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Becoming Co-Witnesses to the Fukushima Disaster in an Elementary Literacy Classroom

Abstract

This study explores what challenges fifth and sixth graders in Pennsylvania encountered as they exchanged letters with children in Fukushima and read a testimony of the Fukushima disaster written by a child there. Trauma theory and seikatsu tsuzurikata, a Japanese traditional critical literacy approach, were used in designing the project and in interpreting children's engagement with the project. The children demonstrated signs of emerging empathy for children in Fukushima. However, the unspeakable nature of the trauma experience, students' discomfort, and a pressure to read and write in a structured manner to prepare for the statewide exam posed obstacles for their development of empathy. Despite the challenges, some children acknowledged the importance of recognizing others' feelings, including pain, no matter where they live. In order to prepare students as empathetic citizens of human society in an increasingly globalized world, the author urges educators to introduce testimonial readings from across the world in elementary classrooms.

Keywords

disaster, Fukushima, global, seikatsu tsuzurikata, testimony, trauma theory

Disciplines

Elementary Education

Becoming Co-Witnesses to the Fukushima Disaster in an Elementary Literacy Classroom

Using trauma theory and *seikatsu tsuzurikata*, this study examines how children in Pennsylvania read a testimony of the Fukushima disaster and what challenges they encountered.

On an afternoon in October 2013, I was in Ms. Hurst's combined fifth- and sixth-grade classroom at El Puente Charter School in Pennsylvania (names of schools and students are pseudonyms). Earlier, I had handed each student letters written by Mr. Shiraki's fifth-grade students at Kamikawa Elementary School in Minami-Soma City, Fukushima, Japan. I was now showing them photographs I had taken during my visit to the class the previous summer. This was an introductory lesson for the Fukushima Project, which I conducted over the following two semesters in collaboration with Ms. Hurst and Mr. Shiraki.

On March 11, 2011, Minami-Soma was hit by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake followed by a tsunami, which resulted in the deaths of 1,961 people and the destruction of 55,092 homes (Fukushima Fukko Vision, 2011). Students at Kamikawa Elementary School were affected by the tsunami. Some of them lost their homes, family members, and friends. The explosion of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power plant on March 12 added yet another layer to the tragedy, forcing the residents to evacuate their communities immediately. For the next few months, they moved through evacuation centers, their relatives' homes, and hotels until they could find places to settle. While their desires to return home never diminished, many residents were discouraged from returning home by their fear of radiation. Two years after the tsunami, only about half of Kamikawa students had returned.

The 5th- and 6th-grade students in Ms. Hurst's class at El Puente School wrote a letter to the students at Kamikawa Elementary School in June

2013. The Kamikawa students wrote their responses in August. However, none of them mentioned the disaster or its effects. They wrote mostly about their families, pets, favorite sports, and video games, just as normal 11-year-olds would. I thought it might be a good idea to avoid the topic of the disaster until students on both sides had a chance to develop personal relationships with each other, so I removed all the photos that suggested the scars of the disaster from my presentation. However, as soon as I began my presentation, the students began asking questions about the photos, such as: "The boy is wearing something like doctors wear [pointing to a large white mask]. Why are they wearing that?" or "They are wearing a blue thing" [pointing to a radiation monitor]. What is that?" Their questions reminded me that we would not be able to complete this project if we were afraid to look at the effects of the disaster.

Ms. Hurst and I were aware that the decision to read and write about topics that involve trauma comes with risks. Some question whether it is even appropriate for teachers to make students feel uncomfortable by exposing them to narratives of trauma (Rak, 2003), especially when we have to address other pressing tasks, such as preparing students for standardized tests. However, simply teaching facts about the Fukushima disaster in the absence of any affective relationship with children in Fukushima would not be significant, as the learning would not translate into any actions that would help create a more humane and peaceful society. In the following semester-and-a-half, the students in Ms. Hurst's class engaged in the Fukushima

Project—a series of literacy activities related to the Fukushima disaster—with the ultimate goal of acting as co-witnesses to this life-changing event.

