A Sense of Belonging: Writing (Righting) Inclusion and Equity in a Child’s Transition to School

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Literacy studies with a sociocultural and participatory view of learning must confront the issue of institutional belonging. Without a sense of inclusion, there are no relationships within which literacy learning can unfold. In this article, I probe this sense from the vantage point of a small Black child as he transitions from a preschool program serving primarily low-income children of color to a kindergarten in a predominantly White, middle-class area. This ethnographic case study is based on four months of observation in the last half of the preschool year (focused on the child’s participation in classroom composing practices) and five months of observation in the beginning of kindergarten (with similar focus). The analysis centered, first, on the child’s situated encounters with other children that could mark him as out of place. The child faced varied kinds of challenges linked to intersecting societal forces, including race, class, gender, and notions of writing competence itself. Second, the analysis considered the contradictory roles of written language in the negotiation of inclusion. Literacy test results situated him outside the classroom “norm”; literacy as a symbolic and communicative tool situated him as an active social negotiator. The case reveals the flimsiness of the ladder of literacy skills as a way of understanding a child’s school experiences and the importance of critically aware teachers who help children construct common ground upon which they all belong as learners, players, and peers.

“How come he’s in kindergarten, and he can’t spell his name?”

Brittany was eyeing the paper of her tablemate, Ta’Von, who had just asked his teacher for help writing his name. Brittany was not impressed. But Ta’Von kept his eyes on his paper, gripping the pencil with his right hand as Ms. Norton leaned over to help this left-handed child hold the pencil like her, a left-handed teacher. As Ms. Norton supported her young student, she commented to Brittany that Ta’Von could write his name; he was just learning “the kindergarten way. Just like you; you’re in kindergarten but you’re learning to make your a differently.” And then she moved over and put her large hand over Brittany’s small one as they worked together on that a.

Ta’Von, a Black child, had just entered a new place called “kindergarten,” a place that was strikingly different from his play- and talk-centered, and racially diverse, preschool. These differences were realized in his new position as a racially
and economically “different” child and, moreover, in his participation in new curricular and testing practices, particularly those stressing written language. Moments of socially marked difference—and of his dislocation from a place of respect—could accompany power-infused (and unequal) relations with peers. Those relational dynamics were structuring a classroom space composed of children coming together and moving apart, caught in the flow of social, academic, and physical distancing (Massey, 2005).

Like us all, Ta’Von wanted to belong—to have friends and to be one. To understand the challenges facing poor and minoritized children, educators have traced their progress up a thin ladder of benchmarked skills. Indeed, the literature on schools and young children, along with the popular press, overflows with advice about how to get the so-called “at risk” ready for the literacy skills demanded by school (e.g., see the New York Times archive of articles inspired by Hart & Risley’s 1995 book on the language “gap” between children of different racial identities and socioeconomic status; see Miller & Sperry, 2012, for a critique).

In contrast, in this article, I examine Ta’Von’s negotiation of a place in kindergarten, aiming to describe a child’s perspective on challenges to inclusion. In so doing, I find that the staircase of skill steps becomes an oddly tenuous structure in dynamic, interactive space. Moreover, written language proves to have a role both in producing unequal relations and in countering that production.

In the following introduction, I set the situational stage for the complex case of Ta’Von’s transition from a place that he explicitly “loved,” his preschool, to a more pedagogically regulated and demographically “mainstream” kindergarten in a local elementary school.

**Changing Educational Spaces: A Situational Overview**

From Ta’Von’s very first day of kindergarten, curricular and relational shifts were evident in how students could access participatory respect. In Ta’Von’s preschool classroom for 3- to 5-year-olds, diversity of knowledge and know-how was taken for granted. In varied ways, all children joined in on class activities; no one commented on anyone’s right to be included. In kindergarten, though, the first week of school was filled with literacy testing: a child knew or did not know, could do or could not do, met or did not meet the benchmarked skills. As Brittany knew, to be judged “ready” for kindergarten in the district, a child should be able to write his or her name and quickly identify at least 10 letters and their associated sounds, and, if “bright” (Ms. Norton’s term), should have already begun to read conventionally and write words phonologically. Based on kindergarten checklists and quarterly timed tests, children were distributed linearly on the stepladder of success, as accumulating skills evidenced their march toward college and career success (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Brittany seemed to have appropriated the discourse of school; in her view, Ta’Von had no legitimacy as a kindergartner—he wasn’t even on the bottom rung. Ms. Norton tried to intervene, but Brittany continued to voice this view (just not around her).
To add to his relational challenges, in his old preschool, Ta’Von had been one of the gang. The district’s preschool served primarily low-income Black and Latino children, along with a small number of children (per class) who were differently abled (e.g., children labeled as autistic or with Down’s syndrome). Ta’Von’s best friend had been Salvia, a little girl whose first language was Spanish. Like him, she loved to sing, pretend play, and run at or near the front of swirly lines of children on the playground. Kindergarten was a very different demographic landscape.

As in city schools generally (Orfield, 2009), the demographic norm for this small, Midwestern urban district was that children attended elementary schools in distribution patterns related to racialized residential housing patterns. However, a consent decree had led to efforts to integrate schools because of notable differences in the educational outcomes of Black children compared with White children. All students’ learning potentially benefits from their interaction with others whose cultural and social experiences may differ from their own (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Coba, 2016). But of course, physical integration does not mean social integration, as Ta’Von would learn right along with writing and reading.

In Ta’Von’s new elementary school, a small number of non-neighborhood Black children, all low-income, like Ta’Von, had been assigned to this primarily White school (assignment dependent on parents listing the school as one of their five choices). The neighborhood children tended to score well on kindergarten’s opening tests; according to Ms. Norton, many parents shared their knowledge of the initial assessments and prepared their children. Those children from outside the neighborhood, like Ta’Von, tended not to do as well.

Against this institutional and politicized backdrop, Ta’Von was transitioning from one institutional space to another. Each space was dynamic, as teacher and children negotiated relations that constituted the evolving experience of being there—that is, of the place itself (Massey, 2005). Children’s writing vividly illustrates this negotiation, since the use and control of any communicative and cultural tool is tied up with relationships with others (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 1993, 2013; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). To belong in a space, then—and to be a respected student in the eyes of others—is not some private possession. As Brittany’s actions suggested, in the public space of a classroom, to be a respected student is a public judgment, and that respect may be racialized (e.g., Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The Ongoing Challenge of Belonging: Research Purpose

This article is based on an ongoing case study yielding a situated view of a child interacting with, and revealing, the sociopolitical and cultural dynamics of school that are potential obstacles to inclusion. Elsewhere I have described Ta’Von’s “amazing” progress as a writer, in the words of Ms. Norton (Dyson, 2016). Herein, I examine his “dislocations” in classroom space (Massey, 1994, p. 147) — that is, the kinds of situated “encounters” with others (Massey, 2005, p. 20) that could mark him as out of place. The research questions concern: (a) the nature of the dislocations entailed in negotiating belongingness, particularly given a child’s identity as “different,” and (b) the potential roles of composing in these challenges and negotiations. Through
this project, I aim to highlight the social negotiations that undergird classroom dislocations, peer inclusion, and access to an equal education; these negotiations bring to the fore the complex role of school composing in mediating a sense of belonging. Below I describe my conceptual and methodological tools.

