Storytelling Through Block Play: Imagining Identities and Creative Citizenship

Abstract: In 2021, more than 80 million people worldwide will have been forced to flee their homes (UNHCR, 2021). Upon arrival in their new country, families may endure numerous hardships, yet succumbing to these challenges is not their single story. To understand how migrant and refugee-background children imagine more liveable futures beyond social and education barriers, financial stress, and unresolved emotional issues, our study focuses on the stories that 8 to 10-year-old learners created while playing with building toys and stacking blocks in a Canadian elementary school. Drawing on the interconnected frameworks of storytelling, identity, creative citizenship, and play-based pedagogies, our case study of 11 students illustrates that, in response to an invitation to support their real or imagined communities, learners engaged in literacy practices, built on their lived experiences and imagined strong identities to create stories of social responsibility and awareness, emphasizing the human needs of securing food and fresh water, ensuring safety, and connecting and caring for the community. Our findings may encourage teachers to consider play-based storytelling to address out-of-school social factors in their classrooms and to capitalize on students' inquiries to design interdisciplinary projects that can develop students' literacies and promote social activism.

Keywords: Creative Citizenship, Identity, Migrant and Refugee-Background Children, Play, Storytelling.

Introduction

With a newly created block model in hand, Hassan (all names are pseudonyms) explained, "I wanted to build a big house that is super invincible because they still have wars in Afghanistan." This was his response to the question: "In what ways can you help your community?" -- a question that a group of 8 to 10-year-old multilingual learners from migrant and refugee backgrounds responded to when playing with building toys (e.g., LEGO) and stacking blocks (e.g., Unifix cubes). They had just finished reading *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (Kamkwamba et al., 2012) -- the true story of a teenage boy in Malawi who endeavoured to fight one of the worst droughts ever seen in his country -- and were contemplating their own possibilities for change.

Hassan, originally from Afghanistan, arrived with his family amongst the more than 12,000 newcomers that the province of British Columbia has welcomed in recent years (B.C. Refugee Hub, n.d.). More than 80 million individuals worldwide, 40% of whom are children under the age of 18, have fled their home countries to escape persecution or armed conflicts (UNHCR, 2021). Though resettlement in a safe country can offer a new lease of life, the first years may be fraught with struggles such as learning a new language and culture, financial stress, and unresolved emotional issues associated with displacement and trauma (e.g., Hamilton & Moore, 2004; McIntyre & Hall, 2020).

While these challenges can result in a cycle of disadvantage and feelings of disempowerment, disruptive behaviour, distress, and academic refusal (Birman & Tran, 2017), the difficulties faced by migrant and refugee background children are not their single stories. Recent studies have found that resettled children cope with adversities, build on their lived experiences to deal with trauma, leverage new literacy

practices, and challenge stereotypical assumptions about migrant and refugee background learners (see e.g., Daniel, 2019).

Hassan's plan to protect his Afghan compatriots from ongoing armed conflicts is an example of how newcomers can anchor their literacies while foregrounding their identities and creative citizenship through block play. Over the past two decades, block play has been widely explored in children's literacy development (Picket, 1998; Snow et al., 2018; Stroud, 1995; Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). We are particularly interested in exploring its possibilities for empowering students from migrant and refugee backgrounds to draw on their lived experiences and imagined identities to tell their own stories as part of classroom based language and literacy learning.

Specifically, drawing on the interrelated frameworks of identity, creative citizenship, and play-based learning, we focused on the following research question: What might the stories that learners from migrant and refugee backgrounds create through block play tell us about their imagined identities and ideas of more liveable futures? These theoretical lenses, which will be further discussed in this article, view literacies as a set of social practices which enable learners to share their understanding of the world through multiple modes of communication and learn by tackling -- or proposing solutions to -- issues afflicting their local or global communities.

We link our pedagogical and theoretical perspectives, and our focus on creating space for resettled children's stories in classroom contexts, with Facer's (2019) article *Storytelling in Troubled Times* in which she proposes two main practices - ontological and affective -- revolving around storytelling that respond to and make sense of the turbulent and changing times in which we live. In the following section, we foreground these interconnections before presenting the context where our

research took place, the pedagogies and methods we used, followed by a discussion of salient examples from our findings.

