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Re-centring the Role of Care in Young People's Multimodal Literacies: A Collaborative Seeing Approach

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As globalized educational policy increasingly incorporates multimodal literacies into the definition of an educated person and estimations of human capital (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), particular literacies are valued and privileged while others are devalued. For instance, expertise in the processes of digital media production – animation, video editing, sound engineering, game design – is prized, while that in more socially oriented practices – like the use of social networking sites and video chatting programs – is stigmatized by educators (Sims, 2014). Engaging in valued digital media practices, those most likely to be framed as multimodal literacies, allows young people to locate themselves on the 'right' side of the 'participation gap' (Jenkins et al., 2006) or 'participation divide' (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008).

Meanwhile, technological developments are leveraged to support narrow assessments of young people's knowledge and identities, and young people's goodness, normalcy and value are distorted through the force of educational standards and measures – as if these standards are given not made. There are complex metrics-based systems for classifying, labelling, evaluating, ranking and monitoring children and their knowledge, but schools have rarely devised equally meaningful and useful strategies for hearing, seeing, knowing and understanding children as full human beings and knowing subjects. Far too often, schools are simply 'voicing over' children's experiences from 'adultist' perspectives (Thorne, 2002).

Collaborative seeing is an iterative and reflexive practice of inquiry that combines elements of visual and narrative analysis (Lico & Luttrell, 2011; Luttrell, 2010) to address the structural imbalance of power between children and adults (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). It aims to preserve the multiplicity of meanings that are co-constructed between researchers and researched, teachers and learners. In the *Children Framing Childhoods* project, thirty-six young people were given cameras and invited to take photos of what matters in their lives over a period of eight years. The participants were afforded numerous opportunities to construct meaning around these photographs. Among the salient themes in the resulting archive of data were images and narratives of young people's digital media practices, including their gaming, blogging, video-making, computer usage at home and in school and diverse uses of mobile devices. Following a structured, sequenced immersion intended to catalyse researcher/adult reflexivity about what is seen and interpreted about working class children and working class childhoods, researchers engaged in 'stereophonic listening' (Charon, 2006) to pick up on young people's resistance to regulation and their claims of value and worth. This helped attune our eyes and ears to the role of longing, constraint, difficulty, complexity and contradiction in inspiring what young people do when they spend time online.

This methodology illuminates often-unseen dynamics of young people's own understandings of their digital media practices and the ways that these understandings are shaped by the context of the contradictory tensions produced by digital technologies and globalized educational policies. We found that young people represent their practices in relation to their care worlds and ambivalently position themselves relative to dominant cultural discourses about limiting screen time and risky behaviour online. The forces of care and love, generally neglected in politics and scholarship (Feeley, 2009; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009), are also under-theorized in relation to multimodal literacies. This understanding provides a useful counterbalance to overly instrumental assessments of kids' time online, which typically focus on how human capital is enhanced by mastery of particular modes of digital media practice.

Three elements of collaborative seeing

Although the *Children Framing Childhoods* project (2003–2012) coincides with the explosion of 'giving kids cameras' research (Clark, 1999; Orellana, 1999; Rasmussen, 1999; Rich & Chalfen, 1999; Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Burke, 2005; Tinkler, 2008; Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; Yates, 2010; Pini & Walkerdine, 2011; Kaplan, 2013; to name a few), three features of the collaborative seeing approach distinguish it from these other projects. The first is the extent of the

iterative and co-constructed flow of meaning-making generated by numerous audiencing opportunities. Second is the particular analytic approach – a sequenced immersion in the visual and audio-visual material intended to catalyse researcher/adult reflexivity about what is seen and interpreted about children and childhood. Third is a way of looking with and listening to the children.