The purpose of this article is to examine the challenges and opportunities that Ms. Hurst and I encountered during this project. I begin by introducing two theoretical frameworks that guided the development of this project and the analysis of the students' engagement in the project. These consist of theories about reading testimonies as co-witnesses as well as *seikatsu tsuzurikata* (ST), a traditional literacy pedagogy originating from Japan that aims to develop children's empathy through literacy. I will then follow with a description of the Fukushima Project and an analysis of how students engaged in a series of activities, with particular attention to how they were (or were not) able to read a testimony of the Fukushima disaster as co-witnesses and why. Based on this analysis, I then discuss the possibility and significance of introducing testimonies in elementary school classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Reading Testimonies as Co-witnesses

A major goal of literacy classrooms today is to teach literacy skills that prepare students for college and careers in the 21st century. These skills include reading and writing complex and multiple forms of texts and expressing one's arguments by drawing on evidence (CCSSI, 2016). In this climate, the emotional wounds that students bring into the classroom are often excluded from the official literacy curriculum (Dutro, 2011). In contrast to this dominant form of literacy, the Fukushima Project, which dealt with children's experiences of disaster, required students to read and write new types of text—a testimony and a response to it—in new ways.

One of the major challenges that we face when reading testimonies in which people describe their experiences of a traumatic event is incomprehensibility. The horrific event that eyewitnesses attempt to recount is essentially unrecognizable and unspeakable, as their experiences do not fit into the existing categories of language that we normally use to represent our usual daily experiences (Caruth, 1996; Dutro, 2013). This limitation of language often puts

eyewitnesses in a stressful situation; they are caught between their desire to speak and their inability to do so. These tensions may even manifest as uncontrollable surges of emotions, leading witnesses to cry, mumble, shout, and joke instead of giving testimonies that use verbal language effectively (Miyaji, 2007). Thus, it is important for readers to be aware of this limit of language when they read testimonies.

As not all aspects of a traumatic experience are recognizable or representative, readers of the testimonies must pay close attention to what is not represented in the texts rather than just reading them at face value. Doing so often makes readers feel sympathetic toward the testifiers. While this process is important in empathetic reading, we must also be aware that sympathy contains the danger of turning eyewitnesses into mere victims, and subsequently objects of pity or redemption. To do this is essentially a dehumanizing act (Zembylas, 2006), as it separates "us" from "them." Instead, readers should open their hearts and let the other enter their minds so that they can feel the pain of that other, as the eyewitnesses do. This is the beginning of a collective transformation, as those who feel the pain of others can take action to eliminate that pain on their behalf without victimizing them.

Seikatsu Tsuzurikata (Life Experience Writing) in Japan

A Brief History

The practice of *seikatsu tsuzurikata* (life experience writing or ST), which originated in Japan in the 1910s, is a literacy approach centered on empathetic reading (Asai, 2010). ST teachers were aware that empathy developed through reading and writing was a precondition for achieving social transformation. In addition, they saw their students, many of whom lived in poverty in rural areas of Japan, not as naïve or innocent, as was generally assumed, but rather as people with the potential to transform society (Namekawa, 1983). As part of a feudalistic tenant system that systematically exploited farmers, children lived in poverty, engaged in hard labor like adults, and witnessed their families' struggles (Murayama, 2004). They experienced emotional wounds and brought those to the classroom. To empower children and to

inspire them to transform their lives in their villages, the ST teachers connected the children's lives with school literacy and built a community of empathy by having them share their writings about their lives with each other (Imano, 1974).

"Turning one's joy into everyone's joy; Turning one's sorrow into everyone's sorrow" (Kokubu, 1974, p. 51) represents the fundamental ethos of ST. By encouraging their students to write about their everyday lives in their own words, and then to share their writings in class, teachers lead students to become co-witnesses to each other's lives of oppression. As students read their peers' essays, ST teachers ask them to discuss why their peers chose to write about particular incidents or issues, what emotions are communicated through their descriptions, and how they feel about them. Students also share their own life experiences, which resonate with the issues addressed in their peers' essays (Kai, 2001). These conversations often lead them to recognize their own pain and establish common ground for viewing the issues as communal (Miyazawa 1998).

