

## **Boxed In and-and Busting Out** **Playing in the Borderlands of Literacy Education**

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## ***Boxed In and-and Busting Out: Playing in the Borderlands of Literacy Education***

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As literacy researchers working with a group of Alberta Grade 1 and 2 teachers, we have observed and heard described several of the complexities educators face in practicing well amidst the multiple and competing dimensions of contemporary literacy instruction. The politicization of curriculum and the outcomes-driven machinery of their provincial context, the structures for communicating classroom assessments within their school district's student information system (SIS), and the increasing dominance of systematic synthetic phonics as a public/professional instructional expectation are factors the teachers note as in/validating and compartmentalizing their knowledge, skills, and ways of being, and that of their students. The boxing in and bordering off of their instructional processes and capabilities have been repeated points of reflection and exasperation in our recent conversations.

“See this is what [our SIS] does, makes you try to fit your thinking into a very confined space.”

“It's like you've got this [assessment] accountability, you've got your curriculum, and then you have this philosophy around the value [of literacy play]. You know that it's valuable but the three just don't want to be together.”

“So you're forced into boxes really.”

We have heard of the teachers' frustrations with the systems and assumptions that seek to box in and box out possibilities in their practice and we have heard of ways in which they inventively respond to their provocations. Conceptualizing instructional contexts and practices as research assemblages, the study in which this article is based investigates how early elementary teachers work at, with, and within the current conditionings of school-based literacy practices, particularly as they bring the affordances of playful(l) literacies together with the formalized curricular expectations of Grade 1 and 2 classrooms. The importance of play as a literacy (Wohlwend, 2019), as an embodied form of text (e.g., Lenters, 2016; Nicolopoulou, 2016; Paley, 1990; Wohlwend, 2011), and as a science of reading (Rand & Morrow, 2021) is a premise of the teachers' practice and our research. As such, our goal in this article is not to *make* the case for play-based literacy instruction but to work within it.

Drawing on teacher interviews, photographs, and extended observations with a Grade 1 French Immersion teacher and class, the purpose of this paper is to explore liveable possibilities in language and literacy instruction for the “right now” of literacy education (Kuby et al., 2018). Focusing on examples in which teachers seek liveability by conceptualizing pedagogy as an “and...and...and...” proposition (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25), our purpose is not to settle the troubled waters of literacy education, but rather to illuminate contours of possibility as teachers encounter literacy education’s conceptual and material enclosures and exceed their confines. We follow this Grade 1 teacher’s participation in curricular attentions to affect (Boldt et al., 2015; Hickey-Moody, 2013; Johnston, 2020; Leander & Ehret, 2019; Lenters, 2023) as a practice of caring for and curiosity about a shared world in early elementary literacy instruction. Thinking with theoretical concepts provided by the interdisciplinary study of borders, and with posthuman conceptualizations of affect and emergence, we ask what is mobilized in the conjunctive encounters of and-and relations in literacy education. We describe three vignettes of Grade 1 students’ outdoor storied play, examine pedagogical rescalings of the familiar impermeable borders of instructional practice, and attend to rebordering efforts that press upon them. We conclude with a call to locate pedagogical practice in emergence so educators may recognize and move-with the complex and sophisticated ways that literacy arrives in and moves through children’s learning.

As we move toward these possibilities, we first consider literacy education’s conceptual and pedagogical “trouble without end” (Tsing, 2015, p. 2), recognizing many of the boxes and borders the teachers have described as “scars of history” (Marcard, cited in Kolossov, 2005, p. 619). Like other “institutionalized lines, fences and walls” they were “born in dichotomies and fashioned in dialectics” (Konrad, 2015, p. 1).

### *A Contested Field*

Questions of literacy, what it is, what it does, what it gives and requires, and how people, particularly children, are and become literate, and even more particularly how they learn to read and write, are questions of significant scholarly, educational, individual, and public investment. Such questions occur with/in and are framed by social, cultural, political, epistemological and ontological contexts. They emerge from and strike at the heart of hopes for meaning, recognition, social participation, democracy, beauty, remembrance, responsibility, contribution, benefit, and certainty.

As readers will recognize in this small sampling of how questions of literacy have been asked and answered, it is not only a topic that matters deeply to many but one of diverse and contested lineages.

“If this is your land, where are your stories?” (Chamberlain, 2004).

“*Reading* might be defined as thought that is stimulated and directed by written text” (Smith, 1971, p. 20, emphasis in original).

“Skillful readers visually process virtually every individual letter of every word as they read and this is true whether they are reading isolated words or meaningful, connected text” (Adams, 1990, p. 18).

“Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (Freire, 1983, p. 10).

“In the past, ‘literacy’ seemed enough. Today we need to be able to navigate ‘literacies’” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 5) – the pluralized, multiliteracies of social diversity and multimodality.

Through paradigms of structuralism, cognitivism, and critical theory, the insights of multimodal thinking, as well as wisdom traditions that have long recognized literacy as situated in and arising from intergenerational place-based relationships, and those more recently attuned to the more-than-human, questions of how literacy is defined and acquired have been broadly explored. And yet, for a topic so thoroughly situated within the interests of the public realm, much of literacy’s history, especially in relation to education, has been fraught with division. Literacy education, as a field of inquiry and practice, has been shaped by a rhetoric of victory and defeat and as a narrative of ascendance and fall. It has been caught up in what Dewey (1964) so aptly described as the continual “swing of the pendulum between extremes” (p. 149).