Iterative and co-constructed meaning-making

In the early phase of the project (2003–2009), thirty-six elementary school students in Worcester, Massachusetts were given a disposable camera (now an ancient technology) with twenty-seven exposures and had four days to photograph their everyday lives, at home, school and in their communities and 'whatever matters most'.¹ Students participated in the project as fifth graders and again as sixth graders. The project was originally designed to bring the children's experiences and perspectives about immigration, social and cultural differences and family–school relationships more fully into view. A microcosm of Worcester and its century-long history of diverse and shifting waves of immigration, the school enrolled 370 students, of whom 92 per cent were eligible for free school lunch, 37 per cent were white, 10 per cent were black, 18 per cent were Asian and 35 per cent were Hispanic;² the children who participated represented the linguistic, racial and ethnic diversity of the school.

After the photographs were developed, Wendy or a research assistant met with each child to talk about her/his images, asking why she/he had taken them, what pictures she/he wanted to take but couldn't, to select personal favourites, and to select photos to share with teachers and a larger public. Then we met in small groups with the children to discuss each others' photos. In these groups, the adults held back from directing the conversations, letting the children direct their questions, comments and 'noticings' to each other. All the interviews and small group conversations were audio and video recorded so that we would be able to trace how context mattered. For example, when speaking with the interviewer about a photograph he had taken of his church, 10-year old Gabriel turned to the video camera and spoke directly to his mother, 'Mommy, I took this picture for you, I'm sorry it is blurry'. This was one of several photographs he had taken to express his love and gratitude for his mother, 'I love her so much I could explode from too much'. But in conversation with his peers, Gabriel emphasized that he had taken the picture because it is where he goes to 'hang with the teenagers' who invite him to join their activities even though he is 'only in fifth grade', highlighting the dual worlds children inhabit as they seek status with peers.

In the later phase of the project (2009–2012), the young people had spread out and only some could be contacted through school. Many were connected through Facebook, however and Wendy was able to track down twenty-six of the thirty-six original participants. Most greeted her with astonishment: 'I can't believe you really came back!' was a familiar refrain. All agreed to be interviewed about their childhood photographs and to reflect upon the ways in which they and their lives had and had not changed. These audiotaped interviews were rich with memories, laughter and sometimes embarrassment about a 'past self' or 'child self' as some put it. Most of the participants agreed to continue by taking photographs to document their contemporary life-worlds. The four young people who decided not to continue participating gave varied reasons, including work and family care-giving responsibilities.

In this next phase of the project, each young person was again given an analogue disposable camera and asked to photograph 'what matters most'. Analogue cameras were chosen over digital cameras for two reasons. First, although young people now had cameras on their phones, not all of them did, and over the course of the year, some had to cancel their phone service because of limited finances. Second, using analogue cameras allowed us to keep the imposed limitation of twenty-seven exposures. Participants selected their five favourite photographs, which they assembled and narrated using VoiceThread, a programme that allows users to upload photographs and create audio and text-based commentary. To facilitate dialogue among participants in different school settings, VoiceThreads were shared among group members, and the young people posted questions and comments on each other's 'threads'. Participants were also given Flip video cameras to record themselves at home, with family, at school, in their neighbourhoods and with friends. The decision to introduce video – the youth participants' preferred medium – was grounded in a recognition of the benefits of involving young people in decisions about representing their lives, an insight from Wendy's research with pregnant teens (Luttrell, 2003). We presented the project in open-ended terms 'Make a short video about you, your world, or your life' and provided no instructions or guidance with regard to composition, light, narrative or camera work. Ethical considerations were discussed at length, building upon the project's earlier role-playing about issues related to intrusion, embarrassment and consent. This later phase of the project was similarly informed by a commitment to providing multiple spaces and opportunities for the young people to speak about their image making.

Collaborative seeing is thus distinguished by the extent of the iterative and co-constructed flow of meaning-making generated by numerous audiencing sessions – *between* a child and his/her intended audience; *between* the child

and the interviewer; *among* the children themselves; *between* the children and an intended teacher/public audience; and finally *the self as audience over time*, as a particular strength of this study lies in its longitudinal orientation.

