

Incorporating digital animation in a school play: multimodal literacies, structure of feeling and resources of hope

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Abstract

In this study, we reflect on our work with 10- and 11-year-olds in an inner London primary school developing a multimodal school play that integrated digital animation into a more conventionally structured Year 6 production. We are media literacy, drama and cultural studies researchers and teachers, arguing for more inclusive, holistic and multimodal schooled literacy practices. We explore roles and opportunities for enactment that the multimodal school play offers, while looking at pupil empowerment through the mobilisation of pupils' existing capabilities and sensitivities. We present a case study that employs semi-structured interviews and observations from which we construct visual and analytic narratives with a focus on participants' practices and responses. Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling' and '*Resources of Hope*' help us make sense of our data. In particular, we note the emergence of new roles through literacy practices that incorporate the tools and artefacts of animation. We highlight the affective dimension and inclusive nature of emergent literacy practices that integrate interactive drama and meaning-making with digital media and look at how these practices have the potential to disrupt entrenched classroom hierarchies and tackle inequalities, particularly for children who are disenfranchised by schooling and traditional school literacy practices.

Key words: media education, digital animation, drama, multimodal literacies, role, equity, affect

Introduction

This is the story of our work with the children of an inner London primary school told in three voices: a former primary teacher, a drama educator and a media educator who work as lecturers and researchers in media in education. Our collective research interests focus on expanded conceptions of literacy in schools to include media-making. We are interested in finding a place for digital story telling alongside the live performance that is commonplace at the stage at which

primary school children prepare to transition to secondary school in the UK. In this article, we discuss the promising outcomes of combining a media arts production, a popular cultural text and live performance. In this way, we position ourselves in the tradition of the New London Group (1996) and Cope and Kalantzis (2000) who argue for an expansion of our understanding of literacy pedagogy to encompass the combination and recombination of multiple modes of meaning-making (Flewitt, 2012; Kress, 2010). We view literacy as not just socio-cultural but increasingly as socio-material (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Hawley, 2020), involving emergent assemblages of intertwined social, material and cultural resources. We are also influenced by those scholars such as Marsh et al. (2005), Levy (2009) and Buckingham (2019) who urge literacy practitioners to shift their gaze towards the vibrant multimodal world beyond the school gates in order to bring about new possibilities in their classrooms.

To this end, we approached a Year 6 teacher with ideas for an end-of-year play that integrated digital animation into the narrative and set design of a more conventionally structured production. This project explored the potential for finding 'innovative and productive ways of challenging inequalities in education ... In particular ... those that subvert and challenge narrow curricula and pedagogies that privilege the dominant culture' (Tett & Hamilton, 2019, p. 4). We use Raymond Williams's (1977) complex and multifaceted concept of structure of feeling as a lens through which to view our observations and data. We argue that this lens allows us to analyse affective responses as an aspect of the interplay between school structures and 'intersubjective social relations and processes' (Kirk, 1999, p. 45). Like Tett and Hamilton (2019) and McKee et al. (2019), we draw on Williams's (1989) '*Resources of Hope*' to promote 'connected, purposeful literacies, joyful engagement in learning, and new relationships between children, teachers, materials and their meaning-making' (McKee et al., 2019, pp. 68–69). As Highmore (2016, p. 161) notes, by

charting the things and feelings that hinder flourishing, we can better understand those that may support it and ‘offer a more hopeful future’.

Highmore (2016) explains how the affective turn (Clough & Halley, 2007; Massumi, 2002) in social sciences has brought Williams’s concept of structure of feeling back into focus. However, as Ngai (2005, p. 360) argues, what Williams is doing is something very different from materialist analysis of affect: instead, he provides a ‘register ... to enlarge the scope and definition of materialist analysis’. That is to say, structure of feeling can be used as a heuristic for examining how lived experience (which is always social and material) is linked to cultural formation, a ‘dialectical process involving hegemonic and oppositional forces’ (Zembylas, 2002, p. 188). As several commentators (Highmore, 2016; Kirk, 1999; Zembylas, 2002) note, the term has often been critiqued as conceptually vague: the words make uneasy bedfellows, with structure denoting something stable and feeling something ephemeral. Even Williams himself uses it differently across his writing, seeing it as both broad enough to be applied to the dominant feeling of a period and narrow enough to pinpoint emergent concerns in particular parts of society. We see this flexibility as an advantage and understand it as referring to what is experienced and evidenced at both a micro level and a macro level.

As Zembylas (2002, p. 194) argues, ‘Williams’s bridge between language and embodiment creates an open dynamic between the structures of school and the structures of feelings in daily practice’. Methodologically, we see structure of feeling as a powerful analytical tool that allows us to understand how change occurs in classroom settings, to notice the way in which lived experience may disrupt and reframe hegemonic patterns of culture. These ideas of emergent change within existing structures inform our enquiry into the transformative potential of introducing media equipment and multimodal literacy practices into classroom spaces. This is instantiated in an edited video that we present as part of our data (Harris, 2016). Our article presents an account of how the messy days of research and practice unfolded during the disruptive waves of lockdown in the summer of 2021, as we explored our research question:

- How does the multimodal school play extend existing literacy practices through the provision of diverse roles and new opportunities for meaning-making?

