

Assembling communities

Looking at how communities work for enacting critical literacies pedagogy in the classroom

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121

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways assembling communities work to support, hinder or disrupt literacy pedagogy in one English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Through an expanded understanding of community based on the concept of assemblage, this paper discusses the ways in which one teacher's critical literacies instructional practices emerged, configured and ruptured through the assembling communities' that affected her enactment of critical literacies pedagogy. A focus on assembling communities recognizes the de/re/territorializing power of the evolving groups of bodies that produce a classroom and pedagogy in particular ways.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on observational field notes and informal exchanges, this qualitative study uses post-structural and post-human theory to examine the assembling communities that produced the enactment of critical literacies pedagogy in a seventh grade ELA classroom. Assemblage theory is used to analyze data to examine the assembling communities that de/re/territorialized in Ms T's teaching in relation to critical literacies pedagogy. This analytical orientation allowed for a nuanced look at communities as evolving, de/re/territorializing formations that, in this study, created tensions for enacting critical literacies pedagogy.

Findings – Assembling communities are always producing classrooms in particular ways, demonstrating the complexities and realities of enacting literacy pedagogy. Through analysis of the data, the rupture between the assembling communities that produced the enactment of critical literacies pedagogy and the assembling communities that produced test prep (and altered critical literacies) became apparent. Ruptures like this must be attended to because enacting critical literacies pedagogy is never done neutrally and without attention to the assembling communities that are always de/re/territorializing pedagogy, teachers may not be equipped to respond to the unexpected ruptures as well as material realities produced from these.

Practical implications – Educators can use the concept of assembling communities for recognizing the territories that shape their literacy pedagogy. By foregrounding assembling communities, researchers and educators may be more appropriately equipped to consider the real-time negotiations at play when enacting critical literacies pedagogy in the classroom. Enacting critical literacies pedagogy is never done neutrally, and attention to the assembling communities that are always de/re/territorializing pedagogy, teachers may be more equipped to respond to the material realities that are produced through their pedagogical actions.

Originality/value – This study suggests assembling communities as a way to productively move forward a perspective on communities that foregrounds the moving bodies that produce communities differently in evolving ways and their de/re/territorializing forces that create material realities for classrooms. Assembling communities moves the purpose from defining a community or interpreting what it means to looking at what it

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does, how it functions and for this study, how assembling communities produced critical literacies pedagogy in one classroom.

Keywords Standards, Critical literacy, English language arts, Literacy teaching, High-stakes testing

Paper type Research paper

In the field of literacy studies, critical literacies are widely known as an imperative movement forward for literacy education, particularly in fueling social critique, change, activism and justice. Yet for many K-12 teachers, critical literacies pedagogy is not necessarily a key element of one's practice; in fact, it is often conflated with critical thinking or misunderstood entirely. Further, even for those who feel committed to this approach (or what some might argue as a way of life), what it actually looks like through instruction and learning varies depending on teacher and contexts. The persistent challenge for negotiating these pedagogical concerns have been noted for quite some time (Lankshear *et al.*, 1996; Luke, 2004; Vasquez *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have examined the enactment of critical literacies pedagogy in classrooms through instructional choices (e.g. text selection, deconstruction and production; dialogic interaction; activism; and funds of knowledge), often making a direct connection to students' and teachers' various communities. These definitions of communities are usually based on ethnicities, cultures, geographies and practices, with an understanding that each of these are shifting, overlapping and at times, conflicting (Moje, 2000). Yet these approaches to community could be expanded upon by shifting attention from identifying what these communities are and how they connect to students to examining how communities function to produce relations of power and produce material realities in classrooms.

This paper examines the ways multiple communities worked differently to support, hinder or disrupt literacy pedagogy in one English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Through an expanded understanding of community that looks beyond identifying what a community is to how communities work to create lived realities in different ways, I examine the ways in which one teacher's critical literacies instructional practices emerged, configured and ruptured through the coming together of multiple communities' values, goals, discourses and experiences. In the following section, I discuss critical literacies pedagogy, its relationship to communities and the concept of assembling communities as the conceptual framework for this research.