Seikatsu Tsuzurikata (ST) in Fukushima

These tenets of ST illustrate the pedagogy's potential to help children regain resilience and subjectivity through writing in post-disaster Fukushima. The tradition of ST can provide a space for students to collectively face and reflect upon their common experience of a disaster and its aftermath. Sharing their pain and sorrow can affectively connect students and turn their private feelings into communal ones. Such a bond may not only lead students to recognize their own pain, it can also provide them with the courage to examine the causes of the pain and how they can alleviate them.

Mr. Shiraki, who had practiced ST for over 30 years in the coastal region of Fukushima, was determined to remain in post-disaster Fukushima to teach and empower local children and their communities. As students who had been evacuated returned gradually to his classroom, he began asking them to talk and write about their experiences of the disaster and of evacuation. While the students felt the desire to discuss those experiences, they were also faced with difficulties in doing so. For example, some wrote

about their experiences without putting themselves into the story. Others could not find any words to describe their feelings and simply cried. There were also students who were hesitant to express their feelings, as they were afraid that their stories might not be understood (Shiraki, 2012). Being aware of this dilemma, Mr. Shiraki focused on developing trusting relationships among his students. He did not force them to write about their experience of the disaster, but when they did write, he read their essays without judgment and tried to embrace their emotions. Gradually, more students began writing and sharing their experiences of the disaster. As they read each other's essays, they realized that they were not the only ones who had gone through the horror of tsunami and the chaos of evacuation; they became witnesses to each other's testimonies (Shiraki, 2012).



"Turning one's joy into everyone's joy; Turning one's sorrow into everyone's sorrow" represents the fundamental ethos of *seikatsu tsuzurikata*.

The Fukushima Project

Site and Description of the Project

After I met Mr. Shiraki in Japan in the summer of 2012 and read his students' essays, I wanted to expand this circle of empathy beyond the boundaries of Japan. Although the interdependence of nations in today's global society has created economic opportunities and advancement, risks such as terrorism, financial crises, and environmental problems have also increased (Beck, 1999). In addition, the causes and effects of some disasters are global. This interconnection of our lives around the globe also suggests the necessity of global collaboration among citizens in an effort to jointly remove the causes of the pain in our lives. To do that, we must learn to see the pain of others as our own pain, as represented in the ST ethos.

Based on this belief, I conducted the Fukushima project from June 2013 to May 2014. El Puente

charter school, founded in 2009, is located in Pennsylvania and offers Spanish and English dual-language programs. The school had 215 students when this research was conducted. Reflecting the curriculum of the school, approximately half of the students were native speakers of Spanish, the majority from Mexico. Ms. Hurst's class consisted of 23 students, 12 fifth graders and 11 sixth graders, 9 of whom were English as a Second Language students. The school was an appropriate setting for this project, as one of its goals is to "prepare citizens for the global world, particularly by developing empathy for others and challenging injustice and inequality."

To guide the students in seeing the issue of Fukushima as their own through reading and writing, Ms. Hurst and I designed a series of literacy activities. At the beginning of the semester, students at El Puente and Kamikawa elementary schools exchanged letters twice to get to know each other. In addition, students at El Puente researched and gave presentations about catastrophes caused by nuclear power (Hiroshima, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima) to gain background knowledge about the effects of radiation in the Fukushima disaster. Students also wrote an imaginary narrative entitled "My Life in Fukushima" in an attempt to put themselves in the shoes of children in post-disaster Fukushima. Finally, we introduced the students to a testimony of the disaster written by one of Mr. Shiraki's students, entitled "A Gift from That Day." We incorporated the Pennsylvania Core Standards into all the activities.

Pen Pal Project: Putting Oneself in Others' Shoes

Traditional ST classes consist of students who live in the same community, where they are vulnerable to the same social forces in similar ways. Based on this assumption, ST teachers believe that seeing the pain of others will naturally lead students to recognize collective pain and its causes (Katsuno, 1991). Thus, ST teachers encourage their students to share their life experiences and emotions openly in class and invite other students to respond by referring to their own life experiences that resonate with them (Muchaku, 1951). This almost automatic formation

of bonds based on a commonality of life experiences could not be expected between children living in Fukushima and Pennsylvania. Thus, we started a pen pal project with the intention of providing the students with opportunities to become acquainted with each other's lives and social cultural contexts. Following the traditional ST approach, we encouraged them to write about what mattered to them and interested them most in their daily lives. Students in both classes were very excited about this opportunity. However, despite the excitement, what they shared through letters remained at a superficial level.