Imagined Identities and Storytelling

As noted previously, our theoretical framework is underpinned by Facer's (2019) practices of storytelling. One of these practices, the ontological, is defined as "an understanding of reality as composed of multiple interdependent and co-present subjective temporalities that are experienced differently in different cultures" (Facer, 2019, p. 9). For Facer, engaging in storytelling means to conceive past experiences, the present, and future aspirations as sites of possibility where one can be informed and change (or improve) their present. By weaving past and present lifeworlds through social interactions (i.e., telling your story or listening to others), students can learn by "making connections between self, others, and the multiple contemporaneous overlapping stories that are unfolding in different temporalities at the present time" (Facer, 2019, p. 7). While this interconnection between self, the known and new learning experiences may benefit every student, scholars have recently shown how it can support children from migrant and refugee backgrounds in particular because it: 1) provides a safe, caring and welcoming environment where newcomers can see their backgrounds valued (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2015); 2) recognizes diversity (see e.g., Block et al., 2014); and 3) establishes strong and trusting social relations involving teachers, students, community and family (see e.g., DeCapua & Marshall, 2015).

Telling stories may also be interpreted as an experience of identity, a site of possibility "of becoming or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of skills and knowledge" (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019, p. 590). In this iterative process of becoming, we can draw on our life experiences and future

ambitions to strengthen our sense of belonging and overcome the present-time upheavals.

Extending our identities across time and space and "creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176) has been referred to by Wenger (1998) as *imagination*. In discussing the role of imagination in language learning, Pavlenko and Norton (2007) draw on Anderson's (1991) view of nation-states as imagined communities and Markus and Nurius's (1986) consideration of possible selves as the connector between our motivation and behavior as language and literacy learners. They refer to "an imagined community that presupposes an imagined identity—one that offers an enhanced range of possibilities for the future" (p. 678) in which their "actual and desired membership" in their "imagined community" (p. 669) affects students' learning trajectories.

One way to make visible our identities, including imagined identities, is through identity texts, which Cummins et al. (2015) define as any creative work produced from a combination of written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or other multimodal forms that generate insight into one's social and personal realities. For children from migrant and refugee backgrounds, creating identity texts is an opportunity to leverage future aspirations. Aided by their imagination, resettled children can perceive a connection with people beyond their immediate social networks (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019); they can project themselves in an imagined community where they are active participants and consequently contest deficit-oriented discourses that view newcomers as problematic or underachievers (see e.g., Bal, 2014).

Creating identity texts can also build up children's ability to cope with adversities in their new country, including family, personal, education, and social adjustments (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2015). Through multiple modes, children can start letting go of their stories of fear and loss and create an openness to new stories of hope and empowerment (see e.g., Beauregard et al., 2017). This exercise, according to Facer (2019), entails the affective practice of storytelling, which "recognizes, attends to and works with the emotions generated by ideas of the future -- hope fear, loss, anxiety, desire -- and explores how these inform and are reciprocally shaped by action in the present" (p. 9).

For migrant and refugee background children, this affective practice of doing literacies through storytelling encompasses understanding feelings of grief for the lives they left behind and envisioning a future in which they feel safe, valued, and secure. Their identity stories can express emerging notions of self and culture and exhibit a desire or reluctance to embrace a new cultural identity (see e.g., Kennedy et al., 2019). As we discuss in the following section, creating identity texts through storytelling may also promote acts of creative citizenship.

Creative Citizenship

Creative citizenship is a concept that has been discussed in diverse areas of expertise, from political communication to cultural studies and history. Mainsah (2017) explains that the meaning of citizenship has moved beyond voting, paying taxes and traditional mainstream politics. Now, it is often associated with a range of phenomena varying from cultural activism and participation in the public sphere to everyday acts of creativity, which include photo sharing, digital storytelling, sharing of sewing and knitting patterns online, graffiti art, urban gardening, and others. Scholars argue that the aim of this shift is to explore the lived experience of being a

citizen, to devise ways for creating social cohesion and identity, and to respond to needs that neither the state nor private enterprise are ready to deliver (Miller, 2015).