Conceptual framework

Critical literacies pedagogy

Scholars such as Freire (1970, 2018), Luke (2014) and Janks (2000, 2017), and others have forged the path for critical literacies as a means for critiquing power as it circulates through social interactions to shape the world in inequitable ways. In recognizing literacies as inherently ideological and political in nature, critical literacies' potential for countering dominant narratives, advocating for morally and ethically sound social policies, and prompting social action has been realized by many more scholars and educators (Pandya and Avila, 2014). Yet in the USA, critical literacies work in schools is certainly not a publicized, nationally based goal or standard. It is also not foregrounded in many teacher preparation programs, leaving many teachers to enter the field unaware and unprepared to implement critical literacies pedagogical practices. In my own experience with teachers and pre-service teachers, the majority is not familiar with critical literacies as an orientation to teaching, or they may conflate critical literacies with critical thinking, a common issue Vasquez *et al.* (2019) recently expanded upon, although this has been an issue for quite some time (Luke, 2004). Even more so, the chasm between critical literacies theory and critical literacies pedagogy remains wide.

Enacting critical literacies in the classroom has been approached in numerous ways, demonstrating different pedagogical commitments and arguing the most important areas of focus. Though not an exhaustive account of all those doing critical literacies work in classrooms, in the past ten years researchers examining critical literacies work with youth have focused on selecting texts that offer alternative perspectives than the dominant norms that are pervasively mainstream (Morrell, 2015); fostering student agency in relation to texts (Janks, 2017), such as media production (Morrell, 2015) and digital tools (Ávila and Moore, 2012); emphasizing students' voices through dialogue (Beck, 2005), writing (Janks, 2009; Lopez, 2011), activism (McArthur, 2016; Morrell, 2015) and family values and literacies (Moll *et al.*, 2013; Pahl and Rowsell, 2011); and deconstructing the ways in which language, policies and institutions have been used to oppress and marginalize people of color (Janks, 2017).

In much of this literature, communities are often highlighted, if not central to the research, building on the understanding that literacies are social practices deeply embedded in and produced by contexts, including communities (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Moje (2000) reviewed the different ways community has been defined and taken up in literacy research, noting recurring categories such as geographical location, shared practices, ethnicities and cultures, cautioning that though these are often taken as fixed entities, they are fluid, overlapping and at times in conflict with one another.

This work has continued in more recent years. For example, Campano *et al.* (2013) discussed local community-based knowledge as a source for organic critical literacies that are already at work for under-resourced communities of color. They highlight how students and teachers drew on experiences of local issues, such as lack of access to books and lack of African-American representation in local historical texts, to connect with other community members in addressing these issues. Scholars such as Comber (2013) draw on place-based pedagogies as a way of making place the object of study through which students think about and critique social issues. Community mapping is an example of a place-based practice through which teachers can link students' local communities and the literacies that shape those communities with critical literacies pedagogy (Lopez, 2020).

Critical literacies scholarship demonstrates how places that shape students' lives are resources for enacting critical literacies pedagogy, yet less attention has been given to the bodies that make communities "overlap, converge, and conflict" (Moje, 2000, p. 82) and how these multiple communities work to stratify power relations and agency in material ways in the classroom, particularly in relation to teachers' enactment of critical literacies. In other words, how might an expanded approach to communities allow for a deeper understanding of how critical literacies pedagogy gets enacted in spaces such as classrooms that are shaped by multiple communities?

An assemblage perspective on communities

To mobilize thinking about how communities function to enable, support or hinder different forms of literacy pedagogy, I put to work the concept of assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). An assemblage forms when two or more bodies – human and non-human, meaning people, things, words, ideas and actions – come together so that individual elements are no longer single subjects but entangle in a nuanced way to become something else through its togetherness (Delanda, 2016; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). For example, in other work I have discussed assemblages to demonstrate how people, things and ideas emerge to produce literacy engagement in specific ways (Johnston, 2018). In one example, an assemblage consisted of a student-iPhone-Notes app-text-researcher-enunciation to produce a nuanced multimodal writing response in a certain time and space. Thus, assemblages are an

entanglement of things that produce reality in specific ways that could not have been produced that way otherwise.