### *Reading Wars*

At no time perhaps, has the debate between differing perspectives on literacy and literacy education been more famously defined by divisive animosity than during the decades-long “reading wars” of the twentieth century. Historical accounts of the reading wars (e.g., Castles et al., 2018; Kim, 2008; Pearson, 2004; Tierney & Pearson, 2021) point to their genesis in a long, evolving debate between part-whole and whole-part perspectives on how children learn to read. Horace Mann, an American educational reformer during the 1800s, is often identified as a key voice igniting such debates in his advocacy for whole-word instructional methods rather than a focus on letter-sound relationships (e.g., Adams, 1990; Castles et al., 2018; Semingson & Kearns, 2021). Something of the tone the debates came to take might be seen in a lecture (delivered in 1841 and published in 1842) in which Mann contrasted children’s natural acquisition of language and the pleasures they experience in the world with the emptiness of the then-prominent alphabetic instruction. He called individual printed letters “lank, stark, immovable, without form or comeliness” (Mann, 1842, p. 27) and tied these qualities, and those of the “cadaverous [phonetic] particles, *ba, be, bi, bo, bu, &c*” (p. 27, italics in original) to a specter of childhood misery.

They are skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions; and hence it is no wonder that the children look and feel so deathlike when compelled to face them. .... Now, it is upon this emptiness, blankness, silence, and death, that we compel children to fasten their eyes.  
(Mann, 1842, p. 27)

Debates between whole-word and alphabetic/phonetic approaches to reading continued throughout the early part of the twentieth century, with phonics worksheets, phonics-based basal readers, and sight-word reading series repeatedly swinging classroom instruction from one extreme position to another. With both phonics-based and sight-word or meaning-based instruction subject to detailed and impassioned critique from those holding other interests and commitments (e.g., Clymer, 1963; Flesch, 1955; Orton, 1929),

an “us/them” way of thinking began to solidify and the relationships between research, pedagogy, and ideology became increasingly muddy. As Jeanne Chall (1967) noted in her classic synthesis of research on reading instruction at the time, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, the fundamental point of contestation was the question “Do children learn better with a beginning method that stresses meaning or with one that stresses learning the code?” (p. 75). This bottom-up/phonetic code vs top-down/meaning-making bifurcation remained the primary point of contention, even *the* “battle line” in literacy education a quarter-century later when what Chall (1967) had previously termed a “great debate” became a “full-scale war” (Chall in Rothman, 1990) and the whole of whole-word was expanded to the whole of whole-language.

Whole-language, with its focus on authentic texts, a literacy rich learning environment, and the integration of the language arts, had gained prominence in the 1980s. Supported by commitments to children as capable meaning makers, research that saw reading as a process of thinking and interpretation (Goodman, 1967; Rosenblatt, 1978; Smith, 1971), and constructivist literacy pedagogies (Calkins, 1986; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Graves, 1983; Stauffer, 1980), whole-language’s attention to literacy (and the decoding of text) beyond the exclusivity of alphabetic principles brought a new fervour to the reading wars. Premised on “paradigm incompatibility” (Stanovich, 1990, p. 221), advocates for whole-language and phonics-based instruction positioned themselves as “hostile competitors” (p. 222) and seemed to imagine the field of literacy education as “a zero-sum game, where one framework’s gain is another’s loss” (p. 222). The passion, scope, and scale of their contestation eventually led to public and professional exhaustion and calls to reach some form of accord.

### *Balance and Stabilization*

Researchers and educators began to seek a means for “peaceful co-existence” (Stanovich, 1990) and a “more dispassionate and open-minded consideration of existing approaches to understanding reading acquisition and reading ability differences” (Stanovich, 1990, p. 228). Comprehensive reviews of reading research were undertaken in the United States (the most influential being the National Reading Panel report of 2000), the United Kingdom (Rose, 2006), and Australia (Rowe, 2005). Each premised their work on the need for classroom instruction to be based in rigorous, evidence-based research and sought, to varying degrees, to look beyond the dichotomous positioning of phonetic and meaning-based approaches to reading. Each review provided a series of recommendations and reinforced the important role of phonics as a pillar of or primary (but not sole) component of reading instruction. The National Reading Panel Report (2000) for example, named five pillars of literacy instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension and created the context for a balanced approach to literacy instruction.

Directed by “scientifically-based research” (National Reading Panel, 2000) and intentional efforts “to give equal attention” (Asselin, 1999, p. 69) to what had been learned on both sides of the reading wars, instruction sought to balance a number of components of literacy education: skill-focused phonics and meaning-focused comprehension; reading and broader literacies; teacher-directed and student-centred activities; whole group, small group, and independent activities; and authentic and incrementally levelled texts. In doing so, balanced literacy programming offered widespread stabilization in literacy education.

The pendulum, it seemed, had found a midpoint where it might come to rest. The routines of sustained literacy blocks, and regular but separate periods (Asselin, 1999, p. 69) of guided reading, phonics instruction/word work, writing, literature experiences, and comprehension activities across a range of language arts were expected, even required, pedagogical structures in many classrooms. The structures, premises, and resources of balanced literacy (Pressley, 1998) permeated the formative professional background of the teachers participating in our study and many teachers across Canada.