In his manifesto, Lee (2015) highlights the significance of creative citizenship as it enables individuals to engage and act, alone or with others, in new and creative endeavours to offer solutions to existing problems. Thus, Grundy and Boudreau (2008) contend, schooling and engaging at-risk populations in creative citizenship practices can redress their perceived lack of empowerment, confidence and social participation.

Stories of creative citizenship offer a counter argument to narratives of colonisation, which Facer (2019) describes as unhelpful in enabling students to cope with our troubled times. She defines these narratives of colonisation as predetermined stories that impose particular social relationships, ways of living, and organization desirable for a sustainable future. Rather than expecting individuals to comply with appropriate citizen behaviour, the concept of creative citizenship enables them to cultivate the capacity to govern themselves (Grundy & Boudreau, 2008). Instead of following a desirable path, creative citizens are leaders in the collective drive for innovation; they seek the means and instruments to generate new possibilities for action that can have an impact on their real and imagined communities (Landry, 2008).

Experiencing identity and creative citizenship requires an equally dynamic pedagogical approach able to weave these concepts together. In the following section, we discuss how a play-based and multimodal pedagogical approach brings these strands together.

Play: Weaving It All Together

A long line of research has explored the affordances of play-based activities in developing children's languages and literacies, in particular the work of Dyson who brings scholarly attention to childhood cultures and their relationship to school learning (see e.g., Dyson, 2020). Since Vygotsky's (1978) studies on the role of play in child development, scholars like Dyson have observed how play can create a zone of proximal development for different areas of cognition and facilitate a distinction between actions and objects.

In fact, the interconnections between play and literacy are so prominent that Wohlwend (2011) has defined play as a literacy. Through play, she argues, children can "skillfully produce texts, muster classroom resources, and perform literate identities in pretend spaces, in ways that affect their literacy learning and classroom status" (p. 1). She adeptly demonstrates how children can engage in social practices, enact literate identities, and collaborate through imaginative play.

For every child in early education but particularly for children from migrant and refugee backgrounds in their first school years in a new country, play can offer an enhanced source of communication to convey ideas and accomplish goals before their language skills fully develop. Play can also afford children opportunities to make sense of how the world is structured (e.g., roles and responsibilities in a community) and understand who they are or who they are not willing to be in the future (Kendrick, 2016).

While playing, children are also storytelling. They interweave fantasy, reality and identities to create stories about their understanding of the world as well as themselves (Kendrick, 2005). They can choose from a combination of different modes (e.g. talk/conversation, drawing, kinetic movement/dance, music/songs/sound effects, etc.) to tell stories that, for example, reflect their understanding of a new scientific

concept or theory (see e.g. Kim & Kim, 2017), explain current media events (see e.g., Leinonen et al., 2021), connect to popular culture (see e.g., Dyson, 2020), develop civic engagement (see e.g., Lotherington, 2017), or showcase their interests and future ambitions.

Specifically while playing with building toys and stacking blocks, linguistically diverse children incorporate abstract symbols, purposeful reading and writing, and oral language production to develop their early literacy (see e.g., Pickett, 1998; Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). In more recent studies, Snow et al. (2015, 2018) demonstrated in literacy-enriched block centers that English language learners can combine block play, drawing and writing behaviour (e.g., name writing, phonetic spelling, scribbling) to create authentic narratives.

Furthermore, Jeannotte (2005) suggests that it may be relevant to consider play as a resourceful tool in the construction of creative citizenship among children, especially given that they "have often been excluded from debates about citizenship due to their perceived lack of capacity" (Stephen & Gadda, 2017, p. 5). Recent Finnish studies, for example, have investigated the concept of creative citizenship by observing how children -- some living in under-resourced contexts -- employ creativity through play and inquiry-based projects (see e.g., Kumpulainen et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2018). Researchers found that, while using LEGO blocks or other multimodal forms of communication, children can foster individual and collective agency, strengthen a sense of belonging and community participation, and engage in open, authentic and critical conversations about culturally-sensitive information.

Having presented how play can weave together identity, storytelling and creative citizenship, we next discuss our research setting and the curricular unit in

which our participants used building toys and stacking blocks to imagine identities and tell problem-solving narratives.