A structured, sequenced immersion

Our analytic approach, which involves a sequenced immersion in the visual and audio-visual material, is intended to catalyse researcher/adult reflexivity about what is seen and interpreted about working-class children and working-class childhoods. Wendy developed this approach to structure graduate students' introduction to the images, first at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) (2004–2009) and later at the CUNY Graduate Center (2010–2013). In these courses, students begin by looking across the images, taking time to identify where they fix their eyes and what questions they have. Then students develop a categorization scheme for the photos. These schemes inevitably vary but frequently include descriptive groupings like 'people, places, things'; settings like 'school, family, community'; activities such 'work, consumption, leisure, literacy'; as well as more interpretive groupings like 'what I am proud of, what I am concerned about'. What is most salient about the images varies by student. For Claire, who took the course in the spring of 2011, the sheer quantity of screen photos attracted her attention. Indeed, an early content analysis conducted with the HGSE students had found that screens – boxy televisions of various sizes, tiny screens on flip-style cell phones, shared home computers and many almost identical photos of new school computer lab – were the most frequently photographed category of items in the children's image galleries at ages 10 and 12.

Following the categorization exercise, students move more deeply into the practice of looking by drawing on Howard Becker's guidelines (1986, p. 232) for working with images. He writes:

Don't stare and thus stop looking; look actively ... you'll find it useful to take up the time by naming everything in the picture to yourself and writing up notes.

After building up capacity for attention to detail, he encourages observers to engage in

a period of fantasy, telling yourself a story about the people and things in the picture. The story needn't be true, it's just a device for externalizing and making clear to yourself the emotion and mood the picture has evoked, both part of its statement.

Immersed in these retro-seeming images from the pre-smartphone pre-touchscreen era, Claire noted her own discomfort with the many photos of televisions and gaming consoles perched atop cabinets and makeshift stands in children's bedrooms, often amid elaborate arrangements of toys, figurines and other collectibles. Particularly troubling were the plentitude of photos of televisions in Mesha's fifth-grade gallery, suggestive of the ways television is popularly conceived of and portrayed, 'as an addiction, as a passive, individual activity which precludes direct communication with others, as an impediment to fulfilling family relationships ... [all of which] are thought to increase in direct proportion to the amount of time the television is turned on in the home' (Seiter et al., 1989, p. 1). Absorption in these images led to Claire's imaginings of 'lonely and unsafe after-school hours' (Strandell, 2013, p. 1), and contrasted with a nostalgic ideal of a 'good' childhood, meaning a less mediated and commercialized one, filled with grass and bikes, suntanned faces and dips in the kiddie pool.

Recalling Becker's (1986) advice to use storytelling to externalize and 'make clear to yourself the emotion and mode the picture has evoked', Claire thought of her own youth, coming up in the 1980s, in a neighbourhood of working folks, modest ranch houses and old cars, in the tiny city of Portland, Maine, noshing on fresh-plucked lettuces, ears of corn, and heirloom tomatoes from the backyard garden and roaming the streets with the neighbourhood kids until the sun set. These imaginings were accompanied by a certain melancholy and a sense of loss of the Rousseauian 'free child' – the child who enjoys spatial and temporal autonomy, and plays unstructured by adults (Hart, 1979). At the same time, Claire noted her own subtly positive reaction to other types of screen photos across the galleries, especially those of the newly installed school computer lab and of home computers. She imagined these represented the children's, and their parents', pride, upward mobility and valuing of schooling.

Reflecting on the emotions raised by this disciplined practice of looking, naming, fantasizing and storytelling, Claire became aware that she was drawing implicitly on a good screen/bad screen dichotomy, rooted not only in nostalgia but also in an evaluative teacher identity, reflecting a germ of belief in a 'strong theory' of media effects (Seiter, 1999), typical of teachers and childcare professionals. This realization highlighted the ways that screens can function as symbolic scapegoats and saviours, with the wrong kinds, or wrong uses, linked in adult imaginations, popular perception and paediatric knowledge to the potential degrading of young people's brains, bodies and educational trajectories (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011). Meanwhile, the right kinds and uses are linked to white-collar work and 'the power to control information' (Scheck, 1985, p. 284), upward mobility (Persell & Cookson, 1987) and enhanced human capital (Keeley, 2007), particularly for girls and women (AAUW, 2000; Margolis & Fisher 2002).

