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The Unfolding of Lucas's Story in an Inclusive Classroom: Living, Playing, and Becoming in the Social World of Kindergarten

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The Unfolding of Lucas’s Story in an Inclusive Classroom: Living, Playing, and Becoming in the Social World of Kindergarten

Haeny Yoon, Carmen Llerena, & Emma Brooks

None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.

(Paley, 1990, p. xii)

Classrooms are spaces where children make public their identities, in the company of other children and adults whose identities are also evolving. As Paley points out, in order for every child to be given equitable opportunities for self-expression, classrooms should be spaces where stories unfold. Artiles and Kozleski (2007) propose a transformative agenda for inclusive education that includes access and permeable curricular boundaries, reflective and inquiry-based praxis, and authentic assessments that work to respond to children’s lived experiences.

In this article, we discuss inclusivity alongside children labeled with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)—a label that constructs assumptions and places limitations on enacting diverse identities. Lists of attributes and predetermined tasks are often assigned arbitrarily to children on the spectrum. Instead, why not view children through Vivian Paley’s lens of storytelling and play? What unique resources do children offer when given the space to enact their own ideas as part of classroom communities rather than *apart from* them?

The Story of Lucas

The story of Lucas,¹ a kindergartner diagnosed with ASD, allows us to see the potential of play, stories, and daily interactions as intellectual and social activity. Lucas’s complex thoughts, social acuity, and sense of humor create new storylines and directions that facilitate depth in play, for both adults and children.

1 All children’s names are pseudonyms.

We re-write the story of Lucas and others like him in order to highlight the funds of knowledge that children bring into the classroom community (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). As his parent (Emma), teacher (Carmen), and a teacher-educator (Haeny), we tell Lucas’s story from multiple perspectives, hoping *all* student identities will be appreciated. We begin with Emma’s description of Lucas.

2Lucas Keeps Having “Meltups”**

Imaginative. Inclusive. When asked to describe my son with high-functioning autism, these are the words that jump to mind. Yes, he can be in his own world, not atypical of a child with his diagnosis. But it is a highly adventurous world of heroism, deception, strategy, dark corridors, and bright endings. He wants more than anything to bring you in and make it come alive for you too.

When we think of autistic children, we tend to picture the reclusive child prone to meltdowns. Lucas is an ebullient child who is prone to what I call “meltups.” These are wide-eyed, ecstatic affairs that are generally short-lived. No tears or crying here. Meltups are certainly something to be managed and tamed, but they are not the hair-raising, emotionally brutal events ascribed to ASD children.

Kids like Lucas—they always have contributed, even before they could verbally. Lucas goes for the laugh whenever he can. He asks classmates, teachers, and therapists alike to come over to our house for play dates. There is so much of his world to share. At home with me or in individual therapy sessions with adults, he is generally more reserved than when he is surrounded by peers. More time is allotted for verbal back and forth, and his spontaneous conversational skills are drawn out. It is real work for him, and he saves his spark for school and play dates. The opportunities for social interaction, and of course peers who appreciate his silly sense of humor, are what make him most vibrant, as a sense of motivation to deepen connections is being forged.

It is 2016, and merchandising for *Star Wars: Episode VII* is relentless and unavoidable. A fan of rocketry and space travel, Lucas was easily lured into George Lucas’s world of intergalactic strife. As his mother, it was initially difficult for me to accept the aggressive conflict in Star Wars, especially with a child whose social development must be carefully monitored. However, the science-fiction genre is an engaging path for a young mind seeking creative input, and so our Star Wars adventure began.

At home, Lucas’s fascination with Star Wars is reflective as well as exploratory. Sometimes he builds a

2 Indicates a shift in author voice.

city (e.g. Coruscant, Naboo) out of blocks, and a flurry of spaceships and Lego characters descend on it. There is plenty of conflict. A green-faced fellow is taken prisoner, or someone must be saved from a sandpit. His cities are frequently leveled and quickly rebuilt by Lego workers. Usually, however, he is feverishly drawing with markers, hashing out elaborate play schemes.

