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Youth Testimony to Contend with Trauma

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Abstract: In this article, we report an illustrative case to focus narrowly on trauma informed literacy instruction during youth testimony, asking: What instructional practices support testimony as a trauma informed literacy practice? The work is theoretically and conceptually framed by trauma informed pedagogies to contend with racialized trauma. The illustrative case study of Bobby, a Vietnamese student struggling to make sense of his families' realities in light of Black Lives Matter protests, represents the complexities of the larger study and its findings. Data collection included interviews with youth participants and video recordings of virtual sessions. Three level coding identified ten themes related to the research question which were translated into three findings: (1) youth move towards personal testimony as part of relationship building, (2) youth draw from racialized trauma as a resource in their testimonies, and (3) adult responses to testimonies of racialized trauma can reinforce oppression. These findings critique the media outlets, educational systems, and macrostructures within society that create racialized trauma and sustain oppression for youth like Bobby, turning towards implications and recommendations to disrupt these systems and foster healing for youth contending with racialized trauma.

Keywords: healing pedagogies, racialized trauma, trauma informed pedagogies



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Youth Testimony to Contend with Trauma

As literacy educators, scholars, and community members who work closely with youth, we, Leah and Latoya¹, were thrust into front-line positions directly supporting youth and literacy educators during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice protests against endemic racism. Within the past calendar year, we have witnessed the academic, social, and emotional impact the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, elections, insurrections, and racial justice protests have had on youth (Daniel, 2020; Grubic et al., 2020) and carried the emotional labor of supporting educators during an educational disruption (Panther et al., 2021; Ye & Chen, 2015).

Within this article, we report on the results from a larger mixed methods study from a virtual, summer literacy program to focus narrowly on trauma informed instruction. In this article, we consider trauma informed literacy practices that critique media (Morrell, 2015) and position youth as authors of their own stories (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Lamont-Hill, 2009a). Additionally, we investigate how testimony supports trauma informed youth literacy practices for learners contending with racialized trauma (Alvarez, 2020) to realize healing (McArthur & Lane, 2019). Therefore, our research question explored: What instructional practices support testimony as a trauma informed literacy practice?

Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature

This work is theoretically and conceptually framed by the expansive work surrounding trauma informed pedagogies within language and literacy scholarship. This includes defining trauma through the lens of racialized trauma and understanding healing pedagogies within trauma informed literacy practices—such as testimony.

Trauma as the Wounded

Trauma studies include a range of approaches to address individual and collective adverse experiences (Dutro, 2017). A *traumatic experience* is the association of an event that changes or impacts one's life (Kashagen et al., 2018), experienced by an individual or a collective group (Alexander et al., 2004), and occurs in one moment or continues over time (Brave Heart, 1998). Ultimately, a traumatic experience is an event that changes an individual emotionally, socially, and behaviorally (Kira, 2001), typically for the worse (Dutro & Bien, 2014).

The majority of trauma research within education focuses on various causes of traumatic experiences, such as physical abuse, neglect, and violence (Minahan, 2019); definitions that rely on diagnostic tools to identify youth who have experienced adversity. These approaches fail to meaningfully take up ideological and systemic causes of sustained trauma, such as white supremacy and macrostructures of oppression (Alvarez, 2020). Some researchers have considered trauma specifically related to racism (e.g. insidious trauma [Miller, 2009] and race-based trauma [Mizock et al., 2011]). However, much of the discourse on trauma within educational research uses trauma as a deficit laden term to describe youth as wounded, broken, or lacking (Spear, 2014); somewhat unsurprising since the root word of trauma means wounded (Lamont Hill, 2009b). From the outset, trauma has been defined as the creation of wounds and the lasting pain of those wounds.

Recently, moves have been made by educational scholars to make the theoretical connection between race and sustained trauma (e.g Alvarez, 2020; Grinage, 2019). Drawing from these new directions in trauma studies, this work acknowledges the varied types and sources of trauma that are related to racialized experiences including ideological beliefs, interpersonal interactions, internalized understandings of superiority and inferiority, and institutional or systemic policies and laws that

¹ Throughout this article we will use “he” to refer to individuals who identify as male, “she” to refer to individuals who identify

as female. The pronouns were chosen by the person who is being referenced.

maintain oppression (Kumashiro, 2000). Oppressive forces from societal macrosystems can manifest in individual interactions; both these macro and micro experiences are traumatic experiences seen throughout society and educational systems. Baker-Bell et al. (2017) further explained “the same racist brutality toward Black citizens that we see happening on the streets across the United States mirrors the violence toward Black students that is happening in our nation’s academic streets” (p. 131). In other words, trauma is created within society and sustained within schooling systems for students of Color when “traumatic individual, institutional, and systematic consequences of racism” are upheld and unchallenged (Dutro & Bien, 2014, p. 9).

