stuff that you’re into?’ so that I can give you specific book recommendations or things that are not for my class, they’re not assignments, but they are interesting, and you’ll like it.

Katherine uses a current events assignment not only to encourage her students’ engagement in reading about the world in real time, but to learn more about them. She told me:

I found it so interesting what they picked. … I was like, “Oh, this kid really likes J. Cole, OK, because he reads about that every week.” Or “This kid seems to find really interesting science articles, hmmm. I’ll have to push more on that.”

Just like Nicole, Katherine uses what she learns about her students to inform her teaching.

Without such intentional interest in learning about who their students are, no educator can hope to be responsive to them, culturally or otherwise. Asking students what interests them and giving them space to share is simple but profound work. It communicates to students that in the space of this classroom, they are not grade point averages or potential test scores but people who deserve to be recognized as people. More than that, they are people who deserve classrooms full of life, charged with the energy and wonder and discovery inherent in unfinalizable learning.

To be a student in these teachers’ classes is to be known. It is to be seen as human and to be celebrated. In these classrooms, students are participants who are invited into learning and question-asking and answer-finding and creation. They are “actual and irreplaceable, and therefore must actualize [their] uniqueness” (KFP, p. 41).
CONCLUSION

The story of this project is about classroom life and classroom joy. It acknowledges the need for teachers to be facilitative experts, to be protectors of the vital spaces that student creativity requires in order to grow. This story is a human one, a counter-narrative inside an otherwise cold and mechanized system of schooling that values efficiency at the expense of organic, unpredictable, and emergent learning. If we seek to recognize students as “actual and irreplaceable” (KFP, p. 41), as responsible for their actions in and on the world, we must never be guilty of overlooking their humanity.

In the spirit of decentering the teacher, as explored in chapter five, ongoing research in the area of classroom unfinalizability and responsibility could test these claims by turning next to the students. The teachers whose stories I have featured here are experts in their experiences, and we must recognize students as experts in their own experiences as well. Classroom observations would help to provide a sense of what unfinalized learning experiences look like moment to moment, on the ground, in all of their messiness and unpredictability. Student reflections on these experiences, both as they are living them and from a temporal distance, would likewise provide valuable insight to help inform pedagogical intervention. How students feel mid-project, or mid-assignment, for example, might differ distinctly from their feelings following the project or assignment’s conclusion. Continued research could better inform the ways that educators balance risk-taking and fear, or freedom and guidance, or high-stakes and low-stakes outcomes.

Additional research might also continue to interrogate the relationship between teachers and mandated curricula. What circumstances or values empower teachers like Jordan and Lucille to “sneak in” pedagogy they believe is more sound that what the curriculum calls for? What forces are at work that prevent other teachers from supplementing or “refurbishing” what is
given, and how do teachers perceive these forces? Research in this area might uncover new possibilities for unfinalizable learning, or it might call further into question the assumed value of many of our current schooling structures.

In the time being, these teachers and others like them press on, continuing to create opportunities for their students inside those structures that devalue and even threaten unique expression and dialogic response. The experiences that they facilitate, or that they “sneak in,” center creativity, promote inquiry, and validate student voice despite the persistent assumptions that school should be mechanized and made efficient in the image of industrialization. In these teachers’ classrooms, learning is humanized.

The trouble with humans, of course, is our constant state of imperfection, of inconsistency. It would be foolish to assume that any of these very human teachers is always able, every day and every hour, to create what we might consider a perfect learning space for perfect flourishing. The point, though, is not perfection: it is the ongoing act of becoming. It is the commitment to continued growth, to the inherent unfinalizability of learning, to the pursuit of responsibility and the belief that school can and should be a place marked distinctly by joy. As Bakhtin puts it rather poetically, “nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken” (PDP p. 166). He was writing about Dostoevsky’s novels, but I confidently apply it here: the ultimate word of teaching practice and about teaching practice has not yet been spoken. There is growing yet to do, for our students and for ourselves: we need only make room for it.
APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