### *Mobilizing Contested Sciences*

And now it seems that the fundamental point of contention defining the reading wars has resurfaced, balanced literacy is the new “whole” against which advocates for phonics have turned their attention (e.g., Hanford, 2023; Moats, 2000; Strauss, 2018), and an insistence on a particular form of phonics instruction has become a full-fledged political issue (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024; Schwartz, 2024). A full analysis of the social, political, ideological, and pedagogical factors converging on this moment and thrusting systematic synthetic phonics into the forefront of educational conversations and legislative efforts as a single, selective interpretation of the broader “science(s) of reading” (Ehri, 2020; Gabriel, 2020; National Education Policy Center & Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2020; Rand & Morrow, 2021; Shanahan, 2020) are beyond the scope of this article and may take some time and distance from the immediacy of the experience to thoroughly understand, yet some factors are apparent even as the destabilization of literacy education is again in process.

Similar in some ways to Pearson’s (2004) analysis of the demise of whole language, factors apparent in the current moment include misunderstandings about and misapplications of the premises of balanced literacy, increased pressure for measurable results aligned with an autonomous view of literacy (Street, 2003), and competing claims for social justice (e.g., Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Burk & Hasbrouck, 2023; Goldstein, 2020; Milner, 2020; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). Added to these are misunderstandings and narrow construals of the research base for synthetic phonics and what might be considered a “science of reading” in the crisis-oriented voices of the press and popular thought (e.g., Goldstein, 2022; Hanford, 2019; Wexler, 2018) and the efforts of conservative alliances to energize emotions, target parental and professional anxiety, and heighten mistrust of teachers and schools (e.g., Schwartz, 2023; The Reading League, n.d.; Watson & McLaren, 2023). In the ideological struggle over what happens in schools playing out as a debate about reading instruction (Strickland in Rothman, 1990), the pendulum is again being pushed toward an extreme.

While the adamance of “science of reading” advocates and the conviction of those now needing to defend balanced literacy might indicate that history is repeating itself, and evidence documenting the limitations of recent efforts in government-directed phonics instruction (e.g., Stevens et al., 2021; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022) might suggest another swing inevitably looms on the horizon, the diminishing effects of the phonics versus all-else debate are concerning. They run contrary to our hopes, as educators and researchers, for deliberate and deliberative, sustainable and evolving, curiously informed and thoughtfully responsive practice. And so, in the present article, we seek possibilities neither in extremes nor in a compromising midpoint but “in a change in the direction of movement” (Dewey, 1964, p. 150). We imagine the disruptions, precarities, and accumulated



compositions and decompositions of literacy education as resources for shaping new directions, for writing or rewriting possibilities “by means of conscious, practical work” (Freire, 1983, p. 10). We therefore turn to intentional classroom efforts to work across ideologies, languages, and circumstances, across borders, and in interstitial spaces, to imagine possibilities outside of dichotomous positions and repeated cycles of ascendance and fall. We turn to pedagogical efforts emerging within an indeterminate spectrum of relationships and collaborative, contaminated composition (Lenters et al., 2022; Tsing, 2015).

### *Borders, Boundaries, and Unbounded Emergence*

As we approach our descriptive and analytic explorations of one Grade 1 teacher’s work with playful(l), expansive literacies amidst the paradigmatic and policed troubles of literacy education, we continue to engage with –and look beyond– the language of compartmentalization and division that runs through the contestations of old and new reading wars and appears in the teacher reflections shared in the introduction to this article. We are guided by theoretical perspectives from interdisciplinary studies of borders and their insights on the indeterminate practices of encounter and emergence that can occur in borderlands. They remind us that people and places are connected by, as well as divided by, borders and boundaries. Posthuman sociomaterial conceptualizations allow us to further work with ideas of unbounded encounter and the affective, emergent, and conjunctive – rather than the divisive – possibilities of educational practice.

### *Borders as Places of Division, Connection, and Emergence*

Theorizations of borders and borderlands arise from the work of geographers (physical and human), anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, and economists. From early studies focused on the evolution, mapping, and typology of physical borders to explorations of borders as dynamic social phenomena, to studies of border activities and border effects, the field of border studies has been explored through structural, sociocultural, postmodern, and critical geo-political perspectives (Kolossov, 2005; Newman, 2006; Peña, 2023; Rumford, 2006). Exploring “what borders are, where they are located, and how they regulate territories, mobilities, and identities” (Mogiani, 2023, pp. 1325-1326), conceptualizations have moved from the idea of a border as a given reality or hard barrier to a focus on its permeability, to the processes that occur within a border’s influence, and to ideas of bordering practices occurring in and across multiple spaces and temporalities and through multiple forms of agency (Kolossov, 2005; Newman, 2003; Peña, 2023; Rumford, 2006). As multivalent manifestations of statehood, policy, practice, identity, and in-betweenness, a border is neither a single nor a coherent concept (Konrad, 2015, p. 5). Nor is a border absolute.

Important to our study is the recognition that while borders and other lines of demarcation and division are created by and create images of difference, otherness, and opposition, (Konrad, 2015, p. 5) they also have their own spatiality. They are important “‘meeting points,’ that is places of encounter, interaction/clash, and reassessment/redefinition of different epistemological and empirical processes” (Mogiani, 2023, p. 1324). The vibrant interactions that occur in the borderlands of naturalized ideology, practice, and security articulate new possibilities of being – places where lives cross borders and borders cross pre-existing relations and ways of living– inspire new

forms of identity, action, and co-existence. Borderlands are places of significant emergence (Kolossoff, 2005; Mogiani, 2023). In this article we are interested in how the material and conceptual boxes and boundaries of literacy education might be imagined as spacious contact zones in which literacy education's paradigmatic divisions might be transgressed and transformed and new forms of pedagogical movement might be generated.