Yet even as assemblages evolve and reconfigure, ideas and ways of understanding and doing life territorialize; that is, these become sedimented and normed as the “ideal” way depending on relations of the territory (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). When something territorializes, it marks its territory through identifiable structures, systems, and established ways of working. For example, in schools “literacy” gets territorialized as assemblages emerge and evolve to constitute a norm. Reading levels, for instance, is a system that works to territorialize “literacy” and what constitutes successful literacy engagement. At the same time, assemblages can deterritorialize at any time, meaning things and bodies configure in a way to break against the norm to create a new path and different outcomes. These breaks are like ruptures, an eruption to a seemingly stable system or structure to entangle into something different.

The concept of assemblage is significant for thinking about how communities function. First, it places emphasis on the fluidity and hybridity Moje (2000) discussed but extends the focus from being on identifying what community *means* (i.e. what it means to be a member of multiple communities, what it means to bring those into the classroom) to what multiple, fluid communities do to produce the classroom in particular ways and to produce enactments of critical literacies pedagogy in particular ways. A part of this doing is looking at how emergent, evolving communities work to territorialize the classroom, that is how relations of power circulate to produce literacy pedagogy in a particular way. Franklin-Phipps and Rath (2018) deepen this understanding through attention to materiality and how an assemblage transports territorialization (Weheliye, 2014) that reinforces totalizing ideals in very material ways that affect people’s lives. This perspective highlights power and agency as a collective force, produced through an assemblage, as opposed to a single subject.

In this paper, I use the term *assembling communities* as a way to productively move forward a perspective on communities that not only foregrounds the moving bodies that produce communities in evolving, changing ways but also bring attention to communities’ de/re/territorializing forces that create material realities, such as conditions for particular types of literacy pedagogy in a classroom. Verbing assemblage into assembling is useful for emphasizing the evolving people, things and ideas that connect in different spaces and times to construct communities uniquely (Delanda, 2016). Equally important, it affords an understanding of communities as evolving bodies that transport relations of power that produce social reality in nuanced ways. If communities are understood as specified groupings of people, places or things, assembling communities can be understood as the evolving constellation of those people, places and things that shape social life in power-laden ways. In the classroom, assembling communities deepens are thinking about communities beyond identifying these groups to looking at how they work, what they do and for this study, how they support, hinder or disrupt literacy pedagogy in one classroom.

Methodology

This qualitative study draws on post-structural and post-human theory to examine how assembling communities worked to produce different enactments of critical literacies pedagogy in Ms T’s seventh grade ELA classroom. Ms T and her 22 students brought to class a diverse range of identities, including ethnicities, cultures, histories and experiences. I was connected to the school through my spouse, who was also a teacher at the school and I was known by many of the teachers and students after having spent time at community and school events. I chose this school because of my personal connection to it, and because I wanted to explore the ways students were engaging with literacies, even when not officially recognized. As a White woman and researcher, I consider myself an ally with people of color

who continue to endure systemic inequities through social structures, including educational policies and systems. Black and Brown students comprised the majority of the school population, and the administrators and teachers were racially and ethnically diverse.

As a researcher and observer in this classroom, I was not originally focusing on critical literacies. However, unlike other studies that might intentionally bring in a critical literacies curriculum with outside support (i.e. a researcher) or a specified time separate of the “normal” curriculum to implement a critical literacies approach, Ms T’s approach to literacy pedagogy exemplified what it meant to orient oneself to critical literacies. Examining assembling communities and how these played into her teaching offers a unique perspective on enacting critical literacies pedagogy and the constant negotiations a teacher must make when making instructional choices. The research questions guiding this paper are:

- RQ1. How do assembling communities function to produce literacy pedagogy in different ways in one ELA classroom?
- RQ2. How might the concept of assembling communities attend to the tensions when enacting and negotiating critical literacies pedagogy in classrooms?