These drawing sessions are not like the quiet time I had with my crayons as a kid. The movements of competing starships are shown in detail. There are explanations, sound effects, and a lot of “Look, Mommy!” His body is physically engaged, jumping during especially exciting parts of the story. He walks his fingers into the heart of battle, and his body reverberates when the Death Star’s explosion rattles the galaxy.

Sometimes these drawings are incredibly touching. He recently asked about my late father, “PopPop,” and where he went when he died. After my attempt to provide a reassuring answer, he stared at me with big eyes as he gathered words for his plan. He decided to draw a picture of PopPop flying a Star Destroyer (Figure 1). Next to my father was a small stick figure representing Lucas holding an X-Wing Fighter, and in the distance, another stick figure without toys but wielding a big smile (me).

Lucas had no memory of my father, but his instinct for inclusiveness inspired him to find a way to bring a man he knew only from pictures into the vivid playtime the rest of us got to enjoy. Most of his “keepers” are hung in the hallway, but Lucas insisted that this one go up in the living room, next to the toys.

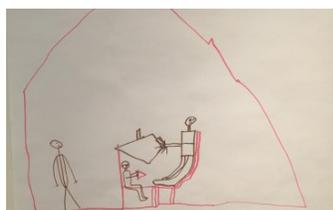


Figure 1. Lucas’s drawing of Pop Pop in the Star Destroyer.

I see this imaginative play as a kind of self-imposed homework. Lucas is working on ideas and even full-fledged stories, as well as the more arduous task of organizing language to go with them. He brings these schemes, what I call his “A-game,” back to his peers at school or on play dates.

Recently, I saw him organize a small group of unfamiliar children in the playground sandbox, taking them on a tour of the dusty planet Tatooine.

He warned them of nefarious characters lurking in the surrounding rocks as well as a few scattered volcanoes (why not?). A little girl clutching a purple pony was intrigued and clearly pleased to be part of this grand adventure—like all of us.

****Framing ASD from a Disabilities Studies Perspective**

By centering on the Lucas narrative, we shift the focus away from discourse about labels, interventions, and imposed meanings. We open up the idea that children like Lucas are intricate in their mind, body, and spirit. Their identities are multidimensional and full of emotions (meltups or meltdowns); their experiences and interests are varied and complex.

However, the larger cultural message around Autism Spectrum Disorder frequently overemphasizes the social behavior of ASD students as problems needing to be fixed. In popular culture depictions, disabled individuals are compared to perceived “norms.” The media portrays individuals undergoing debilitating circumstances. Or ASD persons are exoticized by heroic narratives in which individuals overcome their disabilities (Connor & Bejoian, 2006; Davis, 2013; Linton, Mello, & O’Neill, 1995).

Inherent in the work of disability studies (DS) is a challenge to the idea of normalcy – the images, perceptions, language/discourse used to place social and cultural limitations on those with who are cognitively, physically, emotionally, and socially different (Davis, 2013). Disability is often defined as a medical deficiency that needs treatment or intervention in order to fix individuals rather than fix systems. The focus of DS is on disability as a social, cultural, political construct that has consequences for those who are categorically labeled (Linton, 1998). The field brings to light “the critical divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological, the inside versus the outsider, or the competent citizen versus the ward of the state” (Linton, 1998, p. 2).

DS scholars interrogate the popular discourse, institutional limitations, and identity markers that construct disabled individuals. This shifts the focus from devising interventions and accommodations to a more critical stance on schooling.

Disabilities are a social judgment, and disability scholars have long since argued that “disability is an idea and not a thing...it is not the way in which people vary or the differences they have in comparison to others but what we make of those differences that matter” (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011, p. 270). As Simi Linton and her colleagues ask, “how can we redress problems in the structure as well as the content of the curriculum in reform efforts?” (Linton et al., 1995, p. 10). In other words, it is important to turn the lens on socially constructed schooling practices (e.g., curriculum, classroom management, schedules, movement) that create disabling situations for neuro-diverse children.