Despite substantial logistical challenges due to the pandemic, the show and the research went ahead and provided a rich site of exploration for the forging of links between literacy and media-making (Cannon, 2018; Cannon et al., 2023), multimodality

and theories of enactment (Bryer, 2020; Coles & Bryer, 2018). We were particularly interested in the creation and manipulation of 2D silhouette puppets and the ways in which making animations for a specific purpose and audience allowed pupils who are often disenfranchised in school to lead on and own parts of the show. We present analyses of the processes and conditions that facilitated alternative roles and practices and that provided opportunities for:

- moments of meaning-making invested with intensity of feeling through embodiment, enactment and interaction with tools and artefacts (Burnett & Merchant, 2018) and
- pupils reconceiving themselves as ‘capable meaning-makers’ (McKee et al., 2019, p. 60) through the introduction of multimodal making practices understood as inclusive and facilitated by shared cultural repertoires (Cannon, 2018, 2022; Hawley, 2022; Parry et al., 2011).

Following the creative practices of Margate-based theatre group, 1927, we worked with the teachers and pupils of a Year 6 class, as they developed ideas for their end of term production of *The Lion King* (Disney, 1994). 1927 are an international touring group with a unique aesthetic that incorporates drama, mime, recorded narration, live music and, notably, complex projected animations as kinetic scenery with which the actors interact. Creative Director, Suzanne Andrade, was keen to work in schools, and having secured funding from the UK Literacy Association (UKLA), we developed the idea of the ‘multimodal school play’. Although it could be argued that all theatre is multimodal, here, we use the term to mean the enhancement of the conventional performance with animated clips of key scenes, featuring, for example, striding giraffes and stampeding wildebeests. We incorporated digital modes of filming and editing with theatrical modes of gesture, spoken word, sound, lighting and projection, arguing that using such combinations of expressive resources offers additional roles and responsibilities. These digital practices provided increased opportunities for action and involvement for pupils who can often be disenfranchised by traditional school literacy practices. Moreover, key roles in the production were extended beyond those of the protagonists, adding technical roles for those unlikely to find themselves in the spotlight.

Literature review

Our conception of literacy is grounded in two overarching ideologies, firstly, in the work of Brian Street (2003), in that we see literacy practice as

inherently social, and, secondly, in the work of media education theorists, who regard literacy as multimodal (Kress, 2010), collaborative (Burn & Durran, 2007) and dynamic (Potter & McDougall, 2017). We concur with Burnett et al.'s (2020, p. 168) assertion that literacy encompasses 'still and moving image, sound and even movement'. Seen in these ways, fluency in reading and writing media is fundamental to learners' capacity to participate culturally and creatively; some even posit access to this kind of literacy learning as a child's right, with a view to becoming an engaged social actor and conscious meaning-maker (Cannon et al., 2022).

Drama, animation and literacy practices

In the following section, we consider past studies that have influenced our thinking about relations between literacy, drama production and media-making in schools, with particular reference to animation. Nearly three decades ago, Buckingham et al. (1995, p. 171) made the case for 'establishing some common ground' between drama and media, and Franks et al. (2006) began exploring the relationship between live and recorded media with reference to the domain of English. Explorations of the live and mediated in performance settings (Auslander, 1999; Blake, 2014) provide the backdrop for research focusing on the integration of live and digital drama in education, including forms of animation (Davis, 2012; Dunn et al., 2012). Cameron et al. (2017) develop further insights about the relationship between live performance and media arts and their potential to shape learning, identifying the 'hypermedial nature of spaces for performance, enabling combinations of modes of expression and exploration' (p. 277). This reflects our own interest in transmedia forms of pedagogy (Bryer, 2020) with a particular focus on the integration of drama and stop-frame animation.

Mills (2010) and Munro and Charles (2021) identify how animation work in primary schools leads to a transformation of the space and distribution of roles in ways that have the potential to unsettle regular classroom dynamics. In line with Parry and Taylor's (2021) findings with respect to the rewards of 'playful tinkering', Mills (2010) also notices the opportunities for authorship that draw on the students' identities in the crafting and animation of figures, on their stories and ideas and on their feelings and experiences. Through her observations of pre-school children animating a collection of objects, Fleer (2018, p. 955) recognises how knowledge of the structure of a fairy tale helped them to master the 'technical demands of making a digital animation'. We find this collection of insights around the fluid and sensorial affordances of

digital making, the social and transformative nature of creative spaces and the valuing of children's knowledge and experience to be useful observations in the examination of our data.