Methods and analysis

Data production (meaning data was produced as life happened in the classroom and as critical literacies pedagogy was enacted and engaged in by students) occurred through classroom observations, field notes and informal interviews and conversations for the duration of five months. I typed field notes during each class observation, which took place in 90-min blocks, 2-3 days per week. This meant I sat at different table groups from day-to-day and listened, watched and recorded field notes on my observations. At times, students wanted to interact, though I did not intentionally take on the “instructor” or “teacher” role. I usually listened and ask questions when time allowed so that I could better understand students’ perspectives on the literacy-based choices they were making. I conducted one formal interview with Ms T and recorded informal exchanges as well. These took place at random depending on the day and what might be happening in the classroom.

My analysis was guided by thinking with theory as a way to reorient interpretation away from explaining what the data meant toward noticing what the data produced (Jackson and Mazzei, 2011). This analytical orientation, along with assemblage theory, extends from post-structural and post-human theories that problematize traditional qualitative inquiry that seeks to fully represent the dynamics of an experience through one interpretation (Kuby *et al.*, 2018; St. Pierre, 2013). In this sense, my analytical focus is not on interpreting a specific community or interpreting critical literacies pedagogy and how it could/should have been enacted; rather it is about using assemblage theory to examine how communities work in relation to critical literacies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

I put the concept of assemblage to work as I read across the data to examine the assembling communities that de/re/territorialized in Ms T’s teaching in relation to critical literacies pedagogy. This analytical orientation allowed for a nuanced look at communities as evolving, de/re/territorializing formations that, in this study, created tensions for enacting critical literacies pedagogy. As I read the data, I plugged in the concept of assemblages (Jackson and Mazzei, 2011) to searched for evidence of assembling communities and then reread these instances to identify specific bodies of these communities that influenced her pedagogy. Like Lenters (2016), I followed the material and non-material participants to produce the assemblages, identifying these as key elements, examining their connections,

and then looking for the affective intensities, or forces, produced between these connections (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007). Thus, when reading the data and thinking about the assemblaging communities e.g. professional, school, family, neighborhood, ethnic, racial and the bodies that shape these in different ways at different times (e.g. standards, curriculum, texts, beliefs, values, people and spaces) that de/re/territorialized literacy learning in the classroom, I looked for “movements of deterritorialization and the process of reterritorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 143) and the effects, or material realities, produced through these movements.

Assemblaging communities and territories of literacies pedagogy

In this section, I draw on data related to observations in the classroom and exchanges with Ms T to analyze the assemblaging communities that produced literacies in differing ways. To distinguish data sources from one another, I have included Ms T’s words in italics while interweaving field notes with the analysis. After analyzing these assemblaging communities and their processes of de/territorialization, I will discuss them in relation to the research questions and then conclude with final thoughts and implications for moving forward.

Territorializing critical literacies pedagogy

Multiple assemblaging communities shaped Ms T’s pedagogical stance for teaching literacy. Some of these included the teaching profession, progressive literacy education, school literacy leader, African American and Nigerian and urban and suburban roots. These labels do not represent fixed communities, and recognizing their assemblaging nature both calls attention to the diverse bodies (experiences, histories, geographies and people) that shape these communities and the way they work to shape social life:

Whenever I plan, I always plan with the idea that my instruction should be rooted in (the Common Core State) standards.

When asked how national or state policies influenced her teaching and how she wanted students to engage with literacies in her classroom, Ms T was quick to bring up the national standards, which guided her thinking about teaching and student learning all year long. In fact, her instructional thinking was deeply rooted in these standards and had been throughout her teaching career:

I’ve only ever worked with Common Core since I’ve been a teacher.

While the standards clearly played into how Ms T understood and valued literacies pedagogy in the classroom, she also aligned her curricular planning with critical literacies in mind, seeing the standards as a way to facilitate critical literacies practices and instruction. While the standards were central to her professional community, critical literacies were her way of life and were also central to her personal communities.