Inclusion in Classroom Spaces

Already positioned within deficit terms, ASD students are assumed to be asocial and given reductive instruction meant to control their social behaviors and help them to “fit in.” Rather, we highlight the benefits of lifting up the voices of ASD students within the broader community. Similar to multicultural education frameworks, inclusive education should not be viewed as additive (Banks & Banks, 2009), but central to socially just curriculum and practices. To say that all children must thrive in a prescribed, “normalized” setting, along a trajectory of “typical” behaviors neglects the non-linear ways that many children arrive at understanding themselves and their cultural worlds.

Children with identified disabilities are often treated as unable to function at the level of their peers and included as tertiary members of the classroom. Similar to the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), we begin with the idea that constructing difference as deficit overlooks the varied ideas, capacities, and resources that all children bring into classroom contexts. Thus, “inclusive education requires a transformation in curriculum and pedagogy...from a generalized, dominant culture perspective to a pluralistic and cosmopolitan one” (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Difference and deficit are not synonymous; instead, diverse voices and experiences offer the dominant culture new ways of thinking about ideas and approaching problems and issues.

In the next sections, we discuss the classroom community in which Carmen and Haeny’s project took place by describing the foundation and application of our play/writing project as a tool for fostering inclusion. We place importance on allowing children’s natural inquiries to emerge from careful attention to play in action. Weaved throughout the paper are descriptions conveying the complex actions of Lucas from our multiple viewpoints. We aim to dispel stereotypical views of ASD children, especially those that posit them as asocial and devoid of emotions (e.g., empathy). Our goal in describing the project within this particular classroom is to provide a counter narrative of what inclusive classrooms might look like.

****From Carmen’s Treasure Chest of Stories**

Lucas became central to the narrative at Elizabeth Browning Elementary School.³ While he masterfully engaged his parents and peers in out-of-school spaces, he brought this imaginative, contagious energy into the kindergarten classroom, meltups and all. Our kindergarten classroom beautifully illustrated

3 The school name is a pseudonym.

the diversity of New York City. The thirteen students and two teachers came from various racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The classroom followed an integrated co-teaching (ICT) model, mindfully structured to meet the needs of four students with ASD and nine neurotypical students. While the program provided a therapeutic environment designed especially for students with ASD, all students benefited from the instructional strategies and behavior supports. Among the therapies provided to students with ASD was Social Development Intervention (SDI), which focused on communication, problem solving, social skills, and pragmatic language development (Koenig, Bleiweiss, Brennan, Cohen, & Siegel, 2009). These daily sessions were facilitated by a specialized speech pathologist with the support of the classroom teachers.

In my thirteen years as an educator, I learned from children to presume competence (Biklen & Burke, 2006), recognizing that each child wants to participate and contribute to the classroom community—to be fully included, accepted, appreciated, and heard. Over the years, I amassed a collection of stories about my students and the daily occurrences in my classroom. These stories include exciting discoveries, mischievous acts, proud moments, and hilarious tales. Lucas was a frequent contributor to my treasure chest of stories.

Lucas Saves the Day

Lucas has a gentle demeanor and amiable disposition that drew me to him. His capacity for empathy surpassed that of most kindergartners. It did not fit the ill-conceived stereotype that children with ASD are not capable of understanding and sharing the feelings of others. Lucas is also a savvy problem solver. When one least expected it, Lucas chimed in to offer advice to a peer about how to handle a small conflict or disappointment before it escalated. He was generous with praise and was happy to share with his classmates. He loved to laugh and make others laugh. Lucas was enamored with all things Star Wars and often created intricate drawings that gave us a glimpse into his extraordinary imagination. At one point a new-found passion for chess brought out a competitive side of him I had not seen before.

Lucas consistently showed care and concern for me, despite developmental theories that deem children egocentric, more concerned about themselves than others. One day Lucas and I were working on a task that required him to cut sentences into strips and glue them in his notebook. Lucas noticed that I was rubbing my hands together after using a glue stick and asked if my hands were sticky. After I nodded, he affirmed the same thing happens to him when he uses glue and added his dislike for sticky fingers.