The Research Context

Our research took place in a community elementary school renowned for its decades-long efforts to embrace diversity and inclusion. Through government and non-profit partnerships, this community school offers a variety of programs and services to meet the specific educational, recreational and social needs of the area it serves. Services include food and clothes banks, after school care, programs for preschoolers, and activities that engage community members, with or without children.

As part of a larger Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded project led by Dr. Maureen Kendrick which investigated the language and literacy education of children and youth from migrant and refugee backgrounds, we volunteered weekly in the school for almost a year, supporting teachers and students in various ways. Dr. Maureen Kendrick and Jonathan Ferreira have extensive experience as researchers and teachers working with students in marginalized or under-resourced contexts in Canada, Brazil, and East Africa. Sam Panangamu, a multilingual teacher in his first years of practice, previously supported children and families displaced by war and natural disasters in Italy, Sri Lanka and the UK.

In his Grade 2/3 classroom, Sam Panangamu promoted the principles of respect and responsibility through exploration, discovery and play-based learning. Aided by experiential learning and the support of multimodal resources (e.g., realia, toys, drawings, and posters), learners expressed their ideas and identities through the arts, drama, and play-based narratives. Sam Panangamu also created a stimulating

relationship-driven environment in which students shared the responsibility of assisting one another and, in the process, strengthening their sense of community.

Given the nurturing and stimulating learning environment in the classroom, we co-designed with Sam Panangamu a curricular unit, described in the following section, to encourage students to create multimodal narratives using building toys and stacking blocks to take on imagined identities and propose acts of creative citizenship to support their communities. Citizenship, in this context, entails social awareness and responsibility, one of the key cross-curricular competencies in the province of British Columbia (B.C. Ministry of Education, n.d.). This competence encompasses the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of social relationships. That is, socially aware and responsible citizens welcome and include new community members; they build strong rapport with newcomers and appreciate their lifeworld experiences. These citizens also resolve problems peacefully and sustain healthy relationships.

The Curricular Unit

The interdisciplinary unit was taught intensively over approximately three weeks with several periods scheduled each day. We first activated students' previous knowledge by referring to another picture book read in class -- *The Water Princess* (Verde & Reynolds, 2016). We inquired about the issues that the main character's community faced -- fresh water scarcity -- and how she helped her mother and other villagers. By exploring local and global environmental events that had recently occurred, such as the Australian wildfires and a snowstorm on Canada's east coast, we discussed the causes of these natural disasters and their effects on a community. The picture book *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind* was then introduced and read aloud, and students watched excerpts of its movie adaptation.

After learning about the main character's endeavours to support his community in the face of a prolonged drought, learners were then asked how they could help their own communities. We first shared some examples, and the children brainstormed possible solutions to problems in their communities. Students developed plans to showcase their solutions through the design of models made with building toys and stacking blocks (hereon block models), which overall took approximately 150 minutes. Along with written captions that they later wrote in scrapbooks, these models were presented during a gallery walk and shared at a student-led conference with siblings and caregivers. At the end of the project, with printed photos of their models, in pairs, students further explained their production during a 15-minute semi-structured interview with Jonathan in a separate room. All research activities with the exception of this interview were part of regular classroom activities. Participants were reminded they could decline to participate at any time.

Our Methods and Procedure

We draw from a multiple-case study that included 11 students, the majority from countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, and Syria. All of our participants were from migrant backgrounds. Although several were from asylum-seeking families or refugee claimants, their official government status was not always documented in school files, and for a wide range of sensitive reasons, some students chose not to disclose their countries of origin or immigration status. Only those who provided informed consent were included (out of 21 students), and each constituted an individual case. Consent forms were simplified and explained to students in class. They took the forms home to be signed by their parents/guardians. Families spoke various distinct home languages, and we offered to provide translations in other languages. All signed consent forms were in English.

Yin (2018) defines a multiple-case study as the selection of two or more cases with exemplary outcomes and that are believed to be literal replications. We chose this method of investigation to analyze all 11 participating students' productions because they resulted in similar multimodal artifacts, though each was unique. We sought to understand how a play-based approach might open spaces for migrant and refugee-background children's stories and create opportunities for them to explore their past experiences and future possibilities. Although some of our participants had been making consistent language and literacy progress, the vast majority participated in extra support English language learning (ELL) classes at some point in the past two years. Although they were able to communicate well in English, according to the classroom teacher and ELL specialist, many of the participants' literacy performance was considered below grade-level expectations, which is understandable given the number of years that it takes for students who are learning English as an additional language to catch up with their peers. All but two students spoke a language other than English at home.