Only after completing this activity do graduate students view the video clips of the children speaking about their images. Upon hearing what the children have to say, there are moments of surprise, pride (for 'getting it right') and embarrassment or guilt for making 'wrong' assumptions – especially a tendency to see the photographs through the lens of their own (predominantly white, middle-class) childhoods; to see deficiencies in the student's lives; to misrecognize strengths; and, at times to assign blame. It is this structured, sequenced immersion that makes adult viewers (as teachers or researchers) aware of, and able to reflect upon, their own projections onto children's images, knowledge and intentions.

Stereophonic listening

The third distinguishing element of collaborative seeing is its commitment to a way of looking with and listening to the children, inspired by what Rita Charon calls 'stereophonic listening' (2006, p. 97). Charon is writing about narrative medicine, and what is needed in the exchange between patients who are speaking about their illnesses and medical professionals who are committed to caring for the sick. To listen fully means being able to 'hear the body and the person who inhabits it'. Charon suggests that there has been 'an odd diminishment of the status of storytelling in medicine ever since we decided we knew enough about the body by virtue of reducing it to its parts that we did not need to hear out its inhabitant' (2005, p. 261). This is a fitting metaphor for what has happened in contemporary educational policy and practice – the reduction of children's knowing, being and doing to its measurable parts.

André Turmel (2008), among others, has written about the changing social technologies (recording methods, graphs, charts, tables, etc.) that focus attention on children in specific ways, as if these ways were the only way to know, understand or value a child. The everyday classroom activities of classification, 'standardization' and identifying how a child measures up (or not), is the water in which children swim in school. Insofar as processes of standardization have narrowed the spaces for diverse expressions of young people's everyday informal practices, interests and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), it is all the more important that we are able to hear the 'student' body and the young person who inhabits it.

Listening stereophonically to the children's narrations of their many screen photos, we attended especially to regulation and resistance, and tried to hear the ways that the children were making their worth visible and thus intelligible. For instance, Mesha's fifth-grade image gallery was dominated by photos of a muscular female character captured during 'cut scenes', or

cinematic interludes between sections of game play. In conversation with Wendy about these images, Mesha spoke longingly of past afternoons with her father, who now works in the night shift and 'he's so busy, we don't have that time to go play together anymore'. Mesha recounted taking pleasure in after-school gaming sessions with friends and how they 'used to have a lot of fun together', and described the rituals that framed these gatherings – cleaning up wires, organizing the controllers – as a kind of social glue that bound them together. As she explained that the game is fun because 'you get to beat up monsters' and 'you get to be any character you like', we realized that what we had originally read as photos of television screens, were meant to be photos of what was on the screen, in this case, Yuna, the female protagonist, practitioner of healing magic and one of the main playable characters in the role-playing game Final Fantasy Ten.

This realization opened up new possibilities and questions about Mesha's digital literacy. Perhaps she took the photographs to document her advanced skill and high level of achievement in this male-dominated niche interest (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Taylor, 2009; Kafai et al., 2008). Or was she making an identity claim by signalling her identification with this powerful female protagonist? Maybe these photos were references to the social contexts of her gaming, rather than the solitary ones. Or perhaps this was the first step in her process of articulating a critique, echoed by radical feminist gaming scholars (Bucholtz, 1998, 2002; Sunden, 2009) of the gendered structuring of geek identity. From this perspective, girls' and women's claims of time and space to develop esoteric, specialized expertise in domains like gaming, where such expertise is typically linked to constructions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), are regarded as resisting a patriarchal order that is predicated on women's and girls' moderation in pursuing such focused endeavours, while permitting men's and boys' enthusiastic escape into arenas of geek pleasure.