In what seemed like a random conversation shift, he asked for a water bottle. I thought he might be thirsty, but he said it was to rinse the stickiness off. I told him not to worry – we had plenty of hand wipes to clean our hands and pointed him in that direction. Lucas had difficulty opening the container of wipes so I went over to help him while he sat back down. I returned to my seat next to him and offered him the wipe.

He said, “I don’t need it. It’s for you. *You* have sticky hands.” I had assumed that Lucas was concerned about his own needs when in actuality he was thinking about mine.

This attention to others is also evident in his peer interactions. For example, Xiarra was distressed to discover her pencil did not have an eraser. Though she had no need for an eraser, the possibility of making a mistake without one on hand was more than she could bear. She began crying inconsolably. Before I had a chance to intervene, Lucas jumped in and said, “Here. You can use mine and I’ll use yours.” I thanked Lucas and went off to find him a pencil-top eraser, which he graciously accepted with a smile. I anticipated he would put the eraser on his pencil. Instead, Lucas called out to Xiarra and said, “Here’s an even bigger eraser for you,” and once again they swapped pencils.

In many instances, Lucas found creative ways to diffuse situations, putting the needs of others over his own. In fact, meeting his own needs was not always his sole concern – attempting to understand and communicate with others seemed to motivate his participation in the classroom community – a clear goal in SDI.

Lucas’s peers were drawn to his laid-back personality, responsive nature, and sharp wit. During SDI sessions, other children clamored to sit next to him, at times crying, whining, and heel-digging if there weren’t enough spots close by. Trevor, the last child to enter the room, was disappointed and on the verge of tears to learn the only chair available for him was one chair away from Lucas. Ms. M wondered aloud how they could solve the problem before beginning the session. Lucas looked at Trevor as he pointed to the distance between the chairs and said, “You are *close* to sitting next to me.” Trevor quietly agreed with Lucas’s logic and sat down quietly.

In matters like this, Lucas taught us how children with disabilities are able to “enhance others’ learning and living” (Edmiston, 2007, p.342). In addition, he allowed us to see new ways of problem-solving and to see the needs of others. Lucas was part of solving the problems evident in the social scene.

Telling Our Stories Through Play

Carmen and Haeny worked together in the classroom for most of the school year (2016-2017). Central to their work was the belief that understanding and utilizing children's culture was the foundation of curriculum and instruction.

Many scholars advocate for pluralistic, multicultural, and democratic spaces to reframe deficit paradigms. Using culturally sustaining frameworks, teachers seek to actively maintain cultural identities while providing marginalized groups access to knowledge and power (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Sleeter, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2013).

Similarly, we believe (like many DS scholars) that there has been a long history of oppression and marginalization of individuals with a disability label (Baglieri et al., 2011). Culture (broadly defined) includes (dis)abilities since it influences the range of practices, affiliations, representations, and boundaries that make up individual experience. Thus, exploring the “multi” cultural lives of young children is important in understanding children's development as social, intellectual, and cultural beings (Rowe, Fitch, & Bass, 2001).

To prioritize inclusion means that social interactions are carefully observed, documented, and facilitated by teachers. In play, children build a shared culture, drawing from multiple cultural communities (linguistic, familial, cultural, and social) in order to create and sustain play episodes. Vivian Paley reminds us that “play is not enough; there must be a format that captures the essence of play while attaching to it a greater degree of objectivity” (Paley, 1990, p. 34). In our own quest to intellectualize play experiences, we describe a play/writing project where children's recorded and observed stories became the material used to “write” about life in this classroom.

We spent 30 to 45 minutes giving children opportunities for free play using a variety of materials and configurations (kitchen areas, dress-up centers, block/building areas, and train centers). Within these areas, we documented children's play with audio-recordings and transcriptions of dialogue, photographs of play scenes, collections of artifacts, records of questions/inquiries, and reflective notes. Carmen and Haeny discussed the transcriptions and field notes, paying attention to children's enactment of their identities, cultural affinities, interests, and social appropriations.