**Conceptual Backdrop: From Climbing the Literacy Skills Ladder to Negotiating Relational Space**

As suggested in the opening vignette, in entering kindergarten, Ta’Von faced challenges of inclusion, of belonging. The study of those challenges was undergirded by three interrelated concepts: school transitions, classroom dislocations, and dialogic literacy.

**Transition to School: Shifts in Practices and Participation**

In making a transition into formal schooling, Ta’Von was negotiating a change in categorical level (i.e., he was no longer a “preschooler” but a “kindergartner”). Negotiating such a change entails children potentially confronting complex new configurations of practices—of value-infused, recurrent activities, within which they learn social roles, expected actions, and the kinds of knowledge that are most valued. Thus, negotiating a place in a new official world involves the interweaving of relational and academic maneuvers (Cazden, 2001).

To join in and participate in new practices, children have no choice but to bring their past experiences to bear on the present (Bakhtin, 1986). When they do so, they “develop”: they learn about the possibilities of participation and, in the process, differentiate old practices and new ones—along with gaining new understandings of themselves, their social worlds, and their institutional places (Miller & Goodnow, 1995). In response to present circumstances, we all draw on our histories and thus make our futures. Nothing comes from nothing.

Thus, the sociocultural theorist Rogoff (1995, p. 155) writes, “When a person acts on the basis of previous experience, his or her past is present. It is not merely a stored memory. . . . [One’s] past participation contributes to the event at hand by having prepared it.” Rogoff’s point seems Bakhtinian in its underlying philosophy—every social action, every use of a symbolic tool, including every utterance, reverberates with meanings drenched in past use, even as it points toward the future. It is this notion of the past as present that also undergirds Corsaro’s studies of preschool cultures and the configurations of practices that “prime” children for their educational futures (Corsaro, 2014).

However, the dynamics of new places are never equally open to everyone’s past (Yosso, 2005). As Cole (1996) explains, adults, as cultural and (I add) ideological beings, organize for, and interact with, children based on the futures they imagine for these children; thus, those futures are constrained or furthered by dominant cultural and ideological beliefs, a notion Smagorinsky and Smith (2000) tie explicitly to schooling. The superiority of Whiteness, for example, is interwoven in the fabric of American society, as is that of economic privilege (Harris, 1993). In schools, these ideological positions may be present in the teaching decisions of those
Notions of the “prepared” child with school-relevant experiences, the “proper little boy” or “sweet girl” who behaves “appropriately,” the “bright” child who can handle challenging material—all these judgments are cultural and ideological, and all complicate the learning paths of young children of color and of economic constraint (Delpit, 2012).

Thus, the study of a child’s transition from one classroom to the next is the study of how that child has participated in valued practices in other places and how those past experiences can—or cannot—be drawn upon in the next. It must be remembered, though, that a classroom is not one kind of culture.

In schools, children are confronted not only with official practices, undergirded by official agendas and values, but also with unofficial or child-controlled practices that form in response to the official (Corsaro, 2014; Dyson, 1993, 2003). It is unofficial peer worlds that touch on children’s deep desires to take control of their daily worlds, to share control with others, and to have relationships—to belong (Corsaro, 2014; Nelson, 2007). A study of a child’s transition, then, is never the study of a lone individual. Children are members (to varying degrees) of local cultures, and their participation in those cultures will be the source of their resources as they enter new collectivities, new social organizations for companionship and learning. In Ta’Von’s case, the majority of his new peers were from an essentially “gated” community of primarily White, economically privileged families. As his unfolding story will reveal, Ta’Von had to work hard to overcome (at least partially) the “othering” of peers.

**Racialized Encounters on the Path to Inclusion**

Schools and their classrooms are often spaces that juxtapose people on “previously unconnected narratives” or trajectories (Massey, 2005, p. 39). In Ta’Von’s kindergarten, these trajectories could be emanating from the neighborhood surrounding the school or from neighborhoods some distance away, as was Ta’Von’s (indeed, he spent the week moving between his parents’ and his grandmother’s homes).

Thus, in his transition from preschool, Ta’Von was entering relational space that was undergirded by a complex history that dynamically interconnected city spaces and constructed the “norm” and the “different”—that is, those who could more easily be seen as, and could experience, not belonging. That kindergarten place, that regulated space for child ranking and learning, was, on a larger scale, organized by relations of distance between historically “Black” and “White” sections of the city. Such distances often become a relational dynamic in classrooms with demographics like Ta’Von’s. As has been particularly documented among Black and White children, when there is a small number of children from a particular racial group in a classroom with a clear majority of children from another group, children may choose to self-segregate (Rodkin, Wilson, & Ahn, 2007; Wilson & Rodkin, 2011). Such self-segregation is visible in spaces within schools that allow for more student choice in companionship, as in the human boundaries that form in school lunchrooms and on school playgrounds (Thorne, 2005).

In Ta’Von’s school, the Black children were spread out among classrooms, so there was a small number in each. However, Ta’Von reached out socially to
everybody, despite his varying success. Within classroom relational space, his unfolding story intersected with those of others on their own trajectories. In this article, these encounters—the intersecting narratives of small children—tell both Ta’Von and us something about this experienced place called school. The meaning of this place is not inherent in the school itself but constructed within classroom spaces, within a school, within a city with a racialized history of residential and thus school de facto segregation.

Clearly there is much more involved in transitioning to a primary school than knowing the ABCs. In changing locales, explains Blommaert (2010), travelers are not making a simple shift; rather, they bring experiences and resources into a stratified space, undergirded by vertical scales of value. Thus, aspects of one’s self will reverberate differently across spaces and, potentially, be open to judgment. For Ta’Von, these aspects would include not only his initial literacy assessments but also his physical self, his material possessions, and his repertoire of ways of relating to others. Ironically, given the power of written language assessments to threaten his access to academic respect, these tools themselves also had a role in his negotiation toward belonging—toward inclusion.

**Literacy as Domineering Force and Relational Tool**

The nature of early curricular offerings has changed significantly over the last two decades (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). Even in kindergarten, time for learning through play and the expressive arts and the emphasis on sociality have decreased as time spent on direct instruction of measurable academic skills, especially literacy, has increased. This narrow focus has long been evident in schools serving low-income children, but more recently the push for public accountability has widened to public schools generally (Bassok et al., 2016). Given differences in children’s home experiences, one might imagine that the institutional emphasis would be placed on building on students’ experiences to support diverse literacy pathways (Avineri & Johnson, 2015; Genishi & Dyson, 2009). But this is seldom the case. In response to teachers’ instruction, students are to move up the linear ladder of school skills according to the strict tempo of school districts’ benchmarks, from kindergarten entry on. Learning selves are realized within the time-space regulations and configurations of a differentially experienced place called school.

Thus, by design (by the importance placed on knowing narrowly defined and traditional school skills at school entry), a perceived “gap” between low-income children and dominant-group children may begin to take form from the get-go. If children come from different social and cultural places, if they have different experiences and knowledge to build upon, then clearly a linear view of learning, and a regulated curriculum not “permeable” to children’s resources, will produce inequality (Dyson, 1993, 2016). That inequality is on display in classrooms and realized in literacy practices and official child grouping. Consider, for example, how a small number of children may collectively fill the seats at a teacher’s small-group meeting table—that is, how children may move across space at a particular time to take their public place as a particular literacy “ability” group.