Structure of feeling: bridging the individual and the collective

Our data also suggest the emergence of affect as teams of puppet animators, voice actors and sound and light technicians produced scenes destined for the stage screen. Indeed, appeals to the sensory through audio-visual manipulation are key to the pleasing sense of control that might otherwise elude less confident makers of meaning in print. Burnett and Merchant (2020) and Nordström et al. (2021) draw attention to micro 'affective intensities' and their entanglement with literacy practices. We suggest that the liquid quality of Williams's (1961) structure of feeling can be used to encapsulate the ways we understand and experience affective entanglements between bodies, devices, gesture and collective action that are 'in solution' (p. 63), while not losing sight of how these affective 'processes are mediated and structured' (Hendler, 2001, p. 11). Williams (1961, p. 64) talks of the structure of feeling as both 'firm and definite' yet operating 'in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity'. Structure of feeling is conceptualised as something emergent or even pre-emergent—what Thrift (1996, p. 259) describes as 'a kind of shadow world which is now coming out into the light'. We borrow these observations as they seem to describe both the processual and liminal qualities of our creative work with the children, which was nevertheless bounded by the school structures, both micro and macro, within which we were all positioned.

The few studies that apply Williams's structure of feeling in the field of education (Lingard & Gale, 2007; Zembylas, 2002) focus on its reference to liminality and hybridity and thus to the possibility for transformation that such edge-positioning occasions. This transformative dimension links to the potential in the classroom for learners to leverage their existing capabilities, associative feelings and experiences of media and media production outside the school gates. In his discussion of the role of emotion and emotional rules in curriculum and teaching, Zembylas (2002) suggests that the novelty of the structure of feeling concept is that it provides a bridge between individual feeling and collective social experience. It means that 'emotions can be analysed as cultural formations' rather than 'in terms of their individual and psychological significance' (Zembylas, 2002, pp. 188–189). This social and cultural understanding of the collaborative dimension of affect

in classroom interaction informs our exploration of working with expressive media and live performance with primary pupils.

Methodology and methods

We followed Yin's (2018) rationale for using a case study approach to investigate 'a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context' (p. 15). The emphasis Yin places on 'concrete manifestation' (p. 30) in an everyday context, or the conditions of the 'common case' (p. 50), also aligns with our use of case study as an appropriate method to describe the circumstances of creative practices in the school play setting. In addition, to make our case, we chose a 'descriptive framework' based on three 'descriptive topics' (p. 170), to both present and analyse our data. This approach involved all three authors in forms of participant observation, as facilitators and researchers, gathering 'multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge' (p. 15). We explain later how this convergence was achieved through the making of an edited video, instantiating the 'open dynamic' (Zembylas, 2002, p. 194) between school structures, affective understandings and child-researcher interactions.

The study was carried out in a school in which one of us used to work, with a much higher than average number (almost half) of children designated 'pupil premium' (a marker of social deprivation). The Year 6 class was chosen for study because of their end-of-year production and the fact that Sara had taught this class when they were in Year 5. We worked with a group of six pupils chosen by their current class teacher to produce the animated clips to act as both backdrop and set. The teacher described all six children as vulnerable in some way and likely to benefit from this small group intervention during an unstructured part of the school year. None of the six pupils had either put themselves forward for or been chosen for acting roles in the production. Our focus is on three boys—each with culturally specific pseudonyms—who appeared to gain the most from the intervention. Max and Louis routinely displayed challenging, anti-social behaviour and were rarely attentive and often disruptive in class, while Samir was often quiet and withdrawn. Samir was chief animator of Mufasa's climactic death scene; Louis was in charge of screening both the animated clips and the static backdrops embedded in the PowerPoint projection; and Max was in charge of cueing in the music and lighting alongside the teaching assistant, Clive. Below, we present narratives of the ways in which these boys embraced their roles in uncharacteristically focused and productive ways, manifesting impressive and unusual attention to detail that was

absent in their usual schooled literacy practices. The rest of the class acting in the production were encouraged to interact with the animations screened at the rear of the stage. One of the aims was to engage the audience in an experience of live and recorded story telling with resonances of the cinematic; however, the lack of rehearsal time with the children meant that this was only partially achieved.

We collected data in the form of photos and video footage as we worked alongside two animators from 1927 during workshops and rehearsals with pupils and conducted semi-structured interviews with teaching staff and pupils at different stages (from May to July 2021). Of the 8 days of research we conducted in school, we focus on an afternoon of whole class puppet-making; a full school day of small group animation, with three researchers, our arts practitioner colleague, Rebecca Wilson, and an animator, Amber Cooper-Davies; and two rehearsals and a performance.