So while we are compelled by the ways the historical present may seek to divide and bind literacy in the terms of past narratives, we are also compelled by Leander and Boldt's (2012) reminder that, "literacy *is* unbounded" (p. 41). Like life in the borderlands it exists in infinite relations and surprising movements, and "acts to move, combine, and accelerate bodies" (p. 39). Heeding Leander and Boldt's (2012) caution that "unless we as literacy researchers begin traveling in the unbounded circles that literacy travels in, we will miss literacy's ability to participate in unruly ways because we only see its properties" (p. 41), we seek, in the data and analysis we soon share, to travel with teachers and with literacy into the possibilities of movement generated in the borderlands of classroom practice. In doing so, we expand on Leander and Boldt (2012)'s work to argue that unless educators are given license to locate their pedagogical practices in emergence, they too will miss the complex and sophisticated ways that literacy is living, moving, and creating in their classrooms. In the "troubled stories" of practice that comprise our data (Tsing, 2015), we see that while educators may provide opportunities for their students to engage in complex encounters with literacy, they may also remain blinded by the lines of demarcation established within a restrictive view of literacy and be unable to see the sophistication of their students' literacies.

### *Borderlands as Affective Contact Zones*

As we work with the concept of borderlands as spaces of emergence and possibility for literacy learning, we understand learning to be a space of affective encounter – located/situated in both the mind *and* the body. Our consideration of the role of affect in the present study has us interested in the idea of borderlands as affective contact zones – the lively spaces in which affect is created as bodies (animate and inanimate) come into association with each other; that is, bodies coming into and-and relationships. Paraphrasing Ehret and Leander (2019), we are interested in the energy of contact as things come together, the lively space created by the conjunction "and." They state, "At the site of this conjunction – this coming together – are raw flows of undifferentiated energy or intensities" (p. 5).

The affective contact zone of borderlands, with the energy of and's conjunctive possibilities is the space in which emergent pedagogy can thrive. Davies (2009) characterizes emergent pedagogy as that which is "both continuous with the already known, and yet unfolding into the not-yet known" (p. 12). As they consider the concept, others note that this form of pedagogy does not preexist the actual encounter but is instead fortified by the unknowable (Rautio, 2019; Truman, 2016). It invites unexpected interruption and makes room for it to change the direction classroom work will take (Gallagher & Wessels, 2011).

Thinking with these ideas, we work with the idea of an "and-and" literacy pedagogy. As Lenters & McDermott (2020) conceptualize it,



And-and pedagogy provides a way forward for engaging literacy learning that meets students at their present state of literacy development. Rather than thinking in binary terms, such as literacy programming that explicitly teaches grammar or literacy programming that immerses students in literature, and-and pedagogy asks, “What do *these* students need at this time?” ... And-and pedagogy brings to the classroom assemblage that which is needed, from a curricular perspective *and* from an affective perspective. (pp. 10-11)

Leander and Boldt (2012) describe an emergent encounter with literacy with two young boys, observing that “script-like, purposeful, or rule-governed practices were in constant interaction with actions that were spontaneous and improvisational, produced through an emergent moment-by-moment unfolding (p. 29). Their rendering beautifully animates the fluidity and bidirectionality of the and-and space we seek to promote as we examine the complexities of one teacher’s pedagogical encounters.

### *Researching Un/Bounded Literacies*

#### *Context and Empirical Materials*

The excerpts of conversation in our introduction to this article, (and our return to expand on some of these comments later in the text) come from a transcribed conversation with a small group of Grade 1 and 2 teachers who participated in a multi-year, *Playful(l) Literacies* project<sup>2</sup>. In *Playful(l) Literacies*, we are collectively considering the converging roles of play and literacy in Grade 1 and 2 classrooms; that is, the conjunctive space in which Grade 1 and 2 classroom literacies might be playful(l) *and* attentive to the provincially defined curricular and assessment requirements of early elementary education.

The remainder of the empirical materials we share come from our observations of outdoor play and learning time in the class of one of the teachers, whom we refer to as Mme. Howard. They include field notes and photographs taken in the outdoor learning area that comprises part of the schoolyard, and notes from informal conversations with Mme. Howard during or shortly after the play events, over the space of five months. Mme. Howard teaches Grade 1 French Immersion where much emphasis is placed on the development of French vocabulary and simple grammatical constructions. At the time the empirical materials for this paper were collected, Mme. Howard had been deliberately engaging a play-based approach to teaching and learning for two years. Then and now, for students in Mme. Howard’s class, this means starting the day with table-grouped play materials, teacher-curated to support particular concepts. This is followed by teacher-led activities resembling more traditional approaches, such as mini-lessons, followed by specific learning tasks. Afternoons are fully devoted to play. Monday through Thursday, students identify the play encounter they wish to engage in and are free to mobilize all materials and all spaces in the classroom (with the exception of Mme. Howard’s desk) in their explorations. Movie theatres, hair salons, restaurants, and schools (to name but a few play scenarios) are constructed and played out. Art and fort building projects are initiated. Play in these spaces is returned to again and again, day after day, with both repeated and new movements and players. On Fridays, the play encounters move outdoors. Two

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<sup>2</sup> This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Data presented in this article is done so in accordance with the approved protocols.