Moreover, the emphasis on accountability through measurement (i.e., mea-
surable, countable skills) has affected the nature of attention paid (or not paid) to efforts to integrate the schools. The emphasis has been on measuring the relationship between a numerically desegregated school and achievement test scores. Far less attention has been paid to what goes on inside classrooms to pedagogically build on diverse students’ resources and to construct classroom cultures of respect and belonging (among the exceptions, Cohen & Lotan, 2014).

From the very first day of school in Ta’Von’s kindergarten, displayed literacy knowledge could threaten a child’s dignity, as Brittany illustrated; she disrespected Ta’Von by questioning whether he belonged in kindergarten. In a related way, Allison Pugh (2009) uses the term “economy of dignity” to refer to children’s use of popular forms of participation as tokens to earn respect and inclusion. She studied children’s desire for and use of forms of consumer culture to belong in peer worlds and, also, how that use reverberated in families of different cultural histories and economic means. In Ta’Von’s kindergarten, the display and use of written language could function as a token of, or at least a bid for, inclusion as a respected kindergartner in both official (teacher-governed) and unofficial (child-governed) worlds. Initially, written language seemed to mediate membership—that is, to potentially threaten children’s dignity (and not innocently, given the relationships between race, class, and literacy assessments; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

However, for Ta’Von, daily composing also played a role in his negotiation of inclusion; through that practice, he could initiate, or even display, his relationships with others. Written language, like all symbol systems, is learned through exploration of, and purpose-driven participation in, the use of the system (Vygotsky, 1978), most often in multimodal activity (i.e., within one composing event, children may interweave drawing, writing, singing, and, enveloping all, talking; Dyson, 1989). Relationships can be initiated, displayed, and also disrupted by the ways we enter into ongoing conversations, be our entry oral or written. A speaker or writer’s words, reverberating with echoes of the past, are addressed to others from an ideological vantage point regarding what’s happening (Bakhtin, 1986). One hopes—Ta’Von certainly did—for reciprocity or at least a little interest.

In brief, this article presents Ta’Von as he negotiates his transition from preschool to elementary school, encountering and negotiating unexpected dislocations, trying to belong in school. Literacy, and writing in particular, was at first a mark of his “low skill level,” as his teacher would initially describe it, but writing became a carefully and confidently used social tool; this tool use anticipated, rather than followed from, his rising test scores. His aim was not only to “make Ms. Norton proud of me,” but also to be “friends” with everybody, including me. Below I detail the study’s methods, through which I gained access to Ta’Von’s social worlds.

A Case Study of Belonging

Ta’Von, my guide into the relational space of early schooling, was 4 years old when I first met him in his preschool (and was about to turn 8 when I stopped formal data collection).

I was interested in conducting a case study of a child’s composing (in any me-
dium) as that child moved through early schooling. Ta’Von was a child who regularly attended preschool, had an older sister in the local public schools, was judged as within the broad range of “normally developing” by his preschool teacher, and paid me no particular mind, oriented as he was to other children—all criteria for initial case study selection. I reasoned that a child with an older sibling in an elementary school would be likely to attend a local school as well (which did happen).

Shifts in our relationship, though, were evident on the first day of kindergarten. When I met Ta’Von and his dad walking down the school hall on that first day, Ta’Von lit up; despite being a White lady almost six decades his senior, I was greeted as “my friend from preschool!” In an unfamiliar place, I was a familiar face, and we were pleased to see each other.

In the preschool, Ta’Von had rarely explicitly attended to me. I was, as I remained, the friendly, quiet adult who watched the goings-on, wrote in a little notebook, and switched on a small recorder (“so I’ll remember what happened”). Unlike other adults, I made no move to help, correct, or discipline, but attended carefully, almost always smiling, sometimes laughing, and occasionally “ah”-ing sympathetically when tumbles were taken or LEGO constructions collapsed. In the kindergarten class, though, I was greeted with a grin and a wave on each visit, and I was hugged goodbye when I shut my notebook and readied to leave. I felt, and was treated like, an old friend. (Before another year went by, he was calling me at home if he had not seen me for a while. “I was worried about you,” he said once.)

Below, I briefly describe the sites through which I came to know Ta’Von; in the interest of space, I provide a summative view of featured contrasts between the preK and kindergarten contexts, including participants, curricular goals, and material arrangement. Although the site sections are arranged chronologically, the ways in which preK social relations and curricular practices figured into Ta’Von’s becoming a kindergartner were only clear in hindsight. “Findings” will thus leak into these “Methods,” and, along the way, Ta’Von will be situated in his classrooms.

The Preschool Site and Participants: “I Really Really Loved Preschool”

As a kindergartner, Ta’Von looked back with affectionate nostalgia at his public preschool, a part of the school district’s early childhood center (for more on that nostalgia, see Dyson, 2016). The center was on the edge of the city’s downtown, in an old, renovated commercial building. Ta’Von rode a small bus to the center for the half-day program, from noon until 3:30 p.m. He was one of sixteen 3- to 5-year-olds, including three children who were differently abled and were not yet speaking. The group had balanced numbers of girls and boys, and included six Black children, four who were Latina/o, three who were biracial, and three who were White (as indicated by parents on school forms).

Ms. Sheila’s room had been recommended to me by both a colleague and the early childhood center’s principal, because she was an experienced and respected teacher. White, in her thirties, and bilingual in Spanish and English, Ms. Sheila extended a calm, inclusive manner to all her children. The children’s diversity was the classroom norm, and the children themselves embodied their diverse identities—some spoke multiple languages, others had culturally marked hairstyles (like
Ta’Von’s braids) or ways of referring to kin (“tia”), and on and on. Ms. Sheila seldom verbally marked age, gender, or race, but, collectively, all media were culturally and racially inclusive. For example, when Ms. Sheila read her class *Hooray, a Piñata!* (Kleven, 1996), which featured a friendship between a Latina and a Black boy (like Ta’Von and Salvia’s), Ta’Von excitedly responded with “It’s like *Matthew and Tilly* [Jones, 1995]!” Unlike Kleven’s book, in which children lived in pretty city houses, Jones’s book featured more realistic drawings of children in a tired-looking apartment building. But, as apartment-dwelling Ta’Von articulated, its lead characters too were “a girl and a boy [as] friends”—a Black girl and a White boy.

All children in Ta’Von’s class participated however they could in the routines of the day, as organized by the attentive Ms. Sheila. It was understood, as the older children explicitly said, that one had to “practice” some activities, like name-writing, and eventually Ms. Sheila and a progressing child could say “You/I did it!” Ta’Von was prone to say this too when others achieved, and, as will be illustrated, he kept up this behavior throughout kindergarten. As will also be illustrated, the older preschoolers themselves appropriated this inclusiveness.

The preschool’s curricular emphasis was on language development. Everyone—parents, teachers, aides, and students—was encouraged to talk, especially in playful contexts most often chosen by the children themselves. As for written language, it was, for the most part, embedded in daily routines. When children arrived, they signed in by writing their names (some on large easel paper, some on lined primary paper, and some, like Ta’Von, on a small slate). After the sign-in, children answered the question of the day with Ms. Sheila’s help (e.g., they put their name under YES or NO in response to questions like “Do you like trains?” or “Do you like onions on pizza?”). Then the children played in chosen centers and, within centers with malleable material (like clay) or manipulable units (like toothpicks), they might choose to make letters, guided by their own names and those of others.