Our role as participant observers is one that is familiar to us, as former teachers and facilitators, now university lecturers, engaged in initiating projects in classrooms and seminar rooms and observing student interactions (see Bryer, 2020; Cannon et al., 2014). We recognise that 'Research, for us, does not sit outside the literacy practices we observe, but helps to produce what they become' (Burnett et al., 2020, p. 170). Although we did not formally induct the children as co-researchers, we deliberately intervened to encourage them to notice each other's work and achievements, to build a sense of exploration of this collaborative way of working, so that their voices and opinions informed our interpretation of events.

We have chosen to foreground our particular histories, as a way of framing our analysis: as a drama teacher and now teacher educator interested in the relationship between media production and drama, Theo came to this project with vivid memories of the stresses and joys of putting on a school play. As a creative media practitioner, Michelle had an interest in the roles that surface and the hitherto unseen capabilities that are accommodated in media production projects. As a former class teacher in the school, Sara knew the children's schooled (and literate) selves and was conscious of her position as both insider and outsider. Shifts in tone and register suggestive of our different perspectives are indicative of a reflective and autobiographical orientation that stems from cultural studies and a feminist epistemology (Gray, 2003; Skeggs, 1995).

We use stories to provide a focus on significant elements of the processes of making on the understanding that such analytical narratives mesh with our situated case study approach. Yandell (2019, p. 438) explains this story telling tradition in educational

research practice as one stemming from Eyers and Richmond's (1982) *Becoming Our Own Experts*. The process 'entails decisions about how to represent the complexity of classroom interactions', an approach that 'is necessarily interpretative. It is concerned with meanings and values as well as purposes' (Yandell, 2019, p. 439). Burnett et al. (2020, p. 73) are clear that the research material that they draw on is presented in the form of illustrative stories 'rather than vignettes or data extracts, to foreground their constructed and positioned nature'—an epistemological stance that aligns with our choice to edit a sequence of video clips to present our data.

We transcribed our interview data and coded it using Clarke and Braun's (2021) techniques of thematic analysis, identifying themes relevant to our areas of expertise that formed connective tissues with our respective narratives. As media-makers, we are interested in this form of extraction from video data. We made sense of our observations and records of the event through processes of editing, to generate audiovisual narratives related to the interactions that drew our attention. Following Cannon's (2018) work in which edited video clips of data facilitated analysis, Theo made a short film that can be viewed here: <https://tinyurl.com/Detailvid>.

We recognise video editing as a significant tool in shaping our research evidence through an analytical yet creative process of 'sense-making from fragments' of our observational data (Harris, 2016, p. 57). Identifying which moments to foreground through close and repeated viewing of our material provided insights into the nuances of social interaction and structure of feeling that we endeavour to represent here, albeit in the form of the written word. The transduction from moving image to writing is supported by careful description of those moments of physical interaction and verbalisation that we deem significant. Still images, extracted from our clips, provide contextual details to further our argument.

We bore ethical considerations in mind throughout the project, based on BERA guidelines (2018). Ethics approval for the research was sought and received through UCL's Ethics Review Procedures. We gained the informed consent of all participants, including children in the Year 6 class and their parents/carers, by issuing opt-in consent forms via the Year 6 teacher, all the while ensuring the well-being of child participants. We have all parties' authorisation to share the photos, and the moving image film clips, including those that reveal the children's faces. In addition, the children were pseudonymised and were free to change their minds about participating at any point. All adult facilitators had been DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checked.

A tripartite analytical narrative

In this section, we weave our narratives in ways that reflect our multi-perspectival positionalities, distinguished by our particular interests and experience, starting with Sara's (a former class teacher) account of the first research day. Zembylas (2002, pp. 192–193) notes that when Williams uses the term structure of feeling, he aims at describing 'lived experience intersubjectively, from the point of view of a participant' rather than a detached observer. We adopt this understanding of the term as we detail the structures of feeling we were part of in the classroom, in the heat of collaborative creative practice and during showtime. We trace the processes of crafting and adaptation (Burn, 2021) integral to retelling aspects of the Hamlet-inspired *Lion King* story, celebrating the rewards that young authors gain as they repurpose cultural knowledge.

Sara's perspective: setting the scene

Williams in *The Country and City* (1973) describes landscapes inscribed with structures of feeling and the scenes laden with meaning. Applying the same topographical lens in school, I see the many meanings inscribed in classroom life: the serried ranks of tables, the small hints of defiance of the uniform policy, the studious waving of hands in desperation to be chosen to answer the teacher's question and the less studious fidgeting with whatever is on the desk to entertain and distract. Within this tableau, there are deep contrasts in which feelings are held, feelings about what is possible in these spaces framed by discourses and material resources. This familiar scene and its structure of feeling linked to dominant performative models of education are disrupted by the arrival of three newcomers (two animators from 1927 and Michelle as researcher) and one of us who has taught this class before.