Finally, we shared our findings with the children in the form of play stories, using a combination of

photographs, artifacts, and their own transcribed words as resources. These stories had a permanent place in the classroom library; the children went back to read them again, as well as to initiate and continue storylines in play. For example, transforming superheroes became a common theme at the dress-up center – this gave children a way to try on different costumes (e.g., ninja turtle to construction worker to doctor) and simultaneously “try” on different roles. They used content from previous play stories to develop their own versions of transforming superheroes, reappropriating and thereby “transforming” stories through play. Our role as teachers was to give students the space, materials, freedom, and support to sustain their play (Chudacoff, 2007). In the next section, Haeny shares what she has learned from Lucas within this classroom context.

****Haeny’s View of the Social Scene**

Not too long ago, Lucas was sitting at a table, getting ready to eat lunch. He had a bag of chips that needed to be opened and asked Ms. Carmen for help. She was in the middle of chatting with me, so she asked Lucas to wait a moment. After finishing our conversation, I walked over to Lucas and offered to help him open his bag. He looked up at me and asked, “How did you know I needed help? Did you notice me?” I nodded my head and said, “Of course.” (Field Notes, 2/5/2016)

In fact, I had been “noticing” Lucas a great deal, particularly his astute attention to the social scene and his keen reading of those who were included and excluded. A couple of weeks before this instance, Lucas asked if I would go with the ASD group for SDI. When we got to Ms. M’s classroom, Lucas informed her that we had a new person in the group—he pointed at me and made sure I had a place to sit. I was grateful for the brief introduction since even as adults, it is difficult to approach new people and a new situation.

Lucas did this for me and others quite often. During play, he would stop to tell me the rules or possibilities; he showed me the thermometer in the doctor’s kit, explaining to me how to read the temperature, “This is the bad temperature...and that’s the happy temperature.” Or when Trevor during pretend-play yelled, “Help me Dr. Lucas!”, Lucas was quick to rush over and ask, “Are you okay? What happened?”

On another occasion, Riley was sitting on a red chair wearing a teenage mutant ninja turtle mask (a popular dress-up costume), interacting with no one. I saw Lucas look over at Riley. I could almost anticipate what he would do, and consistent with my expectations, he walked over and said, “I’ll sit

next to you, don't worry." Riley got up and pretended to shoot him with the magic ring on his finger,

"Pyooo!"

"He's still alive! Ahhhhh!" reacted Lucas as he fell to the ground dramatically and lay still, face down.

Within this single act of inclusion, Lucas seamlessly brought Riley back into the play scene through an empathic gesture and a logically constructed response to the ensuing play scenario. He weaved in and out of character (from a concerned friend to a fighter), actively participating as well as purposefully including other children.

Lucas could have easily continued to play with Trevor and excluded Riley. Instead, Lucas responded, revealing a heightened awareness of the entire social scene—the cultural tools, the participants, the storyline, the context, and the environment.

The Art of Improvisation

Lucas was attuned to his social surrounding rather than simply engrossed in his own play. Once, while cooking a pot of spaghetti on the kitchen stove, he continued to pay attention to Evan and Xiarra, who were sharing his play space. In the plastic kitchen area were many play items including pots, pans, containers, plastic food of all types, and a kitchen set with a pretend stove, microwave, sink, and cabinets. Lucas, along with two classmates, were role-playing scenes typical in the kitchen. Evan was flipping eggs on the fryer, Xiarra was boiling water on the stove, and Lucas was making spaghetti. At one point, Evan pretended to pour cold water on Xiarra, who was sitting on the carpet.

Evan: Did you know I put pepper in the water? Now I'm going to pour it on you!

Xiarra: Ah! Choo!

Lucas: I poured ketchup on you! (He takes the ketchup and pretends to put it on Xiarra.)

Xiarra: Ah!

Lucas: A person sandwich! Look, a person sandwich.

Evan: Put mustard!

Lucas: And then you know -

Evan: Ketchup (pours it on Xiarra).

Lucas: And you know, when we eat her, we can put a band-aid on her. When we eat her, we can put a band-

aid on her.