TO:                         
LSUAM | Col of HSS | Dean's Office - 
Interdisciplinary

FROM:                      
Associate Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE:                      
13-Apr-2021

RE:                        
IRBAM-21-0479

TITLE:                     
Participatory Literacy in English Language Arts 
Classrooms

SUBMISSION TYPE:           
Initial Application

Review Type:               
Exempt

Risk Factor:               
Minimal

Review Date:               
13-Apr-2021

Status:                    
Approved

Approval Date:             
13-Apr-2021

Approval Expiration Date:  
12-Apr-2024

Re-review frequency:       
(three years unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 20

LSU Proposal Number:

By:                        
Paul Mooney, Associate Chair

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the 
   Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of 
   human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in 
   the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration 
   date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification 
   of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the 
   study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the 
   individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the 
   study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/research

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APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORMS

CONSENT TO SERVE AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

1. Study Title: Participatory Literacy in English Language Arts Classrooms

2. Purpose of the Study and Study Procedures: The purpose of this study is to explore the use of various texts in secondary classrooms and the ways that students are expected to respond to those texts. The investigator will conduct individual interviews with participants about their experience as secondary educators using a range of texts (literary, informational, digital, etc.) with students. The investigator may also collect documentation (e.g. lesson plans, syllabi, assignment instructions). The investigator may audio- and/or video-record any participants’ interview responses.

3. Risks: This study presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Participants may risk feeling embarrassed by something they share during the interview process. However, participants are encouraged to only share what they feel comfortable sharing. Participants will be identified by a pseudonym in any publications or presentations resulting from this research, so they will not be publicly identified with their words. Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality. Only the investigator will have access to the files in which the collected data is stored.

4. Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participants in this study. However, the research may prove beneficial to the field of education.

5. Contacts: The investigators listed below are available for questions about this study M-F, 9AM-5PM.
   Emma Gist egist2@lsu.edu 501-690-8484
   Dr. Susan Weinstein sweinst@lsu.edu 225-284-8113

6. Performance Site: Various (the participants will be teachers, but they may be interviewed either in their schools or in other sites, based on convenience and pandemic requirements).

   B. Exclusion Criteria: Individuals who are not secondary school educators in humanities or social science classrooms.

8. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Participants will be identified by pseudonyms. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Recorded interviews and documentation will be stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher’s personal computer.
9. Financial Information: There is no cost for participation in this study, nor is there any monetary compensation for participants.

10. Right to Refuse: Participation is voluntary. At any time the subject may withdraw from the study without penalty.

11. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the Investigator’s obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Printed Name: ________________________________________________

Participant’s Signature: _______________________________________ Date: ___________
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

Participatory Literacy in English Language Arts Classrooms

Guiding Questions for Interviews

(The interviews will be open-ended; below are sample questions that may be used, although the investigator will also employ follow-up questions based on participant responses.)

1. Briefly describe your teaching context (subject, grade level, school specialization if relevant).
2. What types of texts do you assign to students to read? Why have you chosen to assign these texts?
3. What forms of media do students engage with in your class?
4. What texts do you wish you could teach? Why would you like to teach these texts? What barriers exist that make teaching these texts difficult?
5. What sorts of writing, or composing, is expected of students in this class?
6. How are students expected to respond to reading in this class? What sorts of responsive assignments do you give?
7. What sorts of responsive assignments, from your perspective, generate the most student engagement?
8. What sorts of responsive assignments do you most enjoy assigning and assessing?
9. What methods do you use to assess your responsive assignments? When you assess these assignments, what are you seeking to measure (e.g. content knowledge, language fluency, critical thinking)?
10. What application does the students’ responsive work have outside of the classroom, if any?
11. How important is student creativity in your classroom? What strategies do you employ for promoting student creativity?

12. How structured is your curriculum? What role does adaptability play in your curriculum design and implementation?

13. What strategies do you have for valuing and celebrating your students’ unique identities and contributions in your classroom?
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