The answers to these questions would become clearer over time and with more probing into Mesha's use of gaming as a multimodal literacy practice and marker of her gender identity as a 'strong woman'. Indeed, when invited by Claire to participate in a follow-up project about 'what teenage girls know about technology that adults don't know that they know', she immediately exclaimed, 'You've come to the right person!' With an imitation of an upper class British accent, Mesha invited Claire to her family house to play games and share 'tea and crumpets'. Mesha's adaptation of the research protocol, which originally called for the youth-led digital media tutorial to be held in a school conference room, was noteworthy in at least three ways. First, it signalled that Mesha felt comfortable and trusting enough of Claire to invite her into her home as the site of her digital literacy practices. Second, it reinforced the idea that Mesha understands her technological expertise as

an outside-of-school activity. Third, her 'tea and crumpets' comment recalls Pini & Walkerdine, 2011 account of the way working-class girls put on more 'posh' accents and middle-class affects in their video diaries. It suggests an awareness of the intimacy of having a researcher in one's home across race-, class-, age- and education-based differences and how these differences might shape expectations of the encounter. On the appointed day, Mesha answered the door wearing dark-washed blue jeans and a deep black, freshly laundered and impeccably ironed black t-shirt, emblazoned in white lettering with the prominent logo, 'Strong, Smart, Bold', a choice of clothing perhaps reflecting her desire to be seen just in those terms. And indeed, as she launched into a two and a half hour, enthusiastic and extensively detailed introduction to six of her favourite games on the Play Station 3 gaming console, she schooled Claire in the politics of gender, power and value that attend in these virtual spaces, and their intersections with the pressing financial, emotional and familial challenges of her daily life described in the next section.

Care networks, governmentality and multimodal literacy

Well-designed games are considered valuable spaces for negotiating literacy (Gee, 2003; Gee & Hayes, 2011), requiring gamers to navigate complex environments, learn by doing and produce themselves as flexible learners, thus demonstrating competencies that are in line with the criteria of being a 'lifelong learner' – a neoliberal form of governmentality. A lifelong learner works actively in 'communities of learners' and engages in a 'continuous course of personal responsibilities and self management of one's risks and destiny' (Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2004, p. 238). These values – of being thoughtful and 'productive' about one's uses of time and aiming towards continuous self improvement – are deeply embedded in global educational policy and schooling ideologies.

Mesha's identity as a gamer was already well established when she began participating in *Children Framing Childhoods* as a fifth grader. She sustained her avid gaming practice through her high school graduation, but her ways of narrating her gaming shifted over these eight years. Ten-year-old Mesha accounted for her daily after-school routine by emphasizing first doing her homework before playing games, watching movies or engaging in other 'leisure' activities. This is exemplary of the ways the children made identity claims through their photography (Tinkler, 2008), as a 'good' student (reading or doing homework); as a grateful/loving son or daughter (Luttrell et al., 2011);

as 'boys' or 'girls (Luttrell, 2012)'; and as soon-to-be teenagers. However, eighteen-year-old Mesha offered a more nuanced accounting of her gaming time:

It's kind of like my getaway, like from reality. You don't have to be stressed out about anything, just get on. You don't have to worry about anything, just get on and go. But you still have to be worried. You have to think about who you're talking to and make sure you don't give a bad impression, you know? Before my dad passed he said that a lot, that I was spending too much time on it. But I told him, 'You know what? In a few years, I'm gonna be majoring in this exact same thing that I love doing now, playing video games and drawing. And I'm gonna prove you wrong, that I can do something with this.' [Extended pause.] So hopefully I can support my mom with that too.