In one of my exchanges with Ms T, she referred to her own background experiences as well as the identity markers of her students (race, ethnicity, language and socioeconomic status) as important factors for how she defines and conceptualizes successful literacy learning in her classroom:

For me, I came to this city and an urban district for a reason [...] with the diverse student population [...] I think it’s also personal for me, having grown up in an inner-city and some of the experiences I’ve had as a student, undergraduate, and graduate student. So I always think and plan from the perspective of the world and how they’ll face it in the future, so that’s important to me. Even though they come from diverse student backgrounds and diverse language abilities, I think it is important for them in literacy to gain exposure to various genres and ones that are very

close to home, ones that have books that represent their language, AAVE (African American Vernacular English), Spanish, other dialects. But I also think it's equally important to view these books not just for the sake of comprehension (can you read, can you pass this assessment, can you write this piece) but to also view it through a critical lens and looking at race, looking at class, looking at culture and even, why did the author write this book?

Here, assembling communities, her professional community with her personal communities (family and inner-city), students' communities (diversities in background, ethnicity, linguistics and urbanicity) and school community (values on reading and writing ability and formal assessment) worked to produce Ms T's literacy pedagogy in a particular way. As a highly educated African American and Nigerian woman who grew up in an inner-city urban environment, yet also spent a great deal of time with close family members who lived in a suburban town outside a large Midwestern city, Ms T's ultimate aim as a teacher has always been to focus her efforts in low-income, urban schools with students of color. Growing up, she noticed the differences between her educational experiences and those of relatives who lived in suburban areas that had more resources. Upon discussing this, she stated, "We had textbooks; they had novels." Ongoing differences like these pushed her to question issues of equity. These assembling communities construct her positionality as an educator. When asked about how her experiences affected her stance as a teacher, she replied:

It's kind of the backdrop of the classroom. Yes, I'm a literacy teacher, but I'm always thinking about the ways race, class, power, and culture play a role not only in the literature but also students' everyday lives. Because these students are in an urban and low-income setting, I personally don't believe that literacy should be taught in the absence of those factors. I feel very strongly about that.

Of key concern for her, especially when planning her own curricular units, were bringing students' attention to issues of social justice. For example, during my first few weeks of observation, Ms T and the class engaged in an informational writing unit that Ms T had designed. This unit featured a documentary about the lack of labor laws in developing countries, the workers' personal experiences, and the countries, such as the USA, that profit from such injustices. Just as important as identifying the elements of an informational writing piece was analyzing an informational piece, which the students were to do through the documentary.

To introduce the documentary, Ms T displayed an article on The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, a devastating fire that occurred in 1911 in a sweatshop only a few miles from the school's neighborhood. As Ms T read through the article, she stopped at different points to ask the students' questions, like: What is a sweatshop? Why would someone choose to work there? What's the significance of immigrants? Why would they be willing to work in those conditions? Who had the power to allow conditions to be this way? These questions are examples of enacting critical literacies pedagogy. They extend the thinking beyond a focus on main idea and supporting details to recognizing social power structures that are oppressive.

This discussion led into viewing the documentary and ongoing analysis, which took place over several days. As students watched, Ms T would often pause the film and ask follow-up questions. After watching one part in which factory workers in a remote area of China are seriously injured or killed in an accident because of poor working conditions, the following discussion ensued:

Malcom: But I want to ask you, how come all these sweatshops keep having all these tragedies?

Ms T (to the class): Who wants to answer that question?

Malcom: But why are people still losing their lives? Why don't people care about their lives?

Bria: I think they don't care because they're just worried about making money.

Just after this discussion, the video featured a woman who worked in a factory with no labor laws in place. She talked about how she and other workers formed a union to demand changes to their working conditions. When the union confronted the factory managers with their demands, the managers locked the factory doors and many of the women were beaten. As this woman was telling her story, there were several audible responses from students in the classroom:

Uh uh.

No.

Replay it.

This was a sobering moment. Ms T did replay this segment of the video and then after, asked the students what happened here. Malcom said something about the cops and being Black. Ms T asked him what he meant:

Malcom: Once the cops got you in their hands, they can do anything they want to you.

Ashton: All these things relate to slavery, cause you know how the master always hits the slave.

There were several inaudible murmurs throughout the classroom:

Ms T: I'm going to stay with what Malcom said now, about being Black, and Ashton mentioned slavery.

Joseph: Race.

Ms T: Is it just race?

Bria: Or class.

Ms T asks her what she means by this.