Evan: I put water, ketchup, mustard.

Lucas: We can put a band-aid! (Lucas and Evan start laughing.)

Initially, it seemed as if Lucas was playing separately from Evan and Xiarra, but he joined them when the plot was “getting good.” He contributed to Evan’s story, transforming the complexity of the storyline. He not only poured condiments on Xiarra, but he also turned her into a person sandwich because that was what condiments were usually for. Furthermore, he suggested putting a band-aid on her because upon being eaten, she would be hurt. His storyline was also accompanied by an ongoing narrative that allowed me to piece together the sequence of actions in this story.

While Evan and Xiarra were actively participating and sustaining the play, Lucas gave insight into what was happening—they were making a person sandwich, they planned to eat it, and they were eventually going to patch her up with band-aids. Without Lucas’s narrative of the event, it would have looked like a fake fight between the members of the center. However, as more careful examination of play reveals, children have much more invested in their play than a cursory glance allows us to see.

Tina Fey (2011), in *Bossypants*, advises improv actors to contribute to the scene, “It’s your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you’re adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile” (p. 85). She emphasizes the importance of listening and respecting your improv partners, being part of sustaining the story rather than relying on others to carry the load.

Lucas took a page right out of Tina Fey’s book—he built on Evan’s story rather than diverging from it and contributed his own ideas, elevating the quality of the scene. Almost on cue, as soon as the scene was over, he grabbed his pot of spaghetti, sat down at the table to eat his spaghetti dinner and carried on a conversation with me about what I liked to eat for dinner. He fluidly moved from scene to scene.

Call Me on My Cell Phone

Social relationships and making connections played a significant part in Lucas’s improvised play scenarios. Most of his play times included enacting social relationships with other children in the classroom, teachers, or imaginary friends. On multiple occasions, Lucas would pretend to call people on the cell phone. I overheard him saying, “I’m going fishing and I’ll meet you back at the basketball court.” He was walking around the room pretending to talk to his friend while using his hands to

gesture while talking. His phone conversation typified a conversation with friends—the idea of making plans played a part in how Lucas understood relationships.

On another occasion, he appropriated a different kind of role and discourse style. He looked over at Mr. N, who was sitting alone at a table (once again involving someone who was solitary), called him on the cell phone, and proceeded to take his order.

Lucas: I'm calling you, Mr. N. What would you like to order? (He stands a considerable distance from Mr. N.)

Mr. N: (He pulls out his actual cell phone.) I would like a bacon cheeseburger. How long will it take?

Lucas: Six minutes.

Mr. N.: How much is it going to cost?

Lucas: One dollar.

When Mr. N's order was ready, Lucas brought him the cheeseburger, informed him that there was no bacon available (it was not easy to find in the toy bin), and managed to wrangle an actual dollar from his new customer.

During this time, Lucas responded in character, answering Mr. N's inquiries. He also completed the task of taking, making, and delivering the order. Moreover, Lucas engaged in a spontaneous role play using humor, wit, and flexibility. Lucas navigated the social scene as well as expertly involving and engaging others around him. He adopted socially appropriate communicative and discourse styles as he engaged with others in play. Arguably, he kept these notions hidden until we transformed our own teacher/authoritative gaze into that of a co-participant and co-learner.

Lucas's play, while unpredictable, always followed a social trajectory— inherent in his play was responsiveness, attention to the ongoing (inter)actions, and a deep understanding of social cues and intentions. In the next section, we turn attention to Lucas' own social world. We begin and end Lucas's story with an enactment of Star Wars, as this seems only appropriate.

Entering Lucas's World

In a Tumblr post by Autistic Worlds, the author describes the idea of “traveling” as “a mental activity categorized by intense, divergent imagining” (2015). Her imagination is what supported her through

difficult moments and ableist barriers. She describes these moments as a journey from stifling, physical realities to imaginative and creative worlds inside her head.