“wonder wagons” filled with digging and cooking implements, in addition to rotating items, such as magnifying glasses, chalk, or biodegradable paint, accompany and enliven the outdoor play.

Mme. Howard is deeply committed to play-based learning as she sees it benefitting her students emotionally, socially, and academically. She sees children who always seem to play together indoors reband and find new play partners outdoors. And she sees that children who sometimes struggle with the confines of the classroom are calmer, more settled in the outdoor play. Within the full week’s afternoon play scenarios, Mme. Howard finds her students using and exploring skills and concepts that go far beyond curricular requirements and what she imagines as possible for their learning.

### *Mapping/Analysis*

In order to select moments on which to focus for this paper, we looked to the hotspots in our empirical materials (MacLure, 2013). That is, we sought encounters in which we noted the children’s engagement with materials, stories, and each other suggested a palpable affective intensity, an indication that something important and deeply meaningful was happening in their learning. Our focus was intentionally on small moments where big things seemed to be happening. As we mapped those moments (Latour, 2005), following the movements and relations forming between human and more-than-human actors, returning to Leander & Boldt (2012), “rather than naming preferred outcomes, we follow[ed] the emergence of activity, including the relations among texts and bodies in activity and the affective intensities of these relations” (p. 34). And finally, as we considered those relations, we brought our observations into conversation with the theory on borders and boundaries, emergence, and the conjunctive energy of “and” (as outlined earlier) in an analytical move referred to as thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022).

### *Assemblages of Outdoor Play and Literacy*

Each Friday, as the children, the wagons, and Mme. Howard move from the classroom to the outdoor space, they inevitably make their way to a rock circle fashioned by the school community as a gathering space for outdoor instruction and conversation (see Figure 1). Mme. Howard routinely uses the rock circle as a touchpoint at the beginning and end of outdoor learning times. Students sit, singly or in small groups, on the rocks as Mme. Howard invites them to attune to the environment, to the materials in the wagon, and occasionally, to a shared provocation for play. They also return to the rock circle at the end of outdoor learning time as Mme. Howard signals to the students what to expect and what is expected when they re-enter the school and classroom and prepare to dismiss for the weekend. Along with some bushes at the perimeter of the schoolyard (normally off-limits to students at Mme. Howard’s school), the rock circle, and particularly a larger rock at its centre, are a vibrant part of the class’s play. The children dig under and around the large rock, splash about it, slather it with mud, and follow the vibrancy of stories as they emerge with, move toward, and travel outward from it.

We offer here a small sampling of the playful(l) assemblages generated between the rock, the children, mud, sand, ice, small shovels, buckets, brushes, chalk, small creatures, and a host of other im/material players. One came to our attention at the site of the big rock. Another was made visible in three small episodes in close proximity to it, and a third travelled to the rock and nearby bushes from experiences the children had on a field

trip to a community museum and a subsequent encounter with smaller rocks at the edge of the school field, along the fence of a neighbouring home. Following each outdoor play and learning vignette, we include a note that highlights something of Mme. Howard's reflections on or responses to the day's play.



*Figure 1. The Rock Circle of the Outdoor Play Space*

#### *Mudding the Rock*

Children, buckets, shovels, and plastic sand moulds immediately flock toward the muddy mix of slush and sand that surrounds the big rock. The children and materials pulse in and out of the rock's presence as they dig, fill buckets, gather snow and slush, and experiment with language to describe various combinations of sand, snow, and slush.

*A new form of storied play emerges as one child declares, "I'm about to dump this mud. I'm going to do it right now!" and instead of tipping the mud onto the ground, deposits it on the big rock. Another child, watching the mud slide down the rock's surface, calls out, "I'm going to make a waterfall!" and pours out a second bucket of mud, a little closer to the edge of the rock.*

Children who had been, moments before, digging in the sand and slush become enthralled with covering the rock with mud (see Figure 2). With each new glance, the composition of the group mudding the rock seems to shift and the process of dumping mud quickly transforms into one of hands and shovels smoothing mud onto the rock.

*A child is heard to say, "I've never painted a rock before. Maybe I can do that at home one day." And yet another calls out to the group, "Can you hear the mud clapping? This is so fun. Listen to this clap! Some children whisper, even sing quietly to the rock as they smooth and massage its surface, making apparent the care entwined in their muddying gestures.*

Boisterous mud play and tender applications of mud continue until it is time for the class to go inside.



*Figure 2. Mudding the Big Rock*

Observing alongside a member of the research team as she watches the students' play unfolding, Mme. Howard takes delight in the children's muddy explorations. She also unexpectedly introduces the students' recent phonetic testing scores and how many letter sounds different students know to the conversation. When she shares the day's outdoor play and learning with a parent who has come to pick up their child, and then later on with the larger group of parents through social media, the energy of the children's experience is apparent in her descriptions of how the students explored the ways snow, sand, and slush worked together, and that those explorations "were a blast!"

### *Gardening for Worms*

At the edge of the sand surrounding the big rock, where the sand and a mound of snow border each other, a student is quietly and methodically digging, mixing the snow and sand together. The student occasionally stops to remove a glove and to touch the soil with their fingers. This apparent moisture-testing leads to more snow being added to the soil. The student invites Mme. Howard over to see the emerging garden, emphasizing their efforts to "moisturize" the soil.