We wanted El Puente students to know the pain that these 11-year-olds in Fukushima might carry with them beyond the superficial normalcy they presented through their letters. Eliciting this awareness required the acquisition of some knowledge about the Fukushima disaster. While we thought that exposing students to a testimony of the disaster right away could accomplish this, we were aware that this approach also carried the risk of inviting passive empathy, which could result in developing merely a sense of pity for their pen pals (Boler, 1997). Thus, as preparation for reading a testimony, we assigned students the task of writing an imaginary narrative entitled "My Life in Fukushima"; here, they would describe how they imagined their lives in post-disaster Fukushima using information they gained from my lecture on Fukushima and their own presentations about the effects of radiation.

While planning, I recognized that putting oneself in another's position and imagining his or her pain is not enough if we aim to become co-witnesses (Boler, 1997). Still, we believed that this was an important step toward achieving the ultimate goal of reading a testimony as co-witnesses. Ultimately, students' narratives reflected signs of emerging empathy; in other words, students were able to put themselves in the shoes of others. However, this did not lead to full development of empathy, as most of them avoided information they considered negative. Carl's reflection shows this tendency:

Carl: At the beginning, I wrote a different story, but then I got used to it, like I started thinking about how they really felt—about the mask and

stuff. And then I changed it and wrote more about like how I felt they would feel.

Researcher: OK. What was your story like?

Carl: Well, the . . . My first story, I was like how . . . I just like got up and just went to school, like I would do here but then . . . I just changed that like I was at school there.

Researcher: OK, what did you think about children's lives there?

Carl: I thought that they probably have a difficult time because of the radiation and about how like [they have to wear] the masks. And they probably think like "don't be shy" and get normal about it, and just go to school like normal people.

Researcher: Why do you think so?

Carl: Um, because mmm . . ., they just wanna get like how that radiation happened, they just wanted to get it out of their mind and start fresh.

Carl did not choose to write a story about children in Fukushima from an objective stance. His perspective on "how I felt they would feel" rather than on facts about the disaster also shows that he was forming a personal relationship that linked himself, the event, and the children in Fukushima. In addition, feeling the emotion of the other and telling the story from that perspective shows the blurring boundary between self and other, a sign of letting that other enter one's own heart (Zembylas, 2006).

However, most of Carl's essay, "Life in Fukushima," consisted of a description of an ordinary day, including daily activities such as going to school and playing sports with friends. Clearly, Carl was aware—thanks to his imagination—that the effects of radiation were present in the lives of Fukushima's children; he even imagined how he would feel if he had to wear a mask. But he only mentioned the radiation in his story briefly, and he continued to write about an ordinary life. He explained his choice to exclude negative facts as follows: "They just wanted to get it [the disaster and its effects] out of their mind and start fresh." His assumption that the Fukushima children did not want to express their pain represents the limits

of his ability to empathize with them. Yet, his story could also be viewed as a manifestation of his realistic imagination about their lives based on evidence he gained from his pen pal's letters.

This type of imagination based on facts is something promoted in school literacy under Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). In contrast, reading testimonies of trauma as co-witnesses requires reading in a manner guided by affective energy rather than by logic. Furthermore, this type of reading and writing involves directing one's gaze onto oneself rather than onto others. This means co-witnesses must face their own emotions, vulnerabilities, and limits to knowing as they try to imagine the experiences of others. What is important in reading testimonials is for co-witnesses to be aware of how and why they feel a particular way about the specific experiences of others, and how those feelings relate to their relationships with the eye-witnesses (Boler, 1997). Looking back, I believe that having a conversation with Carl about his own feelings—both recognizing *and* analyzing them—as he thought about the difficulties of the Fukushima children's lives could have been an opportunity to develop his critical empathy.