Data sources consisted of field notes (36 hours of classroom observation), photos and videos of in-class activities (170 in total), artifact collection (models and scrapbooks), one semi-structured interview with the students along with informal conversations, and eight recorded interviews with the teacher participants (Sam Panangamu and ELL specialist). As noted previously, play was infused into the daily classroom activities, and there were many opportunities to observe students during informal play activities and classroom instruction. Jonathan also conducted a member checking interview to strengthen trustworthiness with the classroom teacher, who is also a co-author, and the ELL specialist who collaborated on the unit design and teaching.

We first analyzed single cases (i.e., individual students) independently before drawing a cross-case thematic analysis to highlight common themes emerging from the focal students' artifacts. Using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CADQAS), *Atlas.ti 8*, Jonathan and Dr. Kendrick worked collaboratively to categorize students' artifacts by what they represented (i.e., their contribution to the community); how learners positioned themselves (i.e., their role); and how they structured their models (i.e., how and why they chose the building blocks they utilized). We then referred to interview transcripts to examine their intentions and motivations and to discern the contexts in which they situated their artifacts. Finally, we analyzed teachers' interview transcripts as another step taken in data triangulation to consolidate our understanding of learners' practices. From this initial interpretation of data, themes, presented in the next section, were generated inductively to account for the stories of identity and creative citizenship students created through block play.

Findings

The block models the children produced in combination with their explanatory narratives are instances of practice (Cummins & Early, 2011; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007) that illustrate possibilities for engaging refugee-background learners cognitively and affectively in telling stories about their past, present, and future in meaningful ways. The problem-solving stories students created are sites of imagined identities and creative citizenship that centre imagined contributions and a sense of belonging in their community contexts. In constructing their models, students engaged in purposeful reading and writing and incorporated oral language production to propose more livable futures for their real and imagined communities. Their narratives foregrounded aspects of their identities and devised solutions to real-world issues. In looking at the models and narratives (shared during classroom interaction, interviews,

and photo captions) as a single unit of analysis, a central theme that emerged is social responsibility and awareness, with an emphasis on the sub-themes of providing drinkable water, securing food, ensuring safety, and connecting and caring for community. Table 1 summarizes the participants' names and countries of origin, the nature of their block models and the explanatory narratives, and the sub-themes elaborated in the following section.

Table 1: Building Block Models and Explanatory Narratives

NAME AND COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	**TYPE OF BLOCK MODEL AND EXPLANATORY NARRATIVE**	**SUB-THEME**
Felicity (Canada - 2nd generation migrant)	**Windmill** - "I kinda had my own idea, but it's kinda copying the boy who *harvested* [harnessed] the wind. But I added a few of my touches. [...] I put a windmill like he [the story's main character] did, and it was blowing the waterfall down because the water was stuck between rocks. [...] Yeah, we could use one of those to get all the dirt."	**Providing Drinkable Water**
Yusef (Eritrea)	**Spaceship** - "It's about people going to space, like, they go to space and they, like, explore if they have water."	**Providing Drinkable Water**
Reem (Afghanistan)	**Flowerpot** - "It's a flowerpot with flower inside. And how it can help? More people could plant more flowers and then maybe turn into food."	**Securing Food**
Nick (Canada - 2nd generation migrant)	**Carrot** - "This is a carrot. You can feed some people because they're on the streets and they got no food, and they're gonna starve. It's gonna be really sad."	**Securing Food**
Noah (Vietnam)	**Apartment Complex** - "I can help people who are homeless and that need shelter." "[...] because if it's raining, you don't have to live on the street."	**Ensuring Safety**
Hassan (Afghanistan)	**House** - "I wanted to build a big house that is super invincible because they still have wars in Afghanistan."	**Ensuring safety**
Nimra	**House** - "I built a house for my community.	**Ensuring**