Drawing from trauma informed pedagogies within education risks positioning students as passive victims of circumstances unless these circumstances are further explored in light of the larger macrosystems that put trauma studies in conversation with racialized oppression. Popular trauma informed pedagogies and assessments have been critiqued for their erasure of race and racism, to instead position students as passive victims who must lack the character, grit, or resiliency needed to overcome trauma (Love, 2019). These approaches ignore the larger systems of racialized oppression that result in racialized trauma (Alvarez, 2020). This work rejects deficit readings of youth as irreparably wounded victims, instead recognizing youth and community agency as sites of healing.

Trauma and the Wounded Healer

Lamont Hill (2009b) remixed trauma’s root word meaning *wounded* and described pedagogical processes of storytelling where youth are positioned as *wounded healers*:

By wounded healing, I refer not only to the therapeutic dimensions of personal and

collective storytelling but also to a critical engagement with majoritarian narratives that exposes and produces new possibilities for culturally relevant classroom practice. Through wounded healing, students formed a storytelling community in which membership was predicated upon individuals’ ability and willingness to “expose their wounds” (share their stories) to the rest of the group (p. 149).

In other words, Lamont Hill (2009b) suggested youth and their cultural histories are sources of knowledge and valued literacies that heal—and the process of storytelling within those community histories positions youth as critical consumers to challenge dominant narratives and restore their experiences.

“The framework guides how educators and youth can disrupt those patterns by first identifying the sources of the trauma and then resisting and challenging them through storytelling to begin healing.”

The turn towards healing pedagogies as a strengths-based approach to supporting youth contending with trauma connects this work to its deeper theoretical roots: indigenous decolonial (e.g. McConaghay, 2003) and Black feminist work (e.g. Richardson, 2018) that focus on healing through recovery, confrontation, dreaming, and action (Villanueva, 2013). Indeed, Richardson (2018) described Black feminist healing circles as decolonizing work that begins with interrogating internalized oppression as trauma, then moves into action and transformation to heal from that trauma.

Thus, we use trauma informed pedagogies as a theoretical approach that focuses attention on the trauma created within schooling spaces, particularly related to racialized oppression. The framework guides how educators and youth can disrupt those patterns by first identifying the sources of trauma and then resisting and challenging them through storytelling to begin healing.

Trauma Informed Literacy Practices and Healing

Trauma informed pedagogies within the literature have shared commonalities that focus on building relationships and trust through individually responsive methods (Nicholson et al., 2018). Within literacy research, trauma is theorized as part of a repertoire of resources that youth can agentively draw from to center language, literacy practices, and valued experiences within literacy instruction (Dutro, 2011b). Trauma informed literacy practices that work towards healing are frequently enacted at the individual level to account for the complexity and nuance of individual experiences with trauma (Dutro, 2017), though scholars suggest the potential for classroom level engagement (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Lamont Hill, 2009a).

One-on-one and small group instruction with trauma informed literacy practices include co-selecting texts and rewriting texts (Taylor, 2019), visual thinking and rhetoric (Gardner, 2017a; 2017b), reciprocal testimonies (Dutro, 2013), storytelling (Gardner et al., 2020), and critical witnessing with intention (Dutro, 2011). Additionally, critical media literacy is identified as a healing pedagogy: it equips youth to name and acknowledge wounds and provides the tools to heal through critiques of advertisements and news media to restore youth experiences, particularly for Black youth (e.g. Baker-Bell et al., 2017), within hip hop music (e.g. McArthur & Lane, 2019), and through counter-storytelling (e.g. Lamont Hill, 2009b). Baker-Bell et al. (2017) explains critical media literacy

provides youth with opportunities to investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives that mainstream media and other social institutions use to construct and oppress Black youth (p. 138).