During “group meeting,” which followed the hour of center play, children would be read stories, often linked to a study unit (e.g., growing oats, peas, and beans; the workings of the post office; the making of a piñata). They also did the district-required quick lesson on phonemic awareness—choosing words that began with a certain sound, for example, or figuring out if words rhymed. Once a week, children dictated their thoughts about a favorite book or a study unit topic to their teacher or an assistant, to which they could add their own writing. Of course, children were free to choose to draw, write, or paint during center play, but Ta’Von rarely did so. He preferred to compose stories by talking with Salvia while they manipulated small animal figures or LEGO bricks.

The emphasis on child agency—that is, on children as decision-makers—was furthered and reflected by the organization of material space. There were no assigned seats. The room was organized, though, as certain kinds of objects belonged on certain shelves or in certain boxes; there was also a corner with hooks for children’s coats and floor space for their boots. The guiding principal for room arrangement was to allow easy child movement among multiple optional activi-
ties, all of which would be enveloped by child talk. Children could, for example, choose to build with LEGO bricks at an available table, enact a breakfast scene in the housekeeping center, or put together puzzles as they chatted away in a corner nook.

In sum, Ta’Von’s preschool experience unfolded in a playful mode, in which Ta’Von’s interests and relations drove, and were informed by, classroom activities. This approach to early schooling was about to change dramatically, as was the absence of hierarchical (“highest” and “lowest” students) labeling.

**Kindergarten Site and Participants: “You Have to Learn”**

Imagine, now, a child moving from the relatively open space for play described above to a kindergarten classroom with assigned seats and teacher-regulated movement through time, space, and tasks. Mix in the change in the child’s companions and their cultural worlds. That was the situation Ta’Von faced as, nervous but excited, he entered his new school and kindergarten.

Understandably, Ta’Von sharply differentiated preschool and kindergarten. As he told me, in kindergarten “you have to learn,” and, to this end, he felt time was spent mainly in assigned “literacy centers and math centers.” Those centers could involve alphabet puzzles, magnetic letters for word-making, and even enactment of read stories—but Ta’Von did not regard them as play. They were assigned tasks, not chosen activities wrapped up in playful talk with a friend.

The school itself was situated in a comfortably middle-class neighborhood of tree-lined streets and homes laid out on blankets of green. I knew, from the local newspaper, that the school regularly ranked higher on state achievement tests than other schools in the district and, indeed, higher than the state average. In his classroom, Ta’Von was one of 23 kindergartners; of those, 4 were Black (2 boys and 2 girls). The rest of the class (9 boys, 10 girls) included 14 White children, 2 Asian children, and 3 whose parents marked the “mixed” category box.

Ta’Von’s teacher, Ms. Norton, was in her sixties and near retirement. Perhaps reflecting longstanding habits, aspects of Ms. Norton’s daily discourse contrasted sharply with those of Ms. Sheila. For example, throughout the school day, Ms. Norton regularly referred to “boys” and “girls,” categories Ms. Sheila rarely used. In addition, Ms. Norton’s shared picture books represented mainly a mainstream childhood, which contrasted with the diverse childhoods in books read in preschool. In particular ways, Ta’Von had been repositioned by official discourse—his maleness underscored, his cultural and racial self erased. Still, like Ms. Sheila, Ms. Norton was attentive and encouraging to each child, always preserving a child’s dignity—her response to Brittany in that opening vignette was vintage Ms. Norton.

Although she considered them excessive, Ms. Norton did perform the mandated literacy assessments, including those required during the first week of school. Given his opening literacy assessments, Ms. Norton never considered Ta’Von one of the “bright” children (who were all from the school’s neighborhood). But she considered his “attitude” (i.e., his response to her directions) good, his writing progress “amazing,” and his imagination fabulous. Ta’Von himself took great pleasure in Ms. Norton’s praise of his work.

Although enormously time-consuming (e.g., there were six pages of test re-
results for each kindergartner each quarter), the tests did capture the major goal of kindergarten, which was to move up the skills ladder. Writing skills were included in the path up the ladder. Among the official writing standards were orienting the writing directionally on a page, using letter-sound connections to make simple words, correctly spelling high-frequency words, and drawing pictures to match text. By the middle of the school year, children were expected to be spacing between words and, moreover, able to write at least three ideas or facts about a topic.

In the first of these assessments, Ta’Von named 22 capital letters in a minute but only 8 lowercase ones, and he did not articulate any sounds for shown letters. He was, said Ms. Norton, on the bottom of her classroom skills ladder. Nonetheless, two months later, he could name all the letters and 25 sounds; more importantly, almost immediately, he composed with evident pleasure, relying on every possible symbolic resource—talk, drawing, and displayed names and numbers, along with a reading cadence that deliberately voiced unwritten symbols.

Ta’Von’s soon-to-be illustrated enthusiasm for composing and, moreover, its usefulness as a social tool pushed against the individualism that pervaded the kindergarten classroom. In the preschool, I had moved easily through classroom space and, indeed, felt its openness in my relaxed physical self; in the kindergarten, I tightened up, making myself as slim as possible so as to ease between the tables and chairs or slip onto the edge of the small classroom rug, which seemed stuffed with children during whole class lessons. Underneath the officially designated spaces and relations, though, an unofficial world grew as children interactively constructed their own understandings of who belonged with whom and who did not. After a discussion of data collection and analysis, readers will be eased into those kindergarten spaces and witness some of the daily drama of Ta’Von becoming a “literate” kindergartner.

**Data Collection across Sites**

Documentation of Ta’Von’s transition began when he was a 4-year-old preschooler. After a month of becoming familiar with his class and its routine practices, I spent three additional months, the last of the school term, observing Ta’Von and his companions participating in those practices. I concentrated on his composing (his deliberate manipulation of symbols to represent meaning) in any medium. Most composing events or activities were highly social and involved manipulatives, especially LEGO bricks and small figures (animal or human), or dramatic role-play. I observed approximately two and a half hours per week. I took scratch notes (written up after observation as formal field notes) on child actions and interactions, audiotaped events filled with talk (for a total of 22 hours), and took pictures of Ta’Von’s productions.

Ta’Von turned 5 in August and began kindergarten, and I was there the first day to continue the observations. I again became familiar with official school practices, especially those involving composing, and then concentrated on Ta’Von as a classroom participant. Once more I observed approximately 2 to 3 hours per week, although as the complexities of the transition began to weave themselves through my data, I extended the study through January (that is, I observed Ta’Von...
in kindergarten for a total of 5 months). Now when I observed composing events, they involved almost exclusively pencil and paper; I collected copies of all Ta’Von’s products, and Ms. Norton saved products for me on the days I was not there. Again, I audiotaped talk during composing (for a total of 50 hours). This talk revealed a new view of Ta’Von, not the comfortable friend and peer, but a child reaching out to others and sometimes seeming to be caught off-guard by peers’ comments. Still, that composing on paper, initially so new, became central to his social efforts.