Reading Kaori's Testimony: Grappling with Incomprehensibility

After having the students write their imaginary narratives, we introduced them to a testimony about the Fukushima disaster entitled "A Gift from That Day" written by Kaori Ishida, a student of Mr. Shiraki. Despite having a strong desire to communicate their experiences, victims of a traumatic event are often incapable of doing so due to the unspeakable nature of the event. Thus, in their struggles to tell their stories, some choose to remain at a distance from their own experiences (Miyaji, 2007). This characteristic was present in Kaori's writing. Her essay was written in a monotonous tone without much reference to personal thoughts or feelings about the disaster. In fact, the essay was little more than a detailed record of what she did, starting from the moment the earthquake hit her town, how she had to leave her home when the nuclear power plant exploded, and how she met and said goodbye to people as she moved

from one evacuation center to another. Despite the series of chaotic events she experienced, Kaori concluded her essay with a short, positive statement: “I feel that I received a gift from that day.” Unexpectedly, she implies that the tsunami was a gift.

In reading this testimony, Ms. Hurst and I agreed that we wanted students to focus on feeling the emotions Kaori had felt (as opposed to gleaning facts about the disaster), although those emotions were not explicitly expressed in her testimony. To do this would allow the students to feel Kaori’s emotion, which does not fit in existing categories of meaning and, therefore, cannot be captured as meaningful content (Dutro, 2013; Felman & Laub, 1992). Using ST techniques, which promote empathetic reading, we wanted students to read Kaori’s testimony as co-witnesses. Thus, in this assignment, we asked students to imagine why Kaori chose to write about specific aspects of the disaster and its consequences and what feelings she experienced in those moments (Kai, 2001). In addition, we warned them not to take what was written literally, but instead to try to embrace Kaori’s emotions, which were not clearly expressed.

The first reading of Kaori’s essay focused on understanding her experience from her point of view, paying special attention to her emotions. While reading, the students took notes on Kaori’s presumed feelings during different scenes. Then, in the post-reading conversation, the students exchanged various thoughts about Kaori’s feelings. In addition, we discussed why Kaori made the statement, “I received a gift from that day.” Despite our instructions to pay attention to implicit feelings and to information missing from the essay, the students tried to make sense of the essay using logic—an approach we had asked them to use in other sessions to prepare for the standardized test. While using logic was important to doing well on the test, students’ attempt to impose a logical structure in reading a testimony resulted in a constant struggle to make sense of Kaori’s essay. Juan’s comments illustrate this struggle.

Juan: Like I was kind of . . . like I wasn’t exactly sure what Kaori was saying.

Researcher: Oh, really? Can you explain that?

Juan: Like I didn’t know if she was saying that the whole event was a good event—which if she was saying that, I wouldn’t agree really.

Researcher: Hmm.

Juan: It’s, it’s . . . the event wasn’t good but . . . well, I took that she was saying that good things came out of it.

Researcher: OK.

Juan: That she benefited from it. But, yet, it was still a very sad experience. She . . . didn’t really say it clearly.

Researcher: Yeah.

Juan recognized that the event Kaori objectively described in her essay was sad, even though Kaori never explicitly said so. In that sense, Juan was empathetic enough to feel the undercurrent of silenced emotions in Kaori’s essay. However, Kaori’s association of disaster with a “gift” in her conclusion posed a challenge for Juan. In reading testimonials of this type, readers must face and accept the incomprehensible nature of the text. This also means one must face the limits to one’s knowing (Boler, 1997; Dutro, 2013). However, Juan did not seem to embrace the incomprehensibility of the text well, nor did he understand Kaori’s emotions, which seeped out of the system of meaning.

When readers encounter incomprehensibility in this way, they tend to succumb to their “impulse to name and categorize what we [they] encounter” (Dutro 2013, p. 303). Juan also gave in to this temptation by imposing preexisting categories of experience on Kaori’s experience, despite the fact that Kaori’s traumatic experience did not fit into these categories. Specifically, what Juan did was to separate the disaster from its effects. He stated that the tsunami was “a very sad experience,” but what came out from this sad event was positive. This clear binary categorization of what was good and bad, however, did not allow him to capture meanings that did not fit into either category of the binary—something that Kaori tried to communicate without words. This method of reading separated Juan from Kaori emotionally. The objective stance Juan adopted to name Kaori’s experiences cut the

affective connection that could have emerged. As Felman and Laub (1992, p. 68) comment, “The absence of an empathic listener, or . . . the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish . . . and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.” Although it was not his intention, Juan’s analytical and logical reading of Kaori’s essay silenced her voice.