The attainment-related discourses framing education and our own busy schedules demand tight time management: we need an outcome by the end of the afternoon—all the silhouette puppets finished so we are ready to start filming on our next day in school (see Figures 1 and 2, making the puppets). I elicit from the children suggestions of which parts of *The Lion King* they think we should animate. They bring their detailed knowledge of the film, and of film more generally, to this activity: we quickly decide as a class on the scenes we will need to make puppets for (the wildebeest stampede, Mufasa's death and ghost scene, animals on the savannah and the elephants' graveyard as



Figure 1: Samir making his 2D wildebeest puppet from a template.



Figure 2: Samir and peers working together with wire to articulate the puppets.

backdrops). It is clear soon enough that in this task, success will be within the grasp of all the children, allowing some to excel who might not usually. Like Zembylas (2002, p. 194), I notice how ‘structures of feeling name the simultaneously cultural and discursive dimension of our experience but do not neglect that these experiences are also felt and embodied’. The children mostly work quickly and conscientiously with awls and split-pins, their collective imbrication with tools, artefacts and unfamiliar adults bearing witness to ‘a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed both social and material’ (Williams, 1977, p. 131).

In a couple of hours, we have some puppets ready to animate, which we project from a lightbox at the back of the class to the whiteboard for all to see. We are all set for the animation workshop the following week with a smaller group and have a quick

discussion with the Year 6 teacher about who would benefit most from this kind of work, which she goes away to think about.

Theo’s drama educator perspective: Samir’s attention to detail—a microplay in production

The next time we are in school, the setting is different. There are eleven of us in a small room: the researchers and practitioners mentioned earlier and the six children chosen by the teacher. There is an opportunity for a new structure of feeling to emerge as we work collaboratively with articulated figures and iPads to create the animations. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Drama at Cambridge, Williams (1975, p. 5) explained what it means to live in a ‘dramatised society’, defined by our ‘habitual experience’ of recorded drama as well as live theatre. Here, I focus on a social experience that informed the creation of just 12 s of animation, highlighting how the children’s sensitivity to its dramatic potential seemed to be heightened by ‘the specific feelings, specific rhythms’ (Williams, 1977, p. 133) associated with working in this medium. In this account, I identify how 45 min of intense collaborative work, in and of itself, encompassed forms of live and recorded dramatic action, making and audiencing—something like the whole cycle of rehearsing and sharing a school play, in a condensed form.

Samir is tasked with animating Mufasa’s death scene, at the hands (or claws) of his brother Scar during our first animation day. I observe him checking Disney’s version of this dramatic moment on the iPad and comment that ‘attention to detail’ seems to be his thing. Initially, he says, ‘I don’t mind’, when asked how the articulated lion puppet should interact with the paper cliff face, arranged on the light box. Following another pupil’s reminder that it is ‘his project’ and Amber’s prompts: ‘OK, good’ and ‘yeah, that’s really cool’, he begins to make tiny movements with the figure with a growing sense of conviction. Over the next 45 min, Samir sustains his focus in increasingly assured ways. ‘Is he going to be reaching really hard, really far?’ Amber asks; ‘a big round movement?’ she suggests, demonstrating with her outstretched arm.

Samir picks up on the hints of emphasis, following her lead in stretching and clawing as she does, feeling the tension in his arm, hand and fingertips and then endeavouring to translate this feeling into the delicate movements of the articulated figure (see Figure 3).

So, professional animator and pupil begin to work in a more carefully calibrated and economical rhythm, with Amber holding the figure’s body still, as Samir moves the lion’s limbs one by one and then reaches up to click twice on the camera button. They focus on



Figure 3: Animation workshop—Amber Cooper-Davis and Samir working out Mufasa's stretching motion as he climbs a cliff face.



Figure 4: Animation workshop—Amber Cooper-Davis and Samir animating Mufasa's climb up the cliff face.

the tiny mouth opening, 'to make him look really scared' as Amber puts it (see Figure 4); and then things heat up as they articulate Mufasa falling—with just one press of the camera now, so that in the replay, he appears to move faster and out of control. There is a gasp, off-camera, and Amber announces, 'he's dying!' She seems to be proposing that the drama is happening now; as if the cardboard figure had run away from their fingers and was enacting his own demise. Sara is alert to this and exclaims, 'Oh my gosh, that's absolutely tragic', encouraging the rest of the group to gather and watch the last couple of takes. 'Completely still ... flatter ... now he's dead', Amber prompts and narrates simultaneously, as they finish Mufasa off. 'Brother, help me!' Max improvises, as Mufasa's mouth opens, in anticipation of a future actor voicing the character's final line. In the ensuing silence and muttered 'amazing' from a watching child, there is an acknowledgement that their version of Mufasa's death is just as affecting as in the Disney film.