(Afghanistan)	Some people in Afghanistan don't have homes."	**safety**
Hakim (Syria)	**Apartment Complex -** "It's a house and we made a house because…so people can sleep."	**Ensuring safety**
Kadan (Afghanistan)	**Bed** - "This is a bed for the homeless people who have no home. I see a lot of people Downtown, people homeless. [Jonathan asked where he would place it]. Outside so that the homeless could see and own it".	**Ensuring safety**
Alya (Eritrea)	**Garbage Bin** - "Mine is cleaning the community. [Jonathan asked how] by picking up garbage."	**Connecting and caring for community**
Alan (Canada - 2nd Generation migrant)	**Phone** - "It's a phone and can help people like call and do stuff and don't get bored."	**Connecting and caring for community**

Providing Drinkable Water

A first concern evidenced in the children's models entailed supplying their imagined communities with fresh water. While Felicity transformed the approach taken by the main character in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by "adding a few of her touches" (Felicity, field notes) to supply proper drinkable water (see Figure 1), Yusef was an astronaut and an engineer who capitalized on his knowledge of space exploration to cater for his imagined community. He built on his interest in *Star Wars* movies to design his spaceships that could "explore space to see if there is any water" (Yusef). As he described one of the crafts, "This one is a *Star Wars* spaceship because of the top" (Yusef).

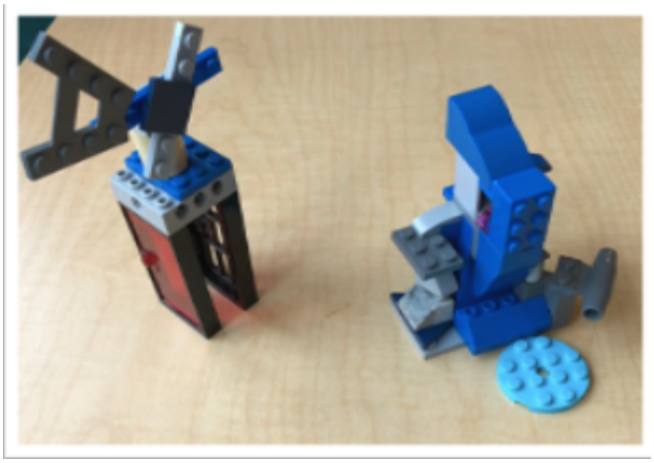

Figure 1: A windmill and a waterfall

Felicity and Yusef played agentive roles at play. They imagined themselves as doers driven to innovate and generate new possibilities for actions that could support their imagined communities. In designing their models, both children combined elements of other narratives, which they had read in class (i.e., *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind*) or read in other contexts (i.e., *StarWars*) with their individualities to be creative citizens. Although water scarcity is not a reality in their own communities, Felicity's and Yusef's block play was a site of possibility where they imagined a membership with a community in need and proposed solutions to a real-world issue.

Securing Food

Students also raised awareness about food insecurity. In Canada, 8.8% of households -- approximately 1.2 million -- have experienced some moderate or severe food insecurity due to financial constraints (Statistics Canada, 2020). More specifically in the province of British Columbia, over 1 in 10 households (11.8%) and approximately 16% of children under the age of 18 experience some level of food insecurity (Provincial Health Services Authority; British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, 2016).

To address this problem in the community, Nick designed a carrot using orange and green blocks to feed those in need. As he explained, “you can feed some people because they’re on the streets, and they got no food, and they’re gonna starve” (Nick). Reem built a flowerpot drawing on his home responsibilities of looking after the plants that had been placed in every room of his house (field notes). He gathered blocks of similar sizes and shaped them into a coherent ensemble to represent a pot, the stem and the petals of a flower (see Figure 2). When presenting the project in class, Reem explained that his flowerpot could inspire more people to plant seeds and turn the flowers into food.