Writing a Response Essay: Test-Related Pressure and Writing Structured Essays

The reason Juan read Kaori’s essay analytically rather than empathetically as a co-witness was in part related to ongoing pressure on our part to prepare students for the statewide test. Since a persuasive essay was part of this test, and research shows that incorporating authentic and familiar topics and audiences when practicing persuasive essays increases their engagement (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004), Ms. Hurst and I decided to integrate a persuasive essay into the Fukushima project. We believed that the task in which the students responded to Kaori’s essay and expressed their reactions to Kaori’s teacher would increase their engagement.

We began this activity by asking students to choose whether they agreed or disagreed with Kaori’s statement, “I feel that I received a gift from that day,” and to support their stance. As stated earlier, testimonies are not written in a structured style. If co-witnesses were to write the experience of trauma on behalf of those who directly experienced a catastrophic event, their writing could also lack a rigid structure, clear content, or a conclusion, as these elements do not matter to co-witnesses. However, at the time, Ms. Hurst and I were not fully aware of the contradiction between testimonial reading and writing and our intention to have students write an organized paragraph following the fixed structure of a persuasive essay. As a result, we began the activity by showing the typical structure of persuasive essays along with the rubric for assessing persuasive essays developed by the Pennsylvania State Department of Education. The rubric suggested that writers must clearly state their stance in the introduction and consistently support it throughout the essay by incorporating evidence.

Therefore, in the opening of the lesson, we asked the students the following question: “Do you agree or disagree with Kaori?” As we shifted unconsciously from testimonial reading as co-witnesses to analytical reading and writing in this project, the students also automatically switched their dispositions as readers.



Although it was not his intention, Juan’s analytical and logical reading of Kaori’s essay silenced her voice.

Annihilating Structure

It was Jasmine who interrupted the flow of this activity, which was moving toward the direction of analytical reading. Jasmine, who had been listening to her classmates as they shared their opinions about Kaori’s conclusion, suddenly raised her hand and began speaking rapidly. It appeared as if she could not stop her words from flowing out of her mouth.

I am kind of in the middle of a dilemma. Remember how there has been a war in the country I used to live. Well, I had to evacuate because there were bombs raining down nearby because we lived in the capital sort of. We had to pack and leave one day. My mom, actually we could have left one year earlier, but she had to stay for her work. She didn’t want to leave that behind. So, we were still living there. So, I remember that was really scary and all my friends went different places. I have almost completely lost touch with them. . . . I am only in touch with three of the people I knew there. A few years ago, I went back and visited and saw the apartment and place I used to live. It was very different now and everything has changed. That was difficult. It was very different now. I am still in a dilemma because I understand where she [Kaori] is coming from. I am glad I met friends here and my life is not terrible. At the same time, I am sad. I miss my old friends and there were people who died. . . .

Pain evoked by the memories of trauma circulates in the social space and enters the bodies and minds of readers as they open their hearts to it. This can cause unexpected emotions among readers, including pain (Dutro, 2011). This is what seems to have happened to Jasmine. As she read Kaori’s

testimony and felt Kaori's pain, she became aware of her own hidden pain. As Jasmine began speaking on behalf of Kaori, she unexpectedly ended up giving a testimony to her own experience of war. This inseparability of Kaori's story from her own during her speech shows that the boundary between self (Jasmine) and other (Kaori) was dissolving.

Felman and Laub (1992), who study Holocaust survivors, found that those who give testimonies are often led by a strong sense of moral obligation to tell the truth. This applies to Jasmine; when she read Kaori's story, Jasmine felt a moral obligation to tell the truth on behalf of Kaori. Just as in testimonies, Jasmine's speech had no clear argument or conclusion to deliver. In fact, she began her talk by saying that she was unsure about Kaori's statement. Then, she returned to the statement about her uncertainty, and ended her testimony almost in the middle of a sentence just by simply slowing down and then falling silent. Although there was no clear conclusion to her speech, the words that spilled out from her body were charged with a high level of affective energy. Everyone in the class was completely captivated by her speech. No one could say anything for a while, including me.