Mme. Howard returns to the garden a little later and discovers it is now home to several sticks. The sticks are standing vertically in a row (see Figure 3) and the student explains that the sticks are worms. The student is excited that "the worms have arrived in the garden". The student goes on to explain that their family had recently moved and their old house had a place, where they loved to play, that was a good spot for worms. The student adds that their new house is in a new-construction area without a park or a good place for worms.



As the worm-sticks, snow, sand, and child continue to play, a pool of nearly melted snow, a shallow trail leading to it, and a scattering of sticks, tell of a worm misadventure. Together the student's hands and voice narrate the events of the story:

*The worms are enjoying the garden when one worm leaves the group and, while exploring, arrives at the entrance to the pond. The worm cries out in alarm knowing the pond holds too much water for worms and they won't be able to breathe. The other worms mistakenly interpret the cry of alarm as an exclamation of excitement and rush forward along the trench toward the edge of the pond to join their friend. All the worms are now in danger and are being swept away by water from the pond flowing into the trench.*



Figure 3. The Worm Garden

Mme. Howard didn't see the third episode of the worm garden story, where the importance the student had given to "moisturizing" the soil fell into place. It was both part of a narrative sequence and a display of the student's knowledge of the worms' need for a moist but not overly wet soil, knowledge born of the student's relational play with worms at their previous home, and a knowing that prompted the student to create a welcoming environment where the worms and the student might again be able to play together. Later, when a member of the research team relayed the events to Mme. Howard, she was very much interested in the child's enacted and narrated story but not concerned that she hadn't witnessed or "captured" the story somehow or helped the student make it into something more.

### *Travelling with Rocks*

Outdoor learning time begins a little differently this week. First, there is a shift in routine as the students begin the afternoon with an Earth Week clean-up walk. Gloves, garbage bags, and tongs in hand, the class walks away from their regular play area, toward the front of the school and out into the field along the other side of the building to collect litter. And second, the play seems to be primed a little differently. The class has been on a field trip to a local history museum, and Mme. Howard shares with the research team that she is hoping some of their learning from the museum will appear in their play. With this in mind, before heading outside she suggests to the students that when they are playing they may want to set up a General Store or think about the Indigenous weapons and carvings they saw at the museum.

During the clean-up, experiences from the museum trip almost immediately begin to appear in the children's language and actions. One student picks up some sticks, carries them along, and explains they are making a spear. As the group leaves the lawn and bushes along the edge of the school's front yard and walk around the side of the school toward the field, the children are less and less focused on picking up trash and more on picking up small rocks and tucking them into their pockets.

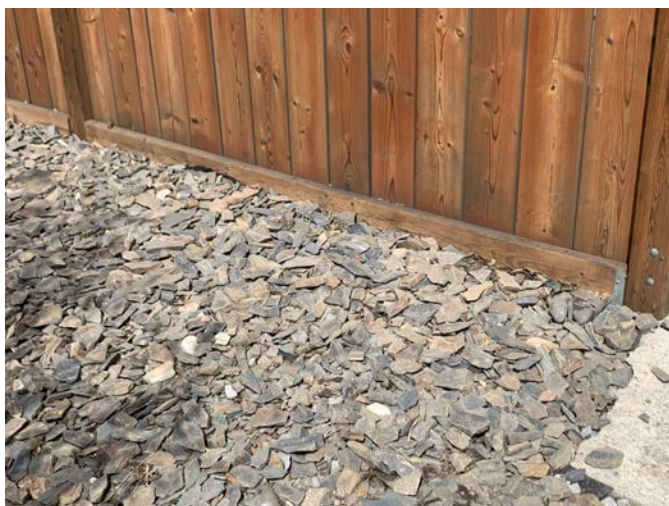
*One student explains, "I'm saving them for later." Another student claims to be making an arrowhead and another to have found an arrowhead. Approaching some shrubs along the edge of the school field and near some houses, the students begin moving into the bushes, looking for treasures rather than trash. Great excitement arises when the students come upon a spread-out pile of shale-like rocks along the edge of a fence bordering someone's backyard (see Figure 4) and the choosing, carrying, and pocketing of rocks suddenly becomes highly animated. The children grab the rocks, stuff them into their pockets, and create aprons with the front of their shirts to carry as many pieces of the shale-like rocks as they can. They begin describing all the things the rocks could be and do: rocks that could be weapons, rocks to build a fire camp and cook, rocks that could be tools. Mme. Howard shares her concern about what the homeowners might think, but settles on the fact that the rocks are outside the fence and on the school field, and tells the students they can each take two (but only two) of the shale-like rocks over to their regular play area.*

The walk back to the play area vibrates with expectation. Play scenarios and stories quickly erupt as the students arrive back at the rock circle. The language of one-room schools, tools, and knives permeate much of the children's play. There is an explosion of activity and stories, too many, and too rapidly evolving to document. As a small example, two students dig a hole with a spade and a rock and their ideas and movements tumble forth along intersecting and diverging lines.

*"This is our teepee. And this is going to be our fire so we can cook our buffalo meat." "We're storing our weapons." "I have an arrowhead and a knife." "I have a whole bunch of arrowheads and a spear." "I'm going hunting." "Can you help me cut the buffalo meat?" "I'm taking these rocks home so I can make a spear for real." "I've got the bison meat." "I've got the knife." One student pulls*



*a rock out of his pocket and makes cutting sounds, “chee..., chee....” as he moves the rock across the imagined buffalo meat with a cutting motion. “That’s all done.”*



*Figure 4. Rocks Along a Neighbour’s Fence*

Mme. Howard later shares with the research team that not only did the children’s play and stories travel home with the rocks, their explorations also moved into the classroom and back out again, appearing in the students’ play in varying forms and intensities for several weeks, and making their way into the students’ writing journals.