Ultimately, trauma informed literacy practices that work towards healing are often under the umbrella of critical media literacy practices as part of a larger effort to understand the experiences and perceptions of youth as they make meaning of their worlds (Dutro, 2011a; Taylor, 2019). These efforts are most often connected to youth storytelling around engagement with multimodal texts.

Testimony as a Wounded Healer

Spear's (2014) work raised the question: when (not if) trauma is part of the curriculum, how do teachers navigate the crisis and, indeed, should they seek to nurture that crisis when navigating traumatic storytelling? Dutro (2017) responded to this pedagogical challenge with testimony, or "The multiple ways children provide insights into their life experiences, including the explicit and overt as well as the implicit and subtle". Testimonies arise in "... children's talk and writing as part of instructional routines, their informal conversations with adults or peers, and the nonverbal" (p. 333). Dutro (2017) continued that witnessing includes "how those testimonies children share are responded to and interpreted by those who surround them in schools" (p. 333). A role Felman & Laub (1992) expanded to all members of a classroom community: "bearing witness to a crisis of trauma" (p. 1). Thus, testimony is the myriad of ways youth communicate their lived experiences and how others in the space respond to those verbal and nonverbal stories.

Dutro and Zenkov (2008) gave one such example of testimony as a trauma informed literacy practice. During their study, they documented the use of youth created photographs and printed texts to deepen youth relationships, critical dialogue, and socioemotional understandings of relationships. One student, Tabitha, shared a picture and writing sample that showed a young mother smiling with the caption:

Although the young lady in the picture appears to be happy, in reality she is not. What is supposed to be the happiest day of her life, the day her son was born, is probably the worst. Her mother, her father, and even the father of her baby were not there for the birth. She has no one. She's only 19 and now has two children and can barely take care of herself. If you don't have anybody to help you and you have to raise two children, then it will be difficult to accomplish your goals. That's what gets in the way of education (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 289).

Tabitha's multimodal testimony juxtaposed the photograph against the story behind the photograph—the reality of teen pregnancy, its consequences, and its emotional toll. The testimonies, “invoke challenges that middle-class viewers/readers may assume about inner city adolescents,” the authors write, which in turn can, “raise issues and implications that could only be drawn from their perspective [and] interrupt the ways their audiences can construct versions of ‘urban youth’” (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 291). Youth testimony was a powerful tool for youth to make meaning of their experiences, challenge the deficit perspectives of others who bore witness to the testimony, and make demands of the current and future audience.

As we began to understand the turn from trauma informed literacy practices towards healing pedagogies as a way to contextualize traumatic experiences in light of racialized trauma, we identified testimony as strengths-based literacy practice more likely to center the agency of youth and their historical community knowledge as a path towards healing.

Methodologies

This study is derived from a larger mixed methods multiple case study (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Stake, 2013) of a virtual summer literacy program. The free, six-week program was offered to adolescent youth who attended a large urban high school in the American Southeast. The description of urban is a reference to the multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual youth who attended Creek High School (all names are pseudonyms), and the disparities of socioeconomic access and opportunity within the densely populated city where it is situated (Gadsden & Dixon-Roman, 2016; Milner, 2012). Within this article, we explored one research question: What instructional practices support testimony as a trauma informed literacy practice?

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Case Study

Qualitative research embraces the complexity of interpreting the world through ideologies and identities to understand the natural world through the eyes of participants and the meaning they ascribe to the world or events (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2013). To best capture our youth participants' perspectives, we used a qualitative case study design where data was gathered in naturally occurring places and events over a sustained period of time to ensure the meanings discovered were accurate for the members, represented their perspectives, and contained enough information to make the invisible processes, individual beliefs, and values visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Patton, 2015).

Case studies have been used in research related to trauma informed literacy practices and healing pedagogies due to their ability to adapt to the context and provide concrete information about a phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2011). For example, Wiseman and Wiseman (2011) used two case study cases to understand how poetry instruction can be used to express students' trauma narratives. Such approaches prioritize participants as the central meaning makers, appropriate for a study focused on creating spaces that fostered youth testimony.

Positionality

Positionality refers to how relationships, assumptions, experiences, identities and historical factors impact the research process (St. Louis & Barton, 2002). Given the nature of racialized trauma and our work with vulnerable youth, interrogating our own positionality was an essential ethical imperative (Acevedo et al., 2015; Amoureaux & Steele, 2015).