In her attempt to speak the truth on behalf of Kaori, Jasmine recognized her own pain.

Giving testimony is a performative act and is driven by the power of affect (Dutro, 2013). In her attempt to speak the truth on behalf of Kaori, Jasmine recognized her own pain, constructing the truth about her own experience of the war and Kaori's experience of disaster at the same time. Hearing this unexpected story created a dissonance within me. Jasmine, whom I thought I knew, was becoming a new person through her speech. Encountering this side of Jasmine also challenged my relationship with her. Furthermore, it made the task of writing a persuasive essay appear illegitimate. The writing assignment—whether one agrees with Kaori's conclusion or not—assumes that we all

have fixed identities, thoughts, and emotions, which are separate from those of others, and we hold an unchangeable and rigid stance in relation to others' experiences. However, Jasmine's testimony radically disrupted such assumptions and destroyed the structure of the persuasive essay, which we had asked students to use to interpret Kaori's essay and to write their responses.

I could no longer continue with the discussion of students' opinions about Kaori's conclusion, as I realized that the task we had assigned was irrelevant to becoming a co-witness. I ended the class with a brief statement: "Thank you Jasmine for sharing your story. It was a powerful story, and I understand that you understand Kaori. . . . Not being able to decide which side you take, or being in a dilemma about it, happens in our lives all the time. So, it's OK." I must admit that I was affected by Jasmine's testimony. As ST teachers in Japan articulated 100 years ago, children come to school with emotional wounds. These wounds are not always visible, nor can we predict when students will decide to speak about them. It may happen at the most unexpected moments, as in our class. Regardless of the abruptness with which it happens, whenever students choose to take the risk of sharing their wounds, teachers must be ready to be witnesses to their testimonies. We should never shut the story down or redirect the conversation to safer ground (Dutro, 2011).

Conclusion and Implications

Challenges of Reading Testimonies

Through the Fukushima project, we conducted a series of reading and writing activities with the ultimate goal of reading a testimony of the Fukushima disaster as co-witnesses. While we met a series of challenges during the project, there were signs that the students developed affective relationships with the Fukushima children. Jasmine expressed her understanding of Kaori's pain as she acknowledged her own pain. The testimony she gave in front of the class, which addressed Kaori's pain through her own, indicates that she did not see Kaori as separate from herself. This recognition of the common pain in individuals' lives resonates with the practice of

ST. ST has traditionally been practiced in a classroom where students are vulnerable to common political and economic forces and thus experience common pain. The development of empathy among students who do not necessarily live in the same community, as occurred between Jasmine and Kaori, shows new possibilities for ST pedagogy—development of empathy through literacy—to expand to the international scale.

At the same time, our lesson did encounter a number of challenges. Other than Jasmine, students had difficulty developing empathy for the Fukushima children. While they were able to put themselves in the shoes of others using both their imagination and rationality (Nussbaum, 1995), they turned their gaze away from negative facts (e.g., the effects of the disaster). Even as they gathered evidence from presentations about nuclear disasters, and the Fukushima disaster specifically, our students remained unable to become co-witnesses. In truth, the pen pal project did not work as intended, as the Fukushima children's letters remained superficial, containing only brief descriptions of ordinary lives. This made it all the easier for our El Puente students' to avoid looking at the pain the Fukushima children may have experienced.

As Boler (1997) notes, testimony can take multiple forms. It is "not only [in] the face-to-face relation but [it should include] a genre of communication that requires the reader to 'encounter vulnerability' and the explosiveness of a 'critical and unpredictable dimension'" (p. 264). In that sense, we did not necessarily have to have students read first-person testimonies written by the Fukushima children. Based on our experience, I recommend that educators introduce testimonies from multiple genres and in multiple modes (e.g., books and films) that invite children to form affective connections with the authors and/or protagonists in the texts.

Another obstacle to the development of empathy in this project was the pressure from the standardized test. While test preparation required students to understand a conventional text structure and to use it to read and write texts, testimonial reading required them to move away from such a structure. In testimonies, important messages escape

from conventional structures and co-witnesses must capture those empathetically (Dutro, 2013). Thus, we created a paradox within our plan to have students engage in conventional writing for test preparation *and* simultaneously read testimonies as co-witnesses.