Analyzing the Documented Transition

In order to understand the challenges of transition, and the role of writing in that transition, I studied the data in a series of analyses. I began with a taxonomy of Ta’Von’s composing practices (recurrent, officially and unofficially valued activities involving purpose-driven manipulation of symbols), first in preschool, then in kindergarten. I considered each practice as enacted through described events. As has been articulated by ethnographers of language (Ahearn, 2012 Hymes, 1974), each enacted event is driven by some purpose(s), involves named participants, uses certain symbolic tools, and proceeds through interactions, themselves consisting of verbal turn functions. In Ta’Von’s events, those functions were interactional (e.g., greeting or inquiring about center choice), narrational (i.e., representing or dramatizing a role or an event), directive of self and/or other (e.g., stating plans, monitoring [saying each letter while writing one’s name]), and heuristic (i.e., seeking information).

As the analysis continued, I did an inductive thematic analysis of both preschool and kindergarten field-note content. The purpose of the original project, to examine the transition process, did not entail the concept of encounters or that of negotiating shared classroom space. These concepts’ analytic presence became clear as themes of gender, race, and social class emerged strongly in the kindergarten data, as did the integrative theme of belonging. During this process, I read Massey (2005), who argues for a view of belongingness as the dynamic product of social negotiation among a shifting populace (rather than static possession of some mapped place). This concept freshened my vision of Ta’Von’s transition, particularly because Massey portrays these encounters among people on different life trajectories as always involving power and political inequality. In my work, I thus identified “encounters,” episodes (topic-related interactions within events) in which the topic included the appropriateness of some aspect of Ta’Von’s self (i.e., physical, material, social, academic). Finally, I described the roles composing played in Ta’Von’s negotiation of inclusive relational space (i.e., of social belonging) in the kindergarten classroom. Both encounters and a role for composing will be on display in the narrative to come.

Throughout the analysis of Ta’Von’s kindergarten encounters, the preschool data kept coming to mind, as points of comparison and contrast in relations and participation were identified. My interest here is in understanding Ta’Von’s encounters as they illuminate the challenges to his legitimacy as a child among children in a place, called school, drenched in literacy skills.
Composing Inclusion in Public School Spaces

In the findings to follow, I illustrate major kinds of classroom encounters between Ta’Von, an experienced preschoooler, and his peers as their life trajectories intersect in kindergarten. Along the way, I illustrate composing’s contradictory role in constructing inclusive space.

Encountering the “Other”: Dislocations Fronting the Dynamic Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class

It is the second week of kindergarten. Ta’Von is sitting at his desk, awaiting morning snacks and a turn to use the bathroom and get a drink. Vida, an Iranian immigrant with long, black, wavy locks, seems bothered by Ta’Von’s hair.

“You have girl hair,” she says accusingly, metaphorically pushing him outside the circle of appropriate boys.

“Yeah, you have girl hair,” agrees Adam, a White boy with a short blond haircut. “No,” answers Ta’Von calmly. “It’s boy hair.”

For the rest of the snack time, the usually smiling Ta’Von is quiet and somber.

Ta’Von’s hair was a source of personal pride and, moreover, it was imbued with the care of his mother, who spent a good deal of time braiding his hair. He had often reported his mother’s new braiding to Ms. Sheila in the preschool. And, in fact, on the very first day of kindergarten, when Ms. Norton asked if the students had done anything special to get ready for that first day, Ta’Von said that his mother had given him new braids and it had taken a long time. But in the above vignette, Ta’Von was judged out of place—a boy with “girl hair.”

Hair can serve as a racial marker among young children (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), but in Ta’Von’s preschool, hair was not a topic of peer conversation. Braids were common among small Black boys at the preschool (and some fathers), but they were not visible anywhere at his new school . . . except on his head. His peers at his work table, all White, appeared to have no knowledge of this hairstyle. His hair had ideological reverberations; in the intersection of race and gender, Ta’Von’s braids seemed to interrupt dominant cultural values and beliefs about proper boys. But Ta’Von was not to be shoved out of bounds.

After that encounter, Ta’Von turned to his writing book. Composing was valued in his class, as he had already learned. Ta’Von now exploited its representational function, mainly through drawing. His drawn people had been circles with eyes and mouth, and lines emanating out from each circle, symbolizing appendages. After that encounter, though, Ta’Von consistently added braids to his pictures of himself and, if colors were available, made his face dark brown, saying as he did so, “I’m Black.” Ta’Von thus linked his intersecting racial and gender identity with hair. One role of composing, then, was self-declaration—that is, articulating one’s identity in a negotiated social world.

The encounter about Ta’Von’s gendered hair was initiated by Vida, another child new to the school and the neighborhood. She was, in fact, a child who regularly
responded to Ta’Von’s friendly overtures (e.g., his queries about “What are you drawing?”). He was often ignored, especially by a tight group of neighborhood girl friends. Indeed, Ta’Von associated Vida with the Black girls, who were responsive, and as will be illustrated, he drew her as such. However, distinct gender categories were part of how Vida interacted with the world. And when Ta’Von came to school with yet another hairstyle, she again voiced an objection, but she seemed to move from being critical to being curious:

On this day, Ta’Von has come to school with his hair in two Afro puffs. Vida herself has her hair on top of her head this day—she has a bun, with a ribbon around it.

Vida: You have a flower on your head. [accusingly]
Ta’Von: I have two meatballs, one on the back, and one on the top.
Vida: You have a flower on your head. . . .
Ta’Von: That’s not a flower. . . .
Vida: Do you sleep with this? [genuine, curious]
Ta’Von: Yes I do. . . . It’s my meatball. That’s what I call it. I sleep with it.

This response seems to satisfy Vida.

Ta’Von did not respond unkindly. He was calm, as he was in the first encounter, but this time he did not appear to be bothered by her comments and question.

The name “meatball” was consistently used by Ta’Von to describe this hairstyle throughout the project, and like his braids, the style had racial connotations. Once, a year later, a child in the lunchroom asked Ta’Von if I was his mother. Age was the identity category that first came to my mind—but this was not so for Ta’Von. He took off the baseball cap he was wearing that day and bent his neck down so the top of his head was displayed to his peer. Then he ran his hand over his head, calling attention to the texture of his hair, then worn in a short Afro. He asked if his peer remembered the day his mom had come to the school, and “she had two meatballs?” With my less tightly curled hair, I could not be his mother. I was, he reiterated, “my friend from preschool.”

The early encounters emphasize the intersection of race and gender were dramatic; they reverberated throughout the year in Ta’Von’s representation of himself. However, there were other encounters highlighting the intersecting societal categories that dynamically shaped his identity (Crenshaw, 1989); among those categories were social class—or having access to money, to reframe the category with child sensibilities. For example, although “water bottle” was not included on the list of required kindergarten supplies, children brought water bottles. None of the Black children, all labeled “low-income,” did so. Those private water bottles were decorated in gender-normative ways (for example, Disney princesses for girls, superheroes for boys). Seeing this situation, Ta’Von remarked to me, “I’m gonna borrow one from Wal-Mart.” I responded that Wal-Mart was not like a library—no lending, just selling. The classroom had a water fountain, which children without
water bottles, like Ta’Von, used. It was the public water fountain, for those without a private bottle.