Bria: What I mean by class is it depends on the type of class you're in so if you're rich they might believe anything you say. You can bribe cops and stuff, but if you're poor and living in the, not trying to be mean, but if you're living in the projects, they might arrest you for no reason.

Ms T asks the students how they think this might relate to the workers in the documentary:

Shawna: They live a tough life.

Ms T: But why is that so? Do they have power?

Shawna: A little bit.

Ms T: What is that called? What power do they have? Who does have the power?

Josiah: White people:

Mary: I think it's the stereotype, like if you're White, you have like White privilege and stuff.

Ashton: Because White people almost have power over everything cause the stereotype is sometimes true.

Ms T: What stereotype?

Ashton: Like how White people overpower things sometimes.

Kira: Stereotypes, like um, like just like, similar to what Bria said, if you live in the projects, the cops is going to have a stereotype of you.

Here, Ms T invited a classroom conversation that connected deeply to the lives of the students and other multiple assembling communities. With nearly all of the class comprised of students of color (only one student in the class was White), and with recent instances of police brutality against people of color, incorporating such discussions was a priority for Ms T.

Ms T also sought to promote students' thinking on societal injustices beyond those regarding race. On another occasion, Ms T challenged students with questions around systemic social injustice during a discussion about a story they had just read:

Ms T: But what do you guys think? Is crime necessary?

Charles: It's like a [...]. Because, like James he had to steal, he got to steal for his sister. People steal for the fun of it. For the thrill.

Ms T: Thank you. So are there systems in place that provoke people to do these things?

Lydia: Yes.

Bobbie: You know how if you were a convict and you get released from jail and you can't get a job, it's probably hard so they go back to doing crimes.

Alexis: Um, maybe people, umm [...] some people commit crimes because of gang affiliation because, like, peer pressure. It could make them do something.

Ms T recaps what Bobbie and the other student have said.

Joseph: Can you repeat the question?

Ms T: So even though these things are happening, are there external things that cause people to get into these situations?

Malcom: Well, it's like, depends on how your circumstance is. You know in the past, if you've been molested and raped and stuff. You might hurt people. You might have flashbacks that make you do bad things:

Elin: Like trauma.

Malcom: Yeah, like trauma. And if parents have been on drugs and you haven't eaten and

stuff, it causes you to do things to survive. You might steal. You got to get money so you can put food on the table.

Elin: Can I add something? But see most people do that, but the state don't care if that's what's happening.

Ms T: Okay, who do you mean by the state?

Chris: Government.

Ms T: Yes, okay.

Elin: Once you get incarcerated for a crime, they don't care the reason you did it, they care that you did it and they got you.

Charles: You could grow up in a two-parent home and your mom could be addicted to a drug and your dad could sell drugs and if you see that, most likely you do what your parents do.

Ms T: Kind of follow that pattern? Okay.

As an enactment of critical literacies pedagogy, Ms T invited conversations around race, class and power and planned her units with these topics in mind. If we consider the documentary, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire article, classroom talk, students (and their backgrounds, experiences, histories, racial and ethnic identities), Ms T (and all of her background, experiences, histories, racial and ethnic identity), global issues (such as inhuman conditions for factory workers), the CCSS and the students' city and neighborhood as bodies, then we can see how these bodies form an assemblage to territorialize literacy pedagogy so that critical literacies were produced. These functioned to encourage students' voices through dialogue (Beck, 2005) and an active deconstruction of polices (Janks, 2017) that not only dehumanized the poor and people of color but contributed to practices of oppression, a body in assemblages that persists because of its prevalence through history and social life. At the same time, other assemblaging communities, as we will now examine, created a different reality when put in relation to the assemblaging communities that produced Ms T's enactment of critical literacies pedagogy.

Deterritorializing critical literacies pedagogy

Assemblaging communities are always producing classrooms in particular ways, demonstrating the complexities and realities of enacting critical literacies pedagogy. Through analysis of the data, the rupture between the assemblaging communities that produced Ms T's enactment of critical literacies pedagogy and the assemblaging communities that produced test prep (and altered Ms T's pedagogy) became apparent:

We're all caught up in test prep.