#### *Possibilities in the Bounded-Unboundedness of Literacy Education*

In some ways the instances of storied play we have shared are far from exceptional. Similar events have played out in each of the outdoor learning sessions we have observed. They announce themselves with some regularity, although in unpredictable ways. Our observational notes are full of descriptions of such live action texts: partial glimpses into the compositional intensities generated between the outdoor space, the children, and the liveliness of memories and materials found within and brought to the occasion. In other ways, these instances of storied play are truly remarkable, situated as they are in pedagogical commitments to the possibility of their emergence. Such storying practices are not seen in other Grade 1 classes in Mme. Howard’s school, nor are they part of what would typically be expected (professionally or societally) in the instructional milieu of elementary education. They are practices claimed neither by the exclusive lens of systematic synthetic phonics instruction nor as part of the amalgamated instructional blocks of balanced literacy. They slip between the “red flags” that line the border between systematic synthetic phonics as a singular focus of instruction and its rhetorical othering of balanced literacy (Watson & McLaren, 2023) and they slip between the demarcating grammars of representational text and the fluid markers of embodied, nonrepresentational literacies (Leander & Boldt, 2012). In their categorical unruliness, they move along trajectories sometimes ambivalent to, sometimes improvising with, and sometimes breaching the discursive borders of literacy instruction. As indeterminate, affective movements in the borderlands of expectations, they create something new.

Recognizing Mme. Howard's instructional practices, as well as the texts students create within them, as bounded and unbounded, we now engage the theoretical work that envisions borders as points of contact and boundaries as emergent affective zones. We look at pedagogical movements animated through the informed anticipations and thoughtful responsiveness of and-and literacy pedagogies (Lenters & McDermott, 2020) and through them, to possibilities for forms of liveability not determined by the alienations and resurgences of the reading wars.

### *Rescaling Space and Boundaries*

Much of Mme. Howard's practice can be seen as movements across and within the expected divisions of practice. Play, as the foundation of her pedagogy, opens space around, and expands from within, the familiar demarcations of literacy education. In its shifts of scale and boundaries it creates neighbourhoods or decentred relations (Rumford, 2006) of educational practice. Such neighbourhoods are defined less by inclusion in or exclusion from defined and bordered territories and more by commitments to reciprocal and collective participation in shared domains.

Mme. Howard maintains the boundaries of safety and security yet rescales the institutionalized spaces of school. She opens the fullness of space, time, and materials to play and encourages students to move with both intentionality and generativity in and through relationships with human and more-than-human others, language, and text. By regularly and routinely moving into the outdoor space, and in making the bushes that are "out of bounds" during whole-school recesses part of the students' outdoor learning space, she further opens a boundaried space where ordinarily an impermeable border exists. She expands the space of the students' literacy learning, the scale of their movements, and their networks of relationship. She encourages movement between developmental print-based representations of story, language, and thought and the openness of embodied composition and interpretation.

### *Rescaling Through And-And Pedagogies*

In each of the vignettes of storied play we have described, the children's bodies and those of the more-than-human others with whom they play have direct contact with one another. Fingers and soil, shovel-hands and mud, sand and slush, rocks and pockets, and the stories they might tell together need not pass through the check-points of alphabetic or whole-word/-language/-text encoding and representation yet neither are they separate from the conventions of print and the development of language. In constant negotiation with the expected borders of literacy education, Mme. Howard's practice is "continuous with the already known" (Davies, 2009, p. 12) while enfolded into the unknowable emergence of each particular encounter.

In these expanded neighbourhoods of practice, *Gardening for Worms* remains an embodied and partially narrated interplay of language, materials, movement, and experience in which a young student plays and re/stories the changing circumstances and relations of their social world. Its emergence is not, and need not be, continuous with the scope and scale of Mme. Howard's direct instruction or intervention. Its affective flow need not be curtailed by a pedagogical need to direct the student's progress along known pathways and toward expected curricular and narrative forms.

In another negotiation of the bounded/unbounded instructional literacy space, and in a different enactment of and-and pedagogy (Lenters & McDermott, 2020), Mme. Howard readily steps into the affective and curricular potential that emerges in the series of events we call *Travelling with Rocks*. Mme. Howard recognizes the vibrant literacy desirings (Rucker & Kuby, 2020) set in motion by the class's visit to the museum and names the potential of storying-with those experiences for the students. When the excitement of environmental stewardship gives way, in the children's bodies and minds, to the relational allure of sticks and small rocks, she makes way for, then encourages and helps amplify, the forces and enchantments energized between the students, the treasures of the schoolyard, and the fascinations of the museum. And later, when she sees the stories multiply and continue to move across boundaries of time and space, she has the students bring some of those stories to print.

She offers "Je joue avec" and "Je joue dehors" as sentence starters that allow the students, in the processes of writing in their journals, to extend a spoken French sentence and to demonstrate and further develop their knowledge of the previously encountered /ʒ/ sound, the letter j, and other phonetic skills (as expected within their Grade 1 curriculum). The processes of moving to print also allow the students to re/language their play and draw on the supports of an encoding/decoding/meaningful context far larger and more lively than the printed charts and vocabulary on display in the classroom.