In this category of encounters, I have highlighted Ta’Von’s own articulations of his sense of dislocation and the underlying societal ideologies and inequalities he experienced (e.g., what does a proper boy look like, and what supplies do kindergartners have?). Nonetheless, gender, race, and class intersected in his sense of himself as a kindergartner, and single categories could not necessarily be analytically fronted. Below I add to these factors by presenting another category of encounters, one involving perceptions of writing competence as tied to needing help.

Encountering Literacy Evaluations: Dislocations Fronting Official and Unofficial Judgments of “Needing Help”

Encounters that highlighted Ta’Von’s written language competence began, as already illustrated, early in the school year; readers may recall Brittany questioning Ta’Von’s legitimacy as a kindergartner because of his name writing. As Ms. Norton pointed out in that episode, Ta’Von could write his name—he knew the letters he needed and the order. Indeed Ta’Von had been aware of his need for help—and proud of what he viewed as his ongoing success, as illustrated in the exchange below:

Ta’Von: Ms. Norton, can you help me with my name?
Ms. Norton: I’d love to. . . . What does your name start with?
Ta’Von: T-A-apostrophe-V-O-N
Ms Norton: So . . . remember the T goes down [modeling on her paper] and across. . . .
Ta’Von: [after having done so] I did it!

Ta’Von’s stated pleasure seemed primed by the enacted ideology of learning evident in preschool, particularly the normalcy of difference in skill and of expectations for improvement. And that “I did it!” was an echo of preschool talk. Thus, composing, viewed as a textual product meeting standards (or not), could problematize Ta’Von’s academic competence. However, through composing, viewed as an evolving production, Ta’Von could also affirm himself as a competent learner.

From the beginning of school, Ms. Norton was pleased that Ta’Von was open to—and even eager for—her help. Nonetheless, in the kindergarten classroom, with its hierarchy of children and their written language knowledge, seeking help and its complement, being offered help, placed him some distance from the “bright” children, as viewed by both Ms. Norton and the “bright” children themselves. There were two properties of help episodes that affected how Ta’Von experienced them. The first property had to do with whether Ta’Von saw himself as needing help. If he did, he tended to respond to offered help with “thanks.” However, if a child began helping without asking first, and especially if Ta’Von did not see himself as needing help, he was clearly irritated.

For example, on the very first day of school, Ta’Von was assigned to the puzzle table with Connor, a neighborhood White child he had just met. Ta’Von
had reacted enthusiastically when Connor said he was five: “Five! We’re the same age!”—that is, *we have age as common ground*. At the table, Ta’Von picked up the alphabet puzzle, which was similar to one he had assembled in preschool; in that place, puzzles were activities chatting children did side-by-side, each with his or her own puzzle. Ta’Von thus began working on the puzzle, but Connor did not pick out a puzzle for himself. Instead, he watched Ta’Von and, as Ta’Von searched for a piece to fit in a space, Connor selected and offered Ta’Von the supposedly correct one. Ta’Von did not say “thanks.” Rather, he told Connor, “I can do this myself.”

“I can help,” responded Connor.

“I don’t want you to help,” said Ta’Von. “I know how to do it. I can do it all by myself.”

After Connor left, Ta’Von said to me in a voice full of exasperation, “Why did he try to help me?” His irritation suggested that he had experienced Connor’s offered help as pushing him from the circle of competent children. His response (“I can do this all by myself”) was how Ta’Von typically responded when he felt no need for help. There was, though, a qualification that involved the second variable property of help episodes—whether they involved reciprocity, a mutual helping. In such episodes, children were collegial, working side-by-side as they talked—at least some of the time—about their work. In these episodes, offered help was not interpreted as an insult, even though it might be rejected.

Collegiality had been pervasive in preschool, as had the inclusive social space thereby constructed. As a brief but typical preschool example, consider the following easy conversation among children varying in race, age, and literacy skill:

Ms. Sheila has just placed letter stencils out on a table. Salvia, Ta’Von, D’ante (also Black), and Damian (Latino), all 4 years old, make their way to the table, soon joined by 3-year-old Xahria (Latina). As Xahria watches, each child searches for, and begins tracing, the letter that starts his or her name.

*Ta’Von*: I did it! [traced the T] Now I need an A. I have a A in my name.

*SALVIA*: Ta’Von, here’s these [stencil cards to check through for an A].

*D’ANTE*: [to Xahria] Put the card [an X] up here. [He shows her how to trace the stencil.] X for Xahria. [She has a go at it.]

Damian is whistling. Salvia whistles too, and Ta’Von tries.

*SALVIA*: You can’t do it, Ta’Von. You’ll have to keep on practicing.

… [omitted data]

*Ta’Von*: I need the N. I just need a N for a minute. Where’s the N?

*SALVIA*: I don’t have it.

*Damian*: I have a N. I have a N. Do you have an N in your name?

*Ta’Von*: Yeah.

*Damian*: I have a N!

All that letter naming and arranging seems academically helpful. But that help was
embedded in an easy conversation that interconnected the children in an inclusive space of engaging activity.

In the kindergarten classroom, such conversational give-and-take (and the constructed inclusive space) was less available—dependent as it was on Ta’Von’s particular companions (cf. Benner & Crosnoe, 2011; Pica-Smith, 2009). It emerged after two months of school, when Ta’Von was assigned to sit with a racially diverse group of children who responded easily to each other; these children happened to be outside the circle of highly ranked “bright” children: on either side of Ta’Von sat Nia (labeled by the school as “mixed”) and Vida. In this dynamic, Ta’Von engaged in comfortable, task-oriented conversations that included mutual helping. Indeed, in this discursive context, Ta’Von could function as one whose knowledge was valued:

As a follow-up to a “senses” unit activity, the children are to draw and label four objects they have “felt” on this day. At Ta’Von’s table, Vida is absent, so he interacts mainly with his closest tablemate, Nia:

**Ta’Von:** [after drawing] There’s my white ball. Ball. [writes “BuoL”]

... **Nia:** I got a Spiderman ring!

**Ta’Von:** I got an apple.

As Ta’Von writes “AL,” Nia repeatedly and slowly says, “I got a Spiderman, Spiderman,” her pencil poised but not moving. The rhythm of Ta’Von and Nia answering each other has been broken, and Ta’Von offers help:

**Ta’Von:** /s/

**Nia:** S [writes S]

**Ta’Von:** /i/

**Nia:** [writes I]

**Ta’Von:** /d/

**Nia:** [writes D]

**Ta’Von:** /m/

**Nia:** [writes M]

**Ta’Von:** Good job!

Nia, who sometimes drew pictures at home for Ta’Von and other “friends,” was comfortable with the help. As illustrated here, for Ta’Von, writing came to serve a role, not only as a marker of academic neediness, but also of valued expertise. Sometimes one needed help, sometimes one helped. There were no set roles among these reciprocal friends and colleagues, whose relationship persisted through the year.

Encountering and Bridging Social Distance: Negotiating through Composing

Ta’Von’s help for Nia was a way of solidifying their social connection. More direct efforts at social connection, mediated by composing, could occur; these happened
most markedly when Ta’Von seemed to be reaching across social distance amid the intersecting forces of gender, race, and class.