Lucas “travels” quite a bit, but often seeks companions to travel with him. One day, he was describing a battle involving tie fighters (elite pilots in the Galactic Empire’s military), shields, and the Death Star. He looked at me and asked, “You know how we will get them?” I looked at his drawing and said, “How?” He jumped out of his seat and put both his hands up and said, “Shoot them...from inside.” He explained to me that the lone tie fighter can shoot through the shield, but “nobody can shoot into the shield...only if they shoot that tie fighter, the shield is destroyed” (Figure 2). He exclaimed that he would get colored pencils to illustrate the tie fighters hitting the shield.

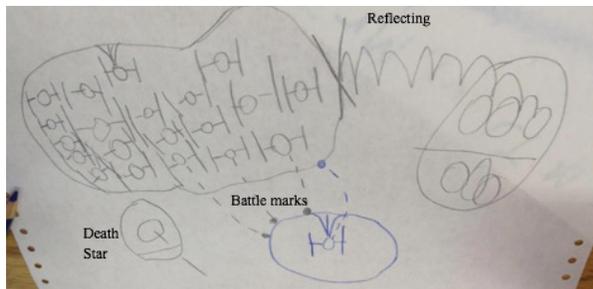


Figure 2. The battle of the tie fighters by Lucas.

“Another one shoots, and they are *not* getting through...now they are having a bit of a battle,” he said, while drawing lines with the colored pencil to indicate the act of shooting and reflecting. Trevor (another student with ASD) interrupted him, insisting on showing Lucas his drawing of Mr. Jabes (a character he had just made up). He said, “It’s us versus Mr. Jabes...we are on the Millenium Falcon.” Lucas, in the midst of his own battle scene, stated rather logically, “I’ve got an idea. Should we pretend we can shoot the pages?”

Lucas drew on Trevor’s paper, as Trevor’s own story seemed to serve as a familiar parallel: the Millenium Falcon (also a part of Star Wars) and the battle language (e.g., “versus”) was in line with Lucas’s ongoing drama. He explained to Trevor, “Death star shooting!” but Trevor was not pleased.

Trevor angrily said, “Hey! I didn’t want to shoot through pages.” Trevor’s picture now had the same, coiled reflection lines, colored pencil lines to indicate shooting, and Lucas’s authorial imprint (Figure 3). Mr. N. came over to deal with the situation as Trevor burst into tears.

Mr. N: Trevor didn't like it when you drew on his paper (Lucas tries to draw on it again and starts whining a

little.) *Excuse me; Trevor didn't like it when you drew on his paper. You saw how he reacted, right?*

Trevor: (in a calmer voice to Lucas). Can you not draw on my paper, please?

Mr. N: Good job using your words.

Trevor: (continues his story to Lucas). Hey, this is us three versus Mr. Jabes and this is...

Lucas: But excuse me, you know what? When you tell me how this story (referring to Mr. Jabes) is going, and I'm working on this story, you're kind of distracting me.

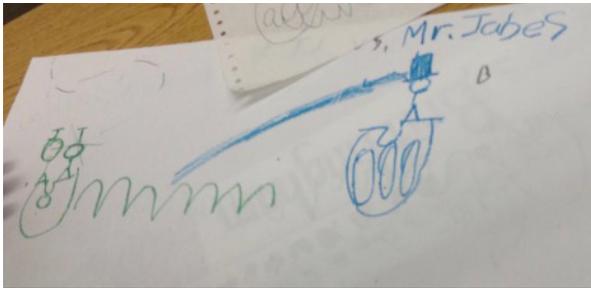


Figure 3. Trevor's drawing of Mr. Jabes.

In this scene, we see Lucas involved in his own story, so much so that he experiences an intense “meltup” (as Emma describes earlier) of an intergalactic battle and supernatural powers. His storytelling and story writing are brought to life by body movements, dialogue, and markings on the page. He continues the experience on Trevor's paper; Trevor unsuccessfully tries to interrupt the scene at its climax.