Leah Panther is a university-based researcher and member of an active school-university partnership (SUP) with Creek High School, where the youth participants attended. As a White, monolingual researcher working with predominantly multilingual youth and educators of Color, I intentionally centered reflexivity to ensure the work met the needs of the local community and was completed with community members, not on youth. This meant recruiting community members from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds for the design, facilitation, and dissemination of the summer literacy program and related research. Additionally, to listen to youth participants and those sharing testimonies of racialized trauma without white talk, guilt, or rage (Anderson, 2016; Bailey, 2016).

Latoya Tolefree is an elementary instructional coach and doctoral researcher. As a monolingual, African American researcher working with predominantly Students of Color, I wanted to include current events that students were living through. As an African American woman, I have experienced racialized trauma and experienced additional traumatic experiences during the time of this study. I wanted to explore how the participants' lives were impacted and include discussions of topics that may have been traumatic. As someone who has experienced racialized traumatic events, I value silence and the ability to choose what I share. It was important that students also had autonomy of the content and discourse to ensure sensitivity to traumatic events.

Together, we sought to engage in faithful witnessing (Lugones, 2003) that moves from listening to marginalized voices to taking real action alongside our participants (Butler, 2017).

Participants

Creek High School (CHS) has been at the figurative and literal center of its neighborhood-like community for over 100 years. CHS is geographically located at the dead end of Main Street, its three stories of glass windows look over a small piece of the sprawling urban metropolitan area within the American Southeast. Perhaps better known in the local community for its athletic excellence, multiple

graduates have become professional athletes in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Football League (NFL), but it also graduates successful musicians, choreographers, screenwriters, and pastors with international name recognition and awards. The Title 1 school enrolls approximately 1,800 students annually and has focused on increasing academic opportunities for its learners. In recent years this has included an innovative STEM program, introducing an International Baccalaureate program, and working directly with local businesses for entrepreneurial internships.

Following the school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the administrators and educators at CHS considered new ways to support learners who were negatively impacted, in particular learners who did not engage with coursework during emergency remote teaching in the spring of 2020. Responding to the need, Leah and Latoya worked with other members of the school university partnership to design and offer a virtual summer literacy program for up to 20 youth. The design was to intentionally and holistically support learners who were identified as needing substantial academic, social, or emotional supports.

To recruit participants, special education, English to speakers of other languages (ESOL), and literacy teachers were sent a recruitment email and asked to forward the information to students they would recommend for the program. Recommended students were accepted into the program first. Of the 22 students recommended, 12 enrolled in the program. The accepted students were then encouraged to engage in snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) to recommend the program to their friends at the school, which resulted in two additional youth participants. This was to increase the likelihood of a comfortable, culturally responsive tutoring environment. Then, a whole school email was sent by the school principal to all families in the school community. Enrollment was closed at 17 participants. Twelve of the 17 youth consented to be a part of this study, selected their own pseudonyms (see Table 1), and were representative of the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of CHS where 63% of students self-identify

as Black or African American, 15% Hispanic or Latino/a, 12% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 9% White, and 3% Multiracial.

Data Collection

The youth participants met virtually with five tutors, representing five bounded cases (Table 2) (Stake, 2013). The five tutors represented school-based educators and university researchers. In addition to Leah and Latoya, this included: Andrew Woods, a White monolingual science teacher certified in ESOL; Mary Meiers, a White female history and economics teacher; and Ayme Collins, a Black female engineering teacher. The tutors were provided with training on the trauma informed literacy practice of testimony from the research team, opportunities for practice, and additional resources to support their instruction prior to the summer literacy program and throughout its implementation.

To gather data related to the research question, entrance and exit interviews with youth participants were conducted by Leah for consistency. This included pre- and post-assessments to determine if and how students shared their testimonies before and after the summer literacy program. Additionally, the video and audio recordings of ten to fifteen meetings within each case documented youth experiences and interactions throughout the program, allowing for cross case analysis (Rihoux & Lobe, 2009). Finally, four semi-structured interviews with the tutors captured additional observations about the youth participants' testimonies (Seidman, 2006).

All of these data sources were collected to better understand youth testimonies and the context surrounding youth sharing or not sharing their testimonies, particularly in relation to youth participants contending with racialized trauma and various manifestations of racialized oppression.