### *Resisting Rebordering*

Bringing these outdoor learning and storied play experiences to her school district's assessment and reporting system, Mme. Howard acutely feels the compartmentalization, discontinuities, and contradictions of her work and is called again to rescale and expand institutionalized spaces and boundaries. She finds it difficult to make the expansive learning that comes out of the students' play recognizable within the hard borders and small compartments of a reporting system directed toward "fixed ideas" (her term) and predetermined outcomes. She cannot, as the reporting system expects, create "a narrow and precise assignment" that describes what each student has achieved on a specific day or that begins to speak to the complexity of what has occurred.

The power of this system's materiality confounds her and pushes on the limits of her communicative thinking. Similar to the rebordering practices that see the borders of one nation situated within another, such as United Kingdom border operations moving with the Eurostar into the heart of France and Belgium (Rumford, 2006), the borders that seek to define educational thought can also expand into unexpected locales. They can not only seek to define practices from extrinsic positions but also from within. Mme. Howard portrayed something of such a dislocation and rebordering when she described how the SIS not only pressed upon her thinking but began to occupy space within it. It "makes you try to fit your thinking into a very confined space. So my brain can't deviate from that."

Resisting this occupation, and administrative expectations that she meet a monthly quota of assessment entries, she has begun to create her literacy "assignments" as expanded categories of possible learnings. She also has begun to leave her assignments open for extended periods of time, returning to them again and again, one occasion of literacy learning and, if need be, one child at a time. She again situates reporting through this system in a neighbourhood of communicative practices. She expands the information for parents

with face-to-face interactions whenever possible and by sharing descriptions and photographs of wide-ranging events within the children's play and learning on Instagram.

### *Risks of Rebordering Within a Decentered Space*

In speaking of neighbourhoods of decentered practices, spaces, and relations we do not envision a new system of cordial compromise, or apportioned attention to "separate but equal" forms of literacy education. We imagine, and see in much of Mme. Howard's and-and practice, a more dynamic, productively contaminating (Lenters et al., 2022; Tsing, 2015) set of relations, ones interlaced in the possibilities of emergence and indeterminate growth. In *Mudding the Rock*, we recognize how unentangled proximity may become a practice of rebordering and an undoing of and-and relations.

Mme. Howard's introduction of the students' sound-symbol testing scores alongside the embodied play between the children, the rock, the mud, shovels, and the in/visible affective networks animating *Mudding the Rock*, was unexpected but not immediately troubling. Its entanglement in the troubles of literacy education became more apparent in its lack of interaction and movement, and in how Mme. Howard's attention and response to the play settled into the spaces of literacy education's familiar property lines. In communicating with parents about the experiences she seemed boxed into the separate terms of fun (the explorations of the day "were a blast") and the science curriculum's focus on the properties of objects and how they do/do not change. Literacy seemed not to be part of what she recognized in the play. It remained within the familiar borders and accomplishments of decontextualized phonics knowledge. A similar reinforcement of the borders of literacy's known categories appeared when, despite Mme. Howard commenting, in conversation with her colleagues and our research team, on the enormous value she saw in what happened for students in the outdoor play times, this value was undercut by a seeming lack of recognition of the significance of its literate components, "Well, they do tell stories, but it's not the main objective."

### *Extending the Invitation of And-And*

In our search for liveable possibilities in the current context of literacy education, we pick up, once again, the words of Leander & Boldt (2012) to ask, "What might we make of the invitation to consider literacy in 'and...and...and' relations?" (p. 41) and more particularly, what might we make of its conjunctive possibilities amidst the current resurgences of troubled and troubling conversations about reading pedagogies and literacy programming? Recognizing the richness and the complexities of seeking to move beyond the bordered and bound spaces shaping expectations for classroom practices, and working with the vignettes from Mme Howard's class, we draw attention to the following contours of possibility.

First, we see playful(l) engagement with the and-and of curricular and affective attention to students' literacy learning as offering a moving, liveable space beyond the dichotomies and dialectics of the reading wars that again threaten the creativity and vitality of the field, and of children's and teachers' "right now" (Kuby et al., 2018) educational experiences. In the and-and of imaginative and material play within children's school-based literacy learning we recognize not only the emergence of stories and language within both representational and nonrepresentational texts, but also the possibilities for emergent pedagogies, those connected to the fullness of what is known about how children are and

become literate and what might be expected from them while also standing at the threshold of the unknown encounter.

We see rescaled and expanded boundaries of institutionalized and curricular spaces, rather than hard divisions and othering, as creating instructional spaces of contact, new possibilities, and emergence: spaces in which a multitude of material, pedagogical, and relational resources might interact in informed and responsive ways on behalf of children's literacy learning. We see the importance of holding neighbourhoods of decentered and relational, rather than exclusively centred or adjacent but divided, practices in productive, collaborative contaminations as a way of resisting the rebordering efforts of both entrenched positions and cordial compromise and moving beyond the pendulum swings that have shaped much of the history of literacy education in schools.

And recognizing the ongoing efforts of re-bordering around and within teachers' efforts to practice in and-and spaces, we argue that educators must be invited and given license—from both the systems that surround them and from within their own intentional, practical work—to locate their pedagogical practice in emergence. Doing so is a necessary step in looking and living beyond restrictive properties and divisive paradigmatic lines to recognize and move-with the complex and sophisticated ways that literacy arrives in and moves through children's learning.

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