On one particular day, I arrived a few minutes early for a class observation. As Ms T was preparing for the class to arrive, we began to chat for a bit. I asked her how things were going. While I did not know it at the time, that seemingly small question ushered in a territorializing assemblaging body: test prep. Ms T, like numerous public school teachers across the USA, had now begun test prep curriculum because of the looming state standardized test date.

The school community of which Ms T and her students were a part overtly valued testing during this time. This priority of the school community shifted how teachers, including Ms T, felt as professionals, how students were valued as members of the school community and how literacy instruction and assessment were defined. As a mandated test prep unit took over the following six weeks, it was noticeable that conversations of race, class and power were not as present. Instead, the discussions became more heavily about test-taking strategies for reading and writing. Ms T openly acknowledged the heavy implications of state testing for her school:

The testing has become a big issue. Knowing the concrete scores from last year, knowing that our school is pretty much at stake, I think for me I found was more intense in the way I engaged students with the test prep unit.

Ms T was not exaggerating by stating that her school was at stake. In the recent weeks up to this point, several city and district personnel had visited the school, including individual classrooms and the school was in the process of becoming a state priority school, meaning it ranked in the bottom 5 per cent of the lowest performing schools in the state. With these developments, the principal had already held several one-on-one meetings with teachers to discuss the upcoming state test:

We were mandated to use a specific test prep curriculum for these upcoming weeks. The literacy department is very tense; all of the teachers seem tense.

Ms T discussed how she felt she needed to be more transparent than usual with her students. She felt her language was different than usual, especially in explicitly relating their learning to the test:

This was the first time I can think that I was really explicit with my kids and used the word ‘test.’

Ms T described this as being more intense with them than what they had experienced so far in class. For her, this was especially evident through timing and pacing:

I found I was very particular about managing their time, even formulaic in the way they wrote, versus how I usually give them a lot of freedom in how they write.

In one of our exchanges, Ms T specifically referenced how this intensity manifested itself through her expectation for their writing engagement. While students had engaged in producing a writing portfolio earlier in the semester, in which she encouraged “you’re the writer, use your voice,” when it came to test prep, her language changed to “this is how they want you to answer.” For Ms T, her approach to instruction altered by being “very specific about taking into account the audience and who they were writing for.”

For instance, during one day’s lesson, the focus was writing a short response essay, as students would be required to do for the ELA state test. The objective and agenda clearly reflect the mandated test prep unit. Along with this, the supplemental whiteboard notes, such as a test prep short response strategies anchor chart also reflected the explicit changes taking place. This anchor chart echoed the change in language Ms T noted in our exchange. She felt she had to be more explicit than usual about how students should construct their written responses. The students then practiced this skill during independent work time, in which they read a passage silently, answered multiple-choice questions (as they would do on the test), and then constructed their short essay response. Student participation was directed to align with testing responses, such as multiple choice and written response, which meant less discussion (and different data). For example, students were engaged in literacy practices

other than open-ended discussion, such as responding to open-ended questions through writing or engaging in a test-driven practice, such as writing a response to paired passages.

The multiple assemblaging communities that shaped Ms T's enactment of critical literacies pedagogy were still present but the bodies configured differently so that they distributed power and agency differently. For example, the school community territorialized differently during this time. New bodies emerged – mandated test prep, test-based activities that mirrored high-stakes testing, public shaming of the school, deprofessionalization and distrust of teachers, and devaluing of the experiences, histories and discourses shaping Ms T and her students. These bodies changed the school community into something different and even more so, stratified power and agency to deterritorialize the enactment of critical literacies pedagogy.

Discussion and implications

The rupture between these assemblaging communities is the act of deterritorializing critical literacies pedagogy (and all the assemblaging communities that produced this in a specific way in the classroom). This is why it may not always be enough to understand there are different communities that shape our schools, students and teachers as pedagogical decisions are made. It may not always be enough to draw on students' multiple communities when enacting critical literacies pedagogy in classroomMs A focus on assemblaging communities recognizes the de/re/territorializing power of the evolving groups of bodies that produce a classroom and pedagogy in particular ways. For example, while Ms T enacted literacy pedagogy, assemblaging communities produced her enactment in particular ways. The analytical focus on her enactment of critical literacies is not just on how this played out in her classroom but how it territorialized in one way but then was ruptured when another assemblaging community deterritorialized this pedagogy.