Amber clarifies that a separate shot needs to be contrived to implicate the murderer, Scar, in this moment of violence. Her explanation that 'we're going to do that in a separate part and we're going to cut through it'

highlights the dramatic role that shot relations play in summoning up the narrative through the processes of editing. The animation of the close-up on the cardboard claw that Samir had cut out earlier takes a matter of minutes, characterised by a similar intensity of feeling. Now, it is Samir's turn to demonstrate a suitably slow and deliberate clawing motion so that Amber recognises the implied intentionality in the gesture: 'yeah that's good, that shows how mean he is.' At the end of the process, it is satisfying to hear Samir announce he 'feels good'.

After the run of performances, we are keen to hear more about how Samir felt watching his animation on the big screen behind the actors, at a turning point of the narrative. We are a bit taken aback when he announces, 'I think we did it a bit too quick. It wasn't really in pace with the actor's line'. It was unfortunate that at the point at which he finished his animation, Samir had had no further control over how it appeared in performance. He was right that the line and action came together in something of a rush because the animation was so short and we had not found a way to accommodate the narrated line 'and then he let go', so that Mufasa's final scream had more impact. At one stage, I suggested that the actor playing Simba might lie next to the animated form of his dead father but in performance, the actor collapsed far down-stage, emphasising the gulf between the live and animated characters. The experience Samir had of moving an audience of his peers during the workshop enabled him to critique its comparative lack of dramatic impact in performance. He had felt good before but at the end of the show, he knew there was something missing. Samir's disappointment referenced the intense experience of making that tragic moment, with every movement so considered, the imbrication of tools and affective relationships bringing forth an emergent structure of feeling in the small setting of the workshop that could not be replicated within the larger class dynamic.

Sara's perspective: the story of Louis reading with fluency

We are back again in school, this time in another setting: the theatre in a secondary school up the road, the opportunity for another structure of feeling to emerge. Here, the tools involve a large projection screen and a laptop for playing the pre-prepared animations at exactly the right moment so they are integrated with the live performance, a job entrusted to Louis. The dress rehearsal begins. I am nervous—I know Louis and how easily distracted he can be in class. He has struggled to concentrate with me in

guided reading sessions. How is he going to pull off this important role and assume responsibility for cueing all the slides that represent the set and all the animated clips? Yet here in the theatre, visible to all at the side of the stage with a laptop and a torch, he reads the script fluently, turning the pages and following the cues, understanding exactly when to change the backdrop or play an animation. He does not need my help at all, reading no longer the Sisyphean task it was in class (see Figure 5).

There are several actual performances, and we are not at all of them. Clive, the teaching assistant, is detailed to support Louis when we are not there but he tells us afterwards that Louis did not need his help at all: *'He knows more than I do and he's got all the notes and everything and he understands them so I was just like: "You can do it on your own and have the free space."*' We interview Louis after the final performance, and he tells us: *'I got to do an important job. It was fun. It was a big responsibility.'* Nevertheless, during the interview, there are still traces of 'schooled' Louis in his body language, the deference and averted eyes in the face of authority figures, as if in expectation of being told he has done something wrong, even as he talks with pride of what he has achieved and what he has been entrusted with. The new structure of feeling in which Louis is transformed into a 'capable meaning-maker' (McKee et al., 2019, p. 67) is still emergent, vestiges of the previous structure in which he was more marginalised, still in evidence.

Michelle's media educator perspective: Max the room-reader

It is the final performance and we are all watching on tenterhooks. Max is in the lighting box with Clive,



Figure 5: Louis at the side of the stage cueing the embedded animations in PowerPoint.

cueing the music, and, like Louis, has been assigned an important and powerful role, with plenty of potential for disruption. Yet Max relishes his responsibility behind the scenes, acquitting himself well, with music volume control and timings right on cue. The performance goes smoothly, and the show is enthusiastically received by an audience of parents, carers, children and teachers. What is interesting is Max's oscillation between impulsive child and master of ceremonies: the whole setting allows him to dip in and out of the action, develop new expertise with lighting and use his existing skills with an iPad. Messing with media-in-performance means being in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing in self-determined ways, and prior to the show, in rehearsals, this had become apparent in the way Max had positioned himself next to the teacher-director to play the music. We see him during a performance in Figure 6, garlanded with Hawaiian flowers, ready to vacate the lightbox and playfully dash down to join his classmates on stage for a particular song, and then rush back up to his lighting console duties. Being liminally positioned, Max was authorised to dart around as necessary, manipulating tools and flitting between different identities as technician, showman, producer and rule-bender.

There is a further instance of sanctioned impulsive behaviour: during the immediate post-show chaos and elation, and sensing the excitement of the cast, Max chooses to electrify the mood further by re-playing the music for one final rendition of an anthem tune. With tacit communication, Louis follows suit and re-plays the animation graphics in the background. In fact, both boys take charge and make impromptu decisions to shape the euphoria of the moment with all the mood-enhancing powers of celebrity DJs and VJs: practical media work is often a



Figure 6: Clive the teaching assistant, Max and the Hawaiian flowers in the light box.

site of transgressive experimentation. The digital tools and media forms in Max and Louis' control are iteratively and positively re-purposed, and what makes their moment all the more marked is a residual sense of mischief permeating the space.