Ta’Von’s preschool experience had primed him for using symbolic productions to reach out to others. He had, for instance, made LEGO planes and drawn pictures for Salvia, and, collectively, his class had made presents and cards for varied occasions. In kindergarten, he initiated such use of writing to connect with an elusive group of neighborhood girls:

One day in January, during a free-choice period, Ta’Von sits down in the empty chair at the “art and writing” table. That chair positions him near the tight social circle of Hannah, Riley, and Caitlin (all White neighborhood girls). The three friends are talking energetically with each other about birthdays. Ta’Von soon starts a list of children to invite to his birthday party (which would be in August, although his birthdays have always been strictly family affairs; parties for peers are most common among the economically privileged [McKendrick, Bradford, & Fielder, 2000]). Ta’Von now asks each of the three friends how to spell her name:

**Ta’Von:** Hannah, how do you spell your name? How do you spell your name?

I need to make a lot of invitations.

Hannah spells her name, and Ta’Von says, “thank you.” He repeats this procedure for Caitlin and Riley. Then, Ta’Von makes another move:

**Ta’Von:** [to Hannah, as he picks up another sheet of paper] This card’s for you.

Hannah briefly looks and then turns away. Ta’Von hesitates a moment before initiating again:

**Ta’Von:** What are you making?

**Hannah:** I’m making a card for my dad because tomorrow’s his birthday.

Ta’Von proceeds to ask if “we” will celebrate it—that is, if there will be a treat for “us, for the class.” Hannah does not know.

Ta’Von had deliberately worked to lessen his social distance from the three girl friends. He adopted a topic he knew they were interested in, asked an almost irresistible question (how to spell one’s name), and, using a familiar practice, made a birthday card for the dominant (most talkative and loudest) of the three—a task he abandoned when she showed no interest (perhaps because it was not her birthday). He then explicitly referenced their common identity, their “us”—“the class.”

Ta’Von made other attempts to mediate his relationships with writing. For example, he composed his own permission slip for going roller-skating with the class when his mother did not quickly sign the official form. He wrote a letter for me to take to Salvia’s teacher, asking that teacher to let Salvia come and visit him.
And, when seated next to Vida, he made an effort to solidify his perceived special friendship with Vida; it was not overly successful but it also was not a failure.

In that event, Ta’Von used composing to portray Vida as sharing social space with him. He first drew a self-portrait, orally labeling himself “Black” as he colored his face and his braids with a brown crayon. Next to his self-portrait, he drew Vida, labeling her “Black” too and coloring her face brown before adding her long hair. (She helped him draw her hat.) And there they were, two Black children, a boy and a girl, standing side by side. (Vida, as noted earlier, was not Black, but she was of darker hue than, say, the White friends noted above.)

Ta’Von then wrote two parallel sentences proclaiming that he liked to see Vida and she liked to see him (see Dyson, 2016, for a full analysis of the production). He turned to her with excitement:

**Ta’Von:** Vida, look what I writed. “I like to see Vida. Vida likes to see me.”
**Vida:** I don’t like to see you always. I like to see my sister always.
**Ta’Von:** Oh. But not me. I didn’t know that. [**seriously**]

After a moment’s pause, Vida, perhaps feeling some sympathy for Ta’Von, responds.

**Vida:** I like to see everybody.
**Ta’Von:** Oh! [pleased] I’ll write that. [begins writing that Vida likes to see everybody]

Ta’Von and Vida, easy communicators, were sitting side-by-side. Ta’Von literally colored over (if inadvertently) potential racial borders. His very declaration that he was Black and Vida was, too, suggested that he knew that race mattered in the ease of relationships. Vida was comfortable with her depiction. She was, though, highly sensitive to gender borders, as earlier noted. Nonetheless, Vida’s “everybody” would include Ta’Von, and this was fine with him.

Ta’Von negotiated his way with Vida more easily than he had with the three friends above. It is hard work to reduce social distance, particularly when it is reinforced by the tangled social forces of gender, race, and class. It is not surprising, then, that the most playful and the most intellectually substantive interactions happened when Ta’Von was assigned a seat among children (like Vida) with whom he had negotiated common ground. To illustrate such interactions, I turn to the last of the categories of encounters, those centered on that old preschool pleasure, play.

**Encountering Play and Its Lack: Dislocations Fronting Shifts in the Curricular Space for Play**

On the first day of kindergarten, Ms. Norton, like many kindergarten teachers in the district, told her children that she had made gingerbread-men cookies for them as a special treat. But they had run away! The children were to take a tour of the school, looking for those runaways. As the children made their way down the hall in a single, quiet line, as instructed, they were quiet and pensive . . . except for Ta’Von. He was on his tippy-toes, thrusting one foot ahead of the other, like
a stealth detective; his fingers formed binoculars over his eyes. He could not suppress his delighted grin, as he looked this way and that, hunting for the escaped gingerbread men.

In preschool, children would sometimes move down the hall with some imaginary identity Ms. Sheila—or a child—had suggested. One day, in the middle of a train study unit, Ta’Von’s peer Alisa shouted to her classmates as they made their way from the gym to the classroom: “Guys. Come on! We’re choo-choo trains.” And Ms. Sheila joined in the low choo-chooing, as children’s circling elbows chugged them back to the classroom.

In kindergarten, children were to walk silently, in a straight line. The stealth detective Ta’Von never tiptoed down the hall again. As noted earlier, he decided that kindergarten was not a place for play, unlike preschool. Indeed, his preschool teacher, Ms. Sheila, would tell her children, “Go play,” a phrase never heard in kindergarten. In preschool, Ta’Von’s most verbal play happened during LEGO-building with Salvia. He made moving objects, like planes; she was partial to houses. Still, they playfully stepped into each other’s worlds, sometimes melding them.

A brief example of their playfulness: One day Ta’Von was making a plane that helped him do his job—picking up “sick cars” and taking them to be fixed.

“I never let me crash,” declared Ta’Von.

“You did one time,” said Salvia. “We went to the policeman.”

“You went to the police? Are y’all gonna tell the police on me?” said Ta’Von with alarm.

“YES!” said Salvia.

In kindergarten, life was different. As noted earlier, Ta’Von saw kindergarten as a place where “you have to learn.” However, when assigned seating situated him with children with whom he had reciprocal relations, Ta’Von could play, especially during composing. Even though classroom writing assignments typically required reports of true events, Ta’Von entered into the present of the unfolding composing scene, elaborating in playful ways on the drawing (cf. Genishi & Dyson, 2014).

In the following vignette, Ta’Von is sitting in his latest assigned place between Nia and Vida; Jacoury, the other Black boy, is now near Vida, at the end of the table. (He was moved there when children at his previous table complained that this relatively tall, big-boned, chunky child crossed into others’ space.) Ta’Von’s reciprocal relations with his seatmates furthered play on paper, the main focus of this section, but they also help him ease a tense encounter between Vida (on one side) and Nia and Jacoury (on the other); the encounter is based not on race and class, but on national culture:

On this December day, Ms. Norton has just read the class a book about how families celebrate holidays around the world. She has asked the children to draw their family getting ready for a holiday. As I sit down at Ta’Von’s table, Vida declares:

**VIDA:** I celebrate Nowruz [a traditional Iranian festival].

**JACOURY:** You can’t celebrate naughty.
Nia: She has naughty-hood.
Ta’Von: [firmly] We’re not talking about naughty.
Vida: We’re not talking about naughty-hood.

Ta’Von is there for Vida. The “naughty” talk stops and, as the interaction continues, the assignment is recalled, the claimed holidays are restated, and Ta’Von again mediates relations among Vida, Nia, and himself.