These stories show how students, parents, and other community members represent an invaluable source of insight, knowledge, and support for teachers wishing to teach in culturally sustaining ways.

In practice, most students chose to follow the instructions we gave to prepare them for the test; they imposed a fixed text structure and categories of meaning upon the reading of Kaori's testimony. This resulted in not understanding Kaori's experiences empathetically. The students also shied away from their own discomfort at facing the incomprehensibility of testimonies. This experience suggests educators should be cautious about integrating testimonial reading into the existing literacy curriculum in the age of accountability. While it may be possible to integrate state literacy competencies into the reading of testimonies, teachers need to make sure that these competencies do not clash with the specific literacy skills, knowledge, and dispositions they want students to have when reading testimonies as co-witnesses.

Hopes

While we encountered multiple challenges in the Fukushima project, a hope also emerged. I would like to end this article with a quotation from one of the students in the class.

I want to know what's going on in the world and not just be like, "Huh?" Because I, um . . . you know, some kids think the world is just a happy place. I want to know, like, about the whole world, like what's going on. It doesn't matter where they are because I know that every person has feelings and I want to know what they're going through so I could put myself in their shoes, and I could help. Because like I said, if you don't know about it, you can't help. (Patricia, Interview, May 12, 2014)

She acknowledged that people have feelings, and she expressed that the issues that affect others matter to her regardless of their location. This awareness also motivated her to learn more about social issues around the world so that she could take action. The empathetic connection with others—as the basis of both learning and action for the sake of removing pain from the lives of everyone (Zembylas, 2006)—is embedded in her statement. This captures the essential values and goals of reading testimonies as co-witnesses.

Knowledge, skills, and dispositions in testimonial reading involve dealing with unrepresentative knowledge. Attainment of these skills cannot necessarily be measured or evaluated in the same way as school literacy in the age of accountability (Dutro, 2013). However, behind the celebration of academic progress and achievement in schools, there are always children and adults who carry wounds in their lives; they are always present, both in our own classrooms and in communities near and far. We should not forget the pains they carry through their lives, and we must address them in literacy classrooms if we are to create a humane society. While young students may not be able to become critical co-witnesses right away, the glimpse of empathy that emerged in this project shows the significance of continually incorporating testimonial reading into the elementary literacy classroom.

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INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

Making Personal and Cultural Connections Using *A Girl Named Disaster*: This lesson is intended to help students experience both "efferent" (reading for information) and "aesthetic" (reading as a personal, emotional experience) responses to the story *A Girl Named Disaster* by Nancy Farmer. Students work as a whole class and with partners to explore the main character Nhamo as she struggles to survive in her extended family and on her many travels alone. Students can make geographic, economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, and personal connections. Suggestions are given for a wide array of interactions and activities to help your students develop a rich transaction with this text.

<http://bit.ly/2ey6FSY>

Huge Mistakes That Led to Catastrophe: Learning about Human-Made Disasters throughout History: After reading a nonfiction book that illustrates a human-made disaster, students examine how other great mistakes in history affected mankind and caused change in the world. For example, they can discover that the massacre at the 1972 Munich Olympics led to increased security at all subsequent games. They can learn that the sinking of the Titanic led to safety policy changes so that all ships needed enough lifeboats to carry all passengers in case of an emergency. While listening to each other's presentations, created using technology, students take notes on graphic organizers to compare and contrast the disasters. Then students pair up to create Venn diagrams to illustrate their notes.

<http://bit.ly/117I8HF>

Responding to Tragedy: Then and Now: Though this lesson focuses on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the activities can be used to help students reflect on their responses to any tragedy from which they now have some distance. Students read and discuss the personal responses of four different poets, focusing on the relationships between language and meaning. They then compose a poem of their own that includes a section addressing their initial responses to the tragedy and their response to it in the present. Finally, they reflect on what they have learned by exposure to the perspectives of their peers through reading their poems.

<http://bit.ly/PYDIAb>

Lisa Fink

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