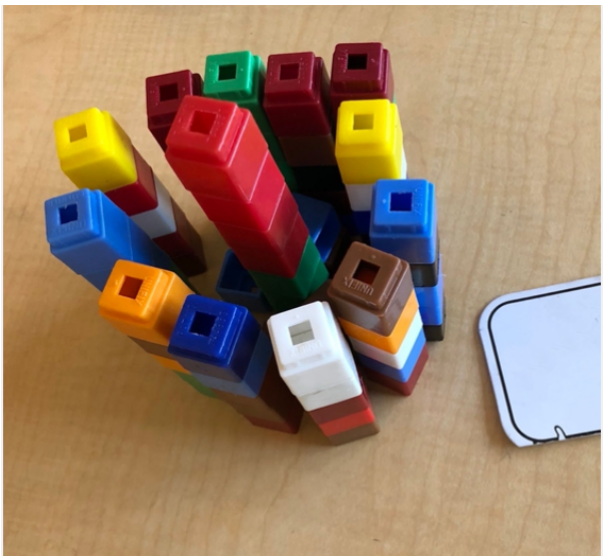

Figure 2: A flowerpot

While narrating their solutions, Nick and Reem made a connection with their real community -- an ontological practice of storytelling (Facer, 2019). The community school where we conducted our study offers affordable meal plans, and a food bank is located on the premises to support families struggling with financial difficulties and disruptive changes.

For this activity, the two boys played more than just the role of students; they were socially aware community members concerned about food safety. Through block

play, they produced problem-solving arguments to emphasize their willingness to contribute to the community not for the obligation but the responsibility of enhancing the well-being of those in need.

Ensuring Safety

Ensuring safety in their communities was another key element in students' stories. In terms of feeling safe, Hassan and Nimra may have referenced their lived experiences or knowledge of armed conflicts in Afghanistan when they proposed the construction of houses that could protect their compatriots. While Nimra explained that "some people in Afghanistan don't have homes", Hassan was more preoccupied with the country's ongoing wars. His proposal was "to build a big house that is super invincible" (Hassan) and provide weapons to keep everyone safe (see Figure 3). Both children, but particularly Hassan, were engaged with their Afghani language, culture, and music. At home, he often searched "for Afghani songs and cartoons. Afghani's stuffs" (Hassan, interview).

We view their problem-solving stories as examples of affective practices of storytelling (Facer, 2019) and identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011). In this context, block play was a site of possibility for these two boys to take on strong identities and imagine themselves as creative citizens using resources such as building toys to direct attention to issues affecting their real community.

Figure 3: A super invincible house

Homelessness and housing shortage in Vancouver (Canada) were other concerns raised by students in our study. In her comprehensive report on the current integration of migrant/refugee-background groups in Greater Vancouver, Barber (2019) indicates that one of the major issues is a housing shortage. Rentals are unaffordable for recent newcomers and some large households have to share a one-bedroom apartment.

Noah and Hakim designed an apartment complex to serve as a shelter where people could sleep “when it’s raining or stormy” (Noah), a rather common forecast on Canada’s west coast. Meanwhile, Kadan designed a bed (see Figure 4). He explained that he would make beds and place them outside where people who are homeless in downtown Vancouver “could see and own them” (Kadan).

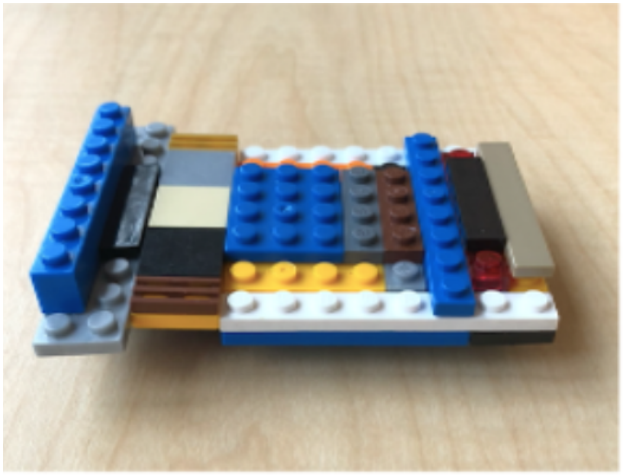

Figure 4: A bed for the homeless

These block models are examples of ontological and affective practices of storytelling (Facer, 2019) through which the four boys demonstrate their concern about keeping community members safe and sheltered. From different perspectives, they built on their lived experiences and interests to create identity texts and narrate their acts of creative citizenship. For example, Hassan is an Afghani culture enthusiast and capitalized on his appreciation for the country and culture (i.e., music, games, and TV shows) to plan a solution for a problem affecting Afghanistan. Kadan, on the other hand, referred to the deteriorating conditions in downtown Vancouver where people live on the streets (which he often witnessed when driving by). Noah's and Hakim's focus on providing shelter can also relate to the lack of affordable housing in the city.