Her beloved father recently deceased, her mother disabled and bedridden, her two older brothers out of the family house and living with their respective girlfriends, Mesha faces the transition from the relatively defined and structured life of a high school student living at home to a more uncertain future. She bears the responsibility for caring for her ailing mother, maintaining the house and paying the bills with the proceeds from her part-time, minimum wage job. Against this gendered and classed backdrop, she represents her gaming in relational terms as well as in career terms. Referencing her long-standing ambition to find gainful employment as a game designer, she frames it as a passion, as something she loves, not just a job. Speaking as if in direct dialogue with her father from beyond the grave ('I'm gonna prove you wrong'), she acknowledges his disapproval of her gaming, at the same time countering the broader cultural discourses of limiting screen time and avoiding risky behaviour in networked spaces. And in declaring her intention to support her mother, she establishes a claim to a carer identity, while narrating her gaming as an investment of time that she will make good on.

Mesha asserts that her gaming and drawing – activities that she perhaps fears will be seen as unproductive, or as a waste of time – have in fact been part of a concerted effort to cultivate herself against the odds into a productive, employable knowledge worker. To bolster this identity claim, she also highlights the school-based, domestic and extracurricular contexts of her digital literacy development. Speaking retrospectively of her younger self, she recounts being singled out by teachers for placement into an advanced computer class in the first grade because 'I was learning so much'; taking on the role of the tech expert among her family and being called upon 'at such a young age' by her mother, father and grandmother to troubleshoot the home computers and

programme the VCR; and learning how to build a computer 'from scratch' as a middle school student participating in an intervention programme designed to increase the representation of girls of colour in STEM fields. In these three examples, she draws attention to her mastery of valued and privileged digital literacies like that of computer programming while drawing on the neoliberal governmental discourse of the lifelong learner to establish her own value and worth.

And yet there is also, embedded in the nuanced accounting for her gaming time quoted in full above, an implicit critique of the overly instrumental emphasis of the lifelong learner discourse for its framing of learning and working as divorced from the dynamics of responsibility and obligation to particular intimate others, as opposed to the state. This way of making meaning from her gaming practice is another example of the young people's *counter-narratives of care* (Luttrell, 2013) and suggests an alternative economy of valuing young people's multimodal literacies, one that re-centres the shaping force of care worlds and networks.

This analysis of what Mesha values about her gaming and digital literacy complicates the implicitly individualized and instrumental terms – a *children as human capital and social investment* discourse (Kjørholt, 2013) – through which multimodal literacies are often seen. By practising the three dimensions of collaborative seeing described in this chapter, we have grown aware of the under-recognized role of care and care relations in young people's perceptions of their engagements with digital technologies. First, the iterative and co-constructed flow of meaning-making generated by numerous audiencing sessions gives young people multiple opportunities to bring to light various valued aspects of their experience. Second, the structured, sequenced immersion, first in the visual, and then in the audio-visual data, helps to guard against the adult/researcher voicing over children's perspectives. And third, the practice of stereophonic listening, tunes us into both the regulatory discourses (such as the 'productive' use of time) as well as the resistant possibilities (such as the value of care and care relations).

Other young people in the project, like Mesha, used their cameras to make visible and thus place value on aspects of their multimodal literacy practices, to make identity claims and to participate in their social worlds. Like Allison Pugh who has argued that children use their knowledge of commodified goods (whether they own these goods or not) to 'transform themselves into citizens of their public sphere' (Pugh, 2009, p. 52), we found that the young people used screens, and access to and knowledge of digital technologies in a similar way, to position themselves as carers and cared for, as valued and valuable, as agents of their own making and as worthy citizens of broad publics.

Notes

- 1 See Luttrell (2010) for the prompt and how we addressed issues of consent.
- 2 These are the labels and percentages provided by the school; they do not publish records of the immigrant status of the children. Students are eligible for 'free and reduced lunch' in US schools if their family income is at or below 185 per cent of the Federal poverty line. The percentage of students in a school receiving free and reduced lunch is an indicator of the socio-economic status of a school.

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