This is where Lucas's ASD label allows us to understand the complexity of neurodiverse children. On the surface, we can point out the rather simplistic diagnoses of the scenario: Lucas was “daydreaming” and in his own world—he seemed uninterested in what is going on around him. He misread Trevor's social cues and disregarded his peer's feelings. He was impulsive and drew on another classmate's drawing. However, when analyzing the full context of the episode, we see that there is more to Lucas's reactions. The level of detail in his drawings and words, and his ability to bring the page to life require more than just imagination and creativity. He was, in fact, directing the scene, situating the characters, improvising the drama, building momentum, and crafting the visual stimulus. He was also involving me as a willing participant and observer of this “galaxy far, far away”—he brought me into his world.

When Trevor brought his paper over, he found a way to connect Trevor's idea with his own; arguably, this could be seen as an inclusive act rather than an ill-intentioned compulsion. To be fair, Lucas was invested in his own story, but he found a way to connect Mr. Jabes, Millenium Falcon, and Trevor's story into the dramatic retelling. Thus, he brought Trevor into the play with him as well.

The miscommunication between the two boys was understandable, given the difficulty of negotiating social intentions and demands, especially when any two people want to play different things. However, Lucas confidently explained (in a “socially acceptable” manner) his feelings towards Trevor’s interruption. He let Trevor know that “When you tell me how *this* story is going, and I’m working on *this* story, you’re kind of distracting me.” He utilized the tools learned at SDI in an authentic, social context—he used his words to mediate the conflict.

Entering Children’s Cultural Worlds

Lucas is an integral character in breathing life into our classroom community. His unique story (along with the unique stories of each classmate) creates a collective story of our kindergarten space that belongs to all of us: the children, the teachers, the parents, and the school.

During play, different children displayed competence dependent on the nature and topic of play, providing an equitable space for children to reveal their sophisticated repertoire of social and cultural knowledge (e.g., making sandwiches, taking orders, dramatizing Star Wars). More importantly, play allowed the children to hold different positions of power and live out complex identities that were not tied to narrow and ill-conceived academic labels (e.g., struggling reader, special needs child).

Edmiston (2007) addressed the social construction of disability as a term used to exclude and “other” those who are different or impacted by physical, emotional, or intellectual labels. These labels simplify the complexity of children, labeling them with different abilities, while overlooking the role of learners as active agents in the construction of learning. He makes a case for dramatic play where children demonstrate competent language use and identify themselves as active and capable participants within their peer groups.

During formal, teacher-directed moments, it would be easy to dismiss Lucas as unresponsive, but as we move towards children’s cultural center, we are afforded windows into their sophisticated and imaginative thoughts. From the above scenario, we rethink how we define “responsive.” We ask, “What are children actually responding to as they engage with others?” And what can we learn as we inquire into the social imagination of children’s worlds?

It is important to provide the time, materials, and space for children to bring these worlds to life. Therefore, we advocate for protecting and privileging spaces in school (e.g., free play) where children

are given agency to engage in authentic experiences and inquiry. Similarly, teachers need to rethink curriculum, structures, and classroom activities in order to make time for play and other agentive activity.

Through collaboration and interaction, children are able to draw on multiple resources to engage with others within literate acts: storytelling, oral language, drawing, numeracy, and writing. We began to see children's identities within their play by looking at the roles they relate to, the conversations they participate in, their enactment and placement of popular culture, and their transformative use of materials.

Lucas was engaged and social during play. He often asked clarifying questions of his peers and teachers; he responded to others when asked questions during classroom events; he referenced thoughts that others brought up. More importantly, freedom to play gave Lucas the opportunity to share his knowledge and experiences in a world that tends to silence and marginalize those who are different (Wendell, 1989).

Holding onto labels and focusing on (dis)abilities hinder the narratives that are constantly being constructed and reconstructed in social spaces like the classroom. Through careful observation and detailed analysis of children's texts and conversations, we place responsibility on teachers to strive for complete portraits of children's abilities and knowledge. The purpose of understanding individuals in self-motivated activities (e.g., play for young children) is important in revealing the multiple positions, roles, and traits individuals pursue across contexts. We avoid the "danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2007) that can potentially narrow the opportunities for individuals to creatively express their strengths and skill sets..

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