Data Analysis

To explore the results further, three level coding was completed on all video transcripts and pre- and post- interviews (Saldaña, 2021). This began with level one descriptive coding: first to note the instructional practices tutors used with gerund coding, denoting the actions of the tutor, free from interpretation (Charmaz, 2006). Secondly, coding students' responses by using in vivo coding, or the participants' own language (Patton, 2015). This immediately resulted in interesting cross-case analysis to determine trends across tutor and youth dyads and initial responses to the research question. For example, early in coding,

Table 1

Youth Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Grade Entering	What do you want others to know about you?
Maya	17	12 th	Latina, older sister
Omarr	17	12 th	Black male
Grace	16	11 th	Black female, an English speaker, and able-bodied
Blaze	16	11 th	Teenage African American male, 5'9"
Zion	16	11 th	Black teenaged girl
Bobby	17	11 th	Asian, Vietnamese, male
Akia	16	11 th	Black woman with curly hair, brown skin who loves to talk and rap but is also shy
Sara	16	10 th	Hispanic teenage girl
Elise	15	11 th	Mixed teenager, female, speak English, able-bodied
Camellia	16	11 th	Fun sized, curly headed, quirky Black girl
Jaden	15	11 th	Black male, young adult
Darius	17	12 th	Black male

Leah recorded an analytic memo of the process, writing:

I'm finding that traditional descriptive coding is not useful for answering the research questions where the tutors have "stuck to the script", but is useful for where tutors used the protocol as a loose guideline. This is affirming my concern that the firmer the [instructional] protocol, the less likely a trauma informed approach will elicit testimony and witnessing [and] center the learner (February 16, 2021).

Level-two coding consisted of provisional coding drawn from the theoretical framework of trauma informed literacy practices (Saldaña, 2021). The terms were defined in a codebook (Table 3) and representative data points were determined by both authors for increased inner-rater reliability.

Data condensation of code clusters for each provisional code resulted in patterns, or reoccurring events and processes related to testimony (Madison, 2011), which were used for cross-case analysis (Rihoux & Lobe, 2009). For example, 38 sections of transcripts were coded as "witnessing". When compared within cases, patterns emerged related to when witnessing happened within the session, what types of questions preceded witnessing, and what topics were most frequently associated with witnessing. These patterns could then be compared across cases to identify larger potential themes which were noted in analytic memos.

Finally, the patterns from level-two coding were compared against additional data sources, such as tutor interviews, for a third level of thematic coding to determine themes and support crystallization of findings (Ellingson, 2009). Crystallization is a three-dimensional approach to data analysis to consider how themes might be dependent on the researcher's "angle or response" to the data (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). By integrating additional perspectives to test the emergent themes, it added validity to the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Table 2

Cases

Group A Latoya Tolfree	Elise Camellia
Group B Leah Panther	Grace Akia
Group C Andrew Woods	Bobby Omarr
Group D Mary Meiers	Zion Maya Sara
Group E Ayme Collins	Blaze Jaden Darius

The resulting themes aligned with instructional practices that routinely supported youth testimony and instructional practices that interrupted or created barriers to enacting trauma informed literacy practices (Table 4). However, we caution that these themes are not prescriptive practices, a list of to-dos and not-to-dos, but rather the richer context of each theme highlights the complexity of youth testimonies as part of trauma informed literacy practices. Thus, in translating the themes into findings, we sought to foreground the ways these themes interacted within instructional decision-making processes. To this end, we offer Bobby as an illustrative case. While these themes were identified across cases, an in-depth description of one participant's testimony is best poised to demonstrate the complexity of social interaction and language practices embedded within trauma informed literacy practices (Cunningham, 1997). Additionally, an in-depth analysis of Mr. Wood's instructional practices surrounding Bobby's testimonies was furthered by the frequent absence of his partner, Omarr, making the tutor's instructional choices more explicit and observable during Bobby's individualized testimonies of racialized trauma.