Ruptures like this must be attended to because enacting critical literacies pedagogy is never done neutrally, and without attention to the assemblaging communities that are always de/re/territorializing pedagogy, teachers may not be equipped to respond to the unexpected ruptures as well as material realities produced from these. At the very least, this might mean tension or stress but more likely, it means harm. For example, linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse children in public schools are entangled in a system that labels them as at-risk or failing (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009), thus perpetuating deficit-based ideologies around who students are and how they should be taught. Black and Latinx children from low-income families who attend schools in high-poverty neighborhoods are most likely to incur consequences from this system. These include gaps in achievement, opportunities and equity (Morrell, 2006), a higher dropout rate compared to White students (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019) and further production of the school to prison pipeline (Winn and Behizadeh, 2011). So, while teachers might feel similar stress to what Ms T was feeling when different mandates, public pressure and expectations produced her (professional, classroom and personal) communities differently, the material outcomes last much longer than the actual enactment of pedagogy.

These assemblaging communities are at work shaping classrooms and pedagogy everyday. And the de/re/territorializing process is not over. We have discussed assemblaging communities as an act of deterritorializing from critical literacies pedagogy but assemblages can always reterritorialize, meaning they reconfigure in a more territorialized way than previously. This means that though critical literacies pedagogy might have ruptured, it can reform differently and more powerfully than before.

Assemblages are always forming, always transporting a territorialization (Weheliye, 2014). The question moving forward is: what will the totalizing territory be? While I positioned critical literacies pedagogy as a totalizing territory we can work to re/territorialize, some might position test prep as the totalizing territory and critical literacies pedagogy as a deterritorialization. Educators can use the concept of assemblaging communities to recognizing the territories that shape their literacy pedagogy. Teachers experience these competing territories every day, and by considering attention to the assemblaging of bodies – people, beliefs, values, experiences and histories – that shape hybrid, multiple communities, perhaps the actual enactment of critical literacies pedagogies could be better understood.

By foregrounding assemblaging communities, researchers and educators may be more appropriately equipped to consider the real-time negotiations at play when enacting critical literacies pedagogy in the classroom. I suggest negotiations, because it is not as simple as standardizing critical literacies (Pandya, 2012), as this often coopts authentic critical literacies engagement and overtly ignores the assemblaging communities that are unique to a teacher, his or her students and the classroom, and even if it were, assemblaging communities would still de/re/territorialize things in nuanced ways. At the same time, teachers may feel stuck because of the way they have been positioned in the classroom, as transmitters of pedagogy demanded of them rather than a part of assemblaging communities. An assemblaging perspective on communities brings into focus the emergent, always forming communities of which teachers are one part. Thus, when we think of teachers' agency in enacting critical literacies pedagogy, we must also shift the focus from the teacher as the single subject to the assemblages through which that teacher is working.

Intentional negotiations allow for recognition of the competing territories and the assemblaging communities shaping those territories and suggest an explicit acknowledgement of these in the enactment of critical literacies pedagogy. Such an acknowledgement might bolster teachers' negotiations in a way that helps them work with assemblages (seeing themselves as a part but not the only factor) to deterritorialize pedagogy such as test prep through critical literacies. Malcom and Bria's dialogue about sweatshops provide a poignant example (I have replaced sweatshops with classrooms):

Malcom: But I want to ask you, how come all these [classrooms] keep having all these tragedies?

Ms T (to the class): Who wants to answer that question?

Malcom: But why are people still losing their lives? Why don't people care about their lives?

Bria: I think they don't care because they're just worried about making money.

How might students and their words, teachers and their histories, experiences, beliefs and all of their values and purposes for learning work together to deterritorialize test prep through critical literacies? To take up Derrida's (1972/1982) words, how might these work within and against? Negotiating the assemblaging communities can be a productive step forward for those enacting critical literacies pedagogy in the classroom, and could also be a productive way to help students navigate these inevitable ruptures as well.

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