Connecting and Caring for Community

Another sub-theme emerging from students' narratives accounts for the need to connect and care for the community. For Alan, telephones were positioned as a way of bringing people together and helping them feel more content because they can "call and do stuff and don't get bored" (Alan). Although this was not his first idea (field notes), through trial and error and after a few failed building attempts (e.g., a bench where city dwellers could sit to rest), he managed to complete his model and designed

a new narrative, emphasizing “You can call people, do stuff with it” to explain his contribution to his community. Alya also foregrounded community connection and engagement. Her design of a garbage bin conveyed the idea of a litter patrol that would clean the community “by picking up garbage” (Alya).

We regard the stories these children created through building block models as instances of storytelling practices that showcase literacy engagement, imagined identities, and creative citizenship. Learners raised awareness of real-world issues such as homelessness, armed conflicts, well-being and community relationships, and imagined themselves as agents of change.

Discussion

Play, according to Geertz (1973), “is a story the players tell themselves about themselves” (p. 237). Through block play, our participants told stories about themselves that reveal what they know, what they may have experienced, or the imagined communities to which they hope to belong (Norton, 2016). Such stories can overcome the barriers within education systems and the relentless focus on academic attainment that hinders migrant and refugee background children’s social participation (McIntyre & Hall, 2020).

Our findings suggest that ontological and affective storytelling practices (Facer, 2019) through play can be more than a measurable literacy performance indicator. Students read and learned about other children’s lives and problem-solving ideas through still and moving images, written words and sounds. To communicate their own solutions to real-world problems -- food insecurity, water scarcity, safety, and community connections -- they manipulated building toys and stacking blocks and, through discussion, shared their understandings. Telling these stories was an opportunity they had to imagine identities and make a difference in their real or

imagined communities. Through a singular act of creative citizenship such as building a block model, these children directed attention to out-of-school social factors that can have an impact on their learning and adaptation in the new country. Placing emphasis on these factors and addressing them in the classroom is a crucial element in supporting newcomers (see e.g., Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Due & Riggs, 2016).

In her article *Storytelling in Troubled Times*, Facer (2019) discusses the power of storytelling to identify and articulate ideas for the future, engage with the rich complexities of the present, and "give birth to new possibilities that could not previously have been imagined and a way of sharing these ideas with others" (p. 10). In this context, the children's narratives and multimodal artifacts demonstrate instances of practice that point to pedagogical possibilities for engaging learners from migrant and refugee backgrounds in creative citizenship.

The models and problem-solving narratives that the students designed can be seen as core civic resources and serve as a prelude to socially responsive acts of citizenship in the real world. The issues that our participants surfaced and the solutions they proposed have the potential to inspire self-directed inquiry projects that educators can develop with students and their communities. Teachers can capitalize on students' inquiries to promote interdisciplinary learning (e.g., academic language and content-based knowledge) and social activism (see e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Early & Kendrick, 2017).

Concluding Remarks

In *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind,* William -- the main character -- controlled the wind to collect underground water and irrigate his community's devastated plantations. Through play, the students in our study harnessed their

imaginations to centre themselves as creative citizens aware of their troubled present times. As Facer (2019) reminds us, “making, telling, listening to and reading stories in education… is not trivial, rather, it is a deadly serious business of identifying and articulating ideas of the future and engaging with the rich complexities of the present” (p. 11). In designing block models in response to the question: *In what ways can you help your community?*, these students told stories of a safe and more livable future where they were the protagonists. To help students achieve this feat, what our findings suggest is that educators should place emphasis on out-of-school factors that may hinder learning, engage students by building on their lived experiences, promote a sense of community, and continue to reimagine play, the arts, the digital, or any combination of modes of communication to afford children from every background myriad opportunities to enact empowered identities, nurture acts of creative citizenship, and claim ownership of their futures.

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