Max had instinctively read the room and had used the multimodal resources at his disposal to shape mood and meaning for the assembled audience. The bridge between subjective and collective feeling had been robustly engineered. Structure of feeling signifies 'what is actually being lived, articulated in revolt against officially sanctioned forms of the time' (Kirk, 1999, p. 61). By sensing and acting on this, and with an impish glint in their eyes, Max and Louis had created a positive and lasting memory that would sediment into the experience of his peers' final days of primary school.

Playing with ideas through improvisatory media manipulation is a liberating practice that embraces cultural repertoires, awakens latent capabilities and renders learners sensitive to social experience and the conditions in which they find themselves. Being able to make something of this sensitivity towards a local structure of feeling and acting on it is part of the story of empowerment that we wish to advance. Some more traditional approaches to end-of-year productions might be considered as set in aspic, but Williams's thinking allows us to value the fluidity of actual lived experience. The permeable conditions (Potter, 2012) of a 'multimodal school play' offer the potential to share familiar popular cultural motifs and instinctive engagements with media.

Insights and resources of HOPE

We wish to characterise the boys described above as 'literate media practitioners' (Cannon, 2018) who felt a refreshing re-orientation towards meaning-making with print. The authors contend that particular capabilities with text, role and performance were rendered visible among the three boys through multimodal production practices. Our data suggest that they caught a rewarding glimpse of themselves as

- nuanced *sense-makers*, through the mobilisation of film, drama and popular cultural knowledge;
- sensitive *crafters* of mood, mode and meaning;
- assured *controllers* of time–space–texts; and
- effective *social actors* with the ability to shift the audience's emotions.

The authors unite behind Williams's *Resources of Hope* (1989) in which he muses on the making of democratic societies through the pursuit of common meanings and directions and valuing 'ordinary' cultures

'(whose) growth is in active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land' (Williams, 1989, p. 4). We borrow Williams's topographic metaphor and conceive of our young animators and show technicians as operating in dialogic discovery with their emergent thoughts, their media worlds and their expressive powers.

As Zembylas (2002, p. 188) argues, 'culture formation, for Williams, is a ... process ... where residual, dominant, and emergent tendencies ... converge and collide'. We would like to argue that our observations of our young filmmakers and producers and the structures of feeling that emerged during the project point to this process of reconciliation of the hegemonic and the oppositional. Accordingly, we have co-opted the idea of resources of hope as a way of arguing for what Mckee et al. (2019, p. 68) call 'democratic literacy education' to counter 'anaemic skills-based literacies', offering teachers and pupils creative autonomy. We have developed the acronym HOPE (*Hybridity, Opposition, Presence and Experience*) to frame our findings as a way to celebrate the inclusive nature of these emergent literacy practices, excited by the potential to make available new roles and disrupt entrenched classroom hierarchies, particularly for those children who feel disenfranchised by established literacy practices.

Hybridity

First, the structure of feeling allows us to examine our data through a lens that combines *hybrid* elements in processes of cross-pollination, mediating as it does between the 'articulated and the lived' (Williams, 1979, p. 168). As we brought media resources, practices and texts familiar from home into the school setting, we encouraged children's understanding of popular culture to emerge from the 'shadow world' (Thrift, 1996), putting it on a more equal footing with selective culture and dominant versions of literacy. We experienced the way in which certain disempowered learners were able to showcase their cultural understanding as we valued their 'informal' (Moss, 2005) or 'vernacular literacies' (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Hall & Coles, 2001, p. 20). These children's expertise outside school is a key aspect of a structure of feeling that includes the popular cultural form of Disney animation and stories that exist in different media, as Mills (2010) and Fler (2018) recognise. During this project, by bringing this structure of feeling into collision with the dominant structure of feeling of performative neoliberal education, we participated in and witnessed an emergent structure of feeling, which allowed Max, Louis and Samir to

experience a sense of empowerment and success as learners.

Opposition

Second, as Williams (1979) notes, the structure of feeling comprises ‘what is not fully articulated, all that comes through as disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble’ (p. 168). This *opposition*, we argue, is evident, simmering under the surface in contemporary classrooms as the disconnect between the vibrant multimodal landscape and the autonomous (Street, 2003) skills-based form of literacy teaching pursued in school, outside of which young people have so much knowledge and experience, which remain largely unharnessed in education.

Acknowledging and leveraging these untapped ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) was key to turning the generalised resistance of the young media-makers into something positive, empowering particularly to those learners who were operating in the margins of the classroom, creating products that did justice to what they already knew and positioning them differently in the class hierarchy. The Year 6 teacher of this class noted how Louis and Max, ‘those two tricky characters who had a really big role, were celebrated not only during the play ... but then following after, they were continuing to be celebrated for that’, indicating the enduring effects of their focused endeavours.