Nia: Ta’Von, what are we suppose’ to do again?
Ta’Von: We’re suppose’ to draw a holiday that we celebrate and get ready for.
   . . . I’m doing birthdays.
Nia: I celebrate Christmas.
Vida: I celebrate birthdays.
Ta’Von: I celebrate birthdays too!
Nia: Put me in the picture because I’m gonna have a birthday. . . .
Ta’Von: I celebrate birthdays AND Christmas. [he adds Nia’s name to his picture; she has already added his name to hers]

At Ms. Norton’s direction, the children stop drawing for a bit and write. Ta’Von writes a piece that maintains his position between Vida and Nia (and complements Jacoury, who has himself switched from Christmas to birthdays):

I Me SeuBatnig Brdan [I am celebrating my birthday]
   . . . And I me seubatnig Kimis. [And I am celebrating Christmas.]

(spaces added for ease of reading)

Then, after drawing begins again, so does the negotiation and the play:
Ta’Von is drawing his present on a large table with a birthday cake. Nia and Vida each have a large table with food too, and each is drawing people dancing—Nia’s people are dancing for Christmas, Vida’s for Nowruz. In response to Ta’Von’s teasing, Nia and Vida align themselves in social space:

Nia: These two are dancing.
Ta’Von: These two are dancing and kissing!
Nia: I said they’re dancing.
Ta’Von: They’re kissing too.
Nia: [No they’re not.
Vida: //Uh uh. [indicating “No”]
Ta’Von: That’s my present [referring to box drawn on edge of depicted table]. It’s falling down. [with urgency] So I’m gonna catch it. Oh no! My present!! . . . My present is falling! . . . It came down here on my head! It dropped on my head hard, and it hurted bad, and I had to
Ta’Von and his tablemates were negotiating an inclusive space. They improvised on their celebratory “reports,” which became present-day play on paper. A cultural divide did appear. In the end, though, the children had more commonalities than differences; all had gatherings around a table, filled with special food, and sometimes accompanied by dancing (not kissing!).

Concluding: The Relational Dynamics of Classroom Belonging

Shortly after the above “holiday” event, Ms. Norton said recess would be inside on that day because the playground was deep in snow. She slid a disc with lively music into the CD player. In the blink of an eye, all the girls plus Ta’Von were moving rhythmically on the meeting-time rug, turning it into a dance floor. Soon several boys, perhaps emboldened by Ta’Von, ventured into the girl-dominated space. As the music played, a common dance floor was constructed in that usually keep-your-bottom-on-the-rug place. Driven by an appealing activity and the company of peers, all of equal status in that event, children constructed a shared space mediated by music and movement—just as some had done earlier at their seats, mediated by composing and play.

This article did not begin in an inclusive space. Rather, it began with Ta’Von, fresh from preschool, continuing his learning trajectory but being pushed outside the realm of appropriate kindergartners. Whiteness and economic privilege were the ideological norm, embodied in the identified “bright” children dominating the top of the skills ladder. That norm was there, too, in the disappearance of race and class, evident in the images not portrayed, the cultural childhoods not textualized, the variations in home dwellings not presented, the possibilities of family languages never noted.

Despite the presentation of literacy as a matter of individual skill mastery, the parents of the neighborhood children, reported Ms. Norton, shared information about kindergarten testing. Most of their children could rattle off letters and sounds, and the “bright” ones had begun to read and spell phonologically. Yet, on the ladder of literacy skills, written language is stripped of its social use and situational sense and divorced from its roots in symbolic play and drawing (Vygotsky, 1978); Ta’Von, then, located outside the neighborhood network, had limited means for making sense of unfamiliar, meaningless testing tasks.
Given the kindergarten classroom’s cultural and ideological landscape, Ta’Von, just a little child, faced big challenges in negotiating a sense of belonging. His dislocations, his experiences of being out of place, instantiated his recent shifts in institutional life; as illustrated in this article, episodes of dislocation occurred because of:

- **Intersecting societal constructs of gender, race, and class**, amid a shifting demographic landscape.
- **Assessed academic standing on the literacy ladder**, amid curricular and ideological shifts about learning.
- **Social distance itself**, amid relational shifts from the preschool community to the more socially fractured kindergarten classroom.
- **Constricting space/time for imagination and play**, amid shifting curricular concerns.

Nonetheless, Ta’Von worked to negotiate inclusion. He learned quickly that, in this classroom, respect was tied to written language. Indeed, the “bright” children’s ranking on literacy assessments may have influenced their nonreciprocal responses to Ta’Von: not only did his physical self mark him as an outsider, but his need—and desire—for teaching seemed to mark him as not an academic equal. Nonetheless, composing events became important occasions for Ta’Von’s social efforts. These events were not motivated by the desire to climb some skills ladder; rather, they were motivated by the desire to negotiate inclusion in a present social space. His communicative progress as a writer was supported as he orchestrated his growing resources to respond to, and participate with, others.

In fact, from the very beginning of kindergarten, composing was useful in Ta’Von’s negotiation of inclusion. It allowed him to declare himself as a Black boy with braids and, as his writing form and content progressed, to affirm his identity as a learner (preserving the preschool celebratory “I did it!”). Moreover, he deliberately used writing to negotiate social connections. Perhaps most important of all, in the company of responsive peers, he could be a worthy companion, a knowledgeable helper, and a playful participant. By February, he was writing more, and more imaginatively, “than the bright children,” as viewed by Ms. Norton (although this wording implied that he himself was not “bright”).

Throughout the study, Ta’Von’s negotiation with class members continued; in events characterized by situated reciprocity, he could voice varied aspects of himself in a dynamic social space. Lack of access to a space of reciprocity may contribute to lower literacy achievement by “minority” children who are relatively isolated in classrooms serving mainly “majority” children (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011). Learning, after all, is a relational matter.

It is not a problem if children are most comfortable with those with whom they share some aspect of their identity. However, it is a problem if we as educators do not work toward an inclusive classroom. Why should a 5-year-old have to work as hard as Ta’Von did to belong? Moreover, powerful learning is potentially
promoted by children from diverse perspectives engaging with each other—but
only if they have a sense of equal status in a collective engaged toward common
ends, only if they are metaphorically (or literally) dancing together.

In Ta’Von’s case, his preschool experience carried lessons about the normalcy
of different sorts of diversity, the progressive process of learning, and the embed-
dedness of literacy in the everyday. He would “have to keep on practicing,” Salvia
had said to him, and then he could say, “I did it!” During the transition to kinder-
garten, these lessons may have helped him persevere, learn to compose, and, along
the way, make new friends.

Ta’Von’s case itself offers lessons about the kinds of struggles desegregated
but unintegrated classrooms may pose for children, particularly when there is
no critical awareness of the damage unexamined ideologies of Whiteness and
economic privilege can do. When children seem to have led a socially restricted
childhood, like a number of White children whom Ta’Von encountered, they may
not engage reciprocally with those they regard as “others,” not “us.” Especially now,
in a political season that has dislocated oh-so-many of us in this American space, I
am struggling to maintain hope for our democratic experiment. May Ta’Von’s use
of language to negotiate connections and bridge differences inspire our efforts to
help all of us in the “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005, p. 149) of this country
construct common ground on which to grow.

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