Presence

Third, Williams (1977, p. 129) argues that the formation of culture should not be seen as something fixed but something always happening in the present, suggesting the primacy of *presence* and *process* ‘where experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalized and assembled’. While arguing that there are benefits associated with incorporating digital animation into dramatic spectacle in terms of textual understandings of composition and the mixing of modes, we are also interested in what is happening on the peripheries of practical media work. We recall Max’s observation of and sensitivity towards the *present* conditions that precipitated a carnivalesque and anarchic moment after the show. Acting and judging in the absence of rule (Eisner, 2005, p. 208), relying on feeling and paying attention to nuance and the dispositions that govern such behaviours are key qualities to be nurtured in media education, and it appears that Max had a keen understanding of

their workings. He sensed a particular mood issuing from immediate and unfolding events (Cannon, 2022), and as such, he performs that which Lanham (1993) presciently described as ‘the radical enfranchisement of the perceiver’ (p. 17).

The seeds for this level of confidence were sown in the workshop, where we observed ‘affective elements of consciousness and relationships’, as the children worked with adults unknown to them, like Amber, Rebecca, Theo, Sara and Michelle. ‘Changes of presence’ (Williams, 1977, p. 132) were produced and were key to the development of ‘a new dynamic relationship among materials, teachers and students’ (Mckee et al., 2019, p. 62), a new structure of feeling.

Experience

Throughout his explication of the structure of feeling concept, Williams points out the importance of *experience* but makes clear that this should be seen not as something abstract, individual or personal but as both social and material. The animation-making and immediate review are moments of intense experience distinguished by ‘the affect produced through interactions between body, text, and place as they infuse each other through meaning making’ (Burnett & Merchant, 2016, p. 276). As Probyn (1992, p. 26) observes, the importance of valuing experience in this way is that it can ‘point to possible sites for critical intervention’. The animation-making workshops were just such sites where skilled practitioners were able to bring about something transformative for some children and allowed others to ride a wave of creative success. Through the focused period of creation, the children experienced the discipline and possibilities involved in the animation of articulated 2D figures. They recognised that embodiment can have powerful effects, imbuing the animated sequences with tension so that the drama that was summoned up represented death and trauma in an appropriately emotional way and made sense in narrative terms. The interactions enacted in the desperate stretch of Amber’s arm and animated in the reach and collapse of cardboard limbs proved surprisingly affecting. The transition from Samir’s viewing of a moment of *The Lion King* with a view to re-creation—meaning that he understood the need for a close-up on a cardboard claw—to embodiment, animation and final review seemed surprisingly seamless, a process of transmediation facilitated expertly by Amber. The intense experience of sharing and reviewing the animation as it was being made is suggestive of the significance of an appreciative and understanding peer

audience, often a hallmark of a successful creative classroom (Bryer, 2013).

Conclusions

This is a small-scale case study in one school involving four facilitators and a professional animator. We recognise that this is not easily replicable in the current educational context, although the tools are user-friendly and widely available. In the limited number of sessions we had, in the midst of precarious pandemic conditions, we did not have time to attune the actors to all that the recorded dramatic action might bring to the live drama. We had been inspired by 1927's multimodal approach; however, we recognise that it takes time to establish emergent media arts practices, especially ones that embrace the oppositional. Notwithstanding, we wish to encourage other schools to explore all the meaningful production tasks for non-stage-performing technicians, artists, editors, voice actors, coders, collagists and crafts-folk, for the potential and actual media achievements acquired in young people's informal cultural pursuits to be recognised and celebrated, so that new structures of feeling, characterised by joy and purpose, can emerge.

We return to our research question, asking how the 'multimodal school play' extends existing schooled literacy practices through the provision of diverse roles and new opportunities for meaning-making. Like Zembylas (2002, p. 208), we note the benefit of learning to analyse structures of feeling, which allows us to 'problematize the present' and act on it for the benefit of the future. The roles and forms of enactment made available to the children involved in animating aspects of a well-known film proved meaningful and motivating. This work engaged even the most reluctant of literacy learners in acute attention to media-making and the pleasures of performance. We hope to have made a convincing case that collaborative project work blending digital media with moving image, music, live action, the spoken word, the visual, graphic and performing arts, and digital technologies is an example of integrated literacy practices that are relevant, inclusive and liberating. We believe our HOPE acronym is borne out by the ways the children wrote, or inscribed, themselves into their creative terrain, in active and iterative negotiation with familiar texts and tools, and with feelings of responsibility and purpose. As such, we seek to breathe new relevance into literacy work in schools to identify how emergent practices and dispositions related to media arts and craft, affective digital-authoring practices and dramatic enactments can combine generatively within the conventions of a school play.

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Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest.

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