Findings and Discussion

This research was guided by the question: What instructional practices support testimony as a trauma

Table 3*Excerpts from the Provisional Codebook*

Code	Definition	Example
Institutional Oppression	When the idea that one group is better than another group is imbedded within institutions (laws, legal system, schools, hiring policies, media images). May not be intentional.	Leah: Well, are there any other like structures or institutions that don't care about people's mental health, not just students? Akia: Prisons. . . Like the penitentiary. Prisons cuz I was like, I watched the show called <i>How to, How to Get Away With Murder</i> and I watched a movie called <i>Just Mercy</i> . Leah: Yeah. Akia: One thing that I compared was that some people who's in jail was in the army. Someone is actually like, something is wrong with them. Like not something physically wrong. Nobody cares about the prisoners. People don't care about what's going on, some people sentenced to life for something they've never done, but because they have mental health problems they're going to say that person deserves to be.
Testimony	"[t]he multiple ways children provide insights into their life experiences, including the explicit and overt as well as the implicit and subtle. . . children's talk and writing as part of instructional routines, their informal conversations with adults or peers and the nonverbal" (Dutro, 2017, p. 333). Also, analysis of "how students are positioned in relation to power and oppression in schools and society" (Garcia & Dutro, 2019, p.379).	Leah: So you don't think that, whether it's your school or schools generally, support students' healthy mental health? Grace: I feel like sometimes you try to chime in or say there's a problem but it's with the culture, that sometimes people might have a problem or be thinking about suicide and people say "Oh, you can come to me!" but they don't really mean it. Basically, what I'm saying is like, schools say a lot but they don't really take any action. So you've got to move forward by yourself.
Witnessing	"a self-conscious attention to both connection and difference between one's own and others' testimonies" (Dutro, 2011, p. 199). "how those testimonies children share are responded to and interpreted by those who surround them in schools. . . to invite children to bring the full spectrum of their lives into school literacies and to build the trusting, mutual relationships required in children are the feel that invitation as genuine" (Dutro, 2017, p. 333).	Ayme: Does this meme represent your opinion of the border wall. Darius: Kinda Ayme: Okay. Would you like to share about that? What has influenced your opinions about the building of the border wall? Darius: I hear a lot of negativity towards it. Jaden: Yeah. Darius: Like, I guess I kind of see why they built it like to keep like illegals and like bad stuff from crossing. Ayme: Right. So there's pros and cons to it?

Table 4*Themes: Instructional Practices Related to Youth Testimony*

Instructional Practices that Routinely Supported Youth Testimony	Instructional Practices that Routinely Created Barriers to Youth Testimony
Recognizing youth agency and power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking consent • Inviting input • Youth selected topics and memes • Youth created memes 	Adult Centered Testimonies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repurposing discussions • Yes or no questions
Building relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preexisting relationships • Identifying social cues and culturally dependent nonverbal norms • Using nicknames • Patience and consistency 	Digital tools to silence testimony <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write in chat • Auto-mute
Inviting testimony	Privileging content coverage over testimony
Range of testimonies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hypothetical testimony • Personal testimony • Composing testimonies 	Avoiding testimonies
Identifying connections to prior knowledge or experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naming missing language 	Using silences as testimonies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance • Self-preservation

informed literacy practice? The ten identified themes (Table 4) demonstrate the range of practices that supported and created barriers to youth testimony. Within this section, we place these themes in conversation with three identified findings to demonstrate the nuanced themes related to trauma informed literacy instruction and youth testimony:

1. Youth moved towards personal testimony as part of relationship building;
2. Youth drew from racialized trauma in its various forms as a resource in their testimonies;
3. Adult responses to testimonies of racialized trauma can reinforce oppression.

Personal Testimony as Part of Relationship Building

Bobby, a 17-year-old English language learner going into his junior year of high school, described himself as Asian, Vietnamese, and male. Bobby explained he wanted to learn more about Asian-American cultures

during the summer literacy program, including “Wuhan [and] bats”. In his entrance interview, he hopefully asked, “When will we get back to school?” The tutor working with Bobby was Andrew Woods, his former science teacher who was also certified in ESOL.

Building Relationships

The existing warm relationship between Bobby and Mr. Woods was demonstrated throughout the program in consistent, small ways: calling Bobby by terms of endearment like “buddy” and “man” which caused Bobby to light up with a huge grin. Also, asking Bobby to move his computer so Mr. Woods could see his nonverbal reactions more clearly, but not requiring eye contact which would be disrespectful in Bobby’s Vietnamese culture due to their age and status difference. Mr. Woods would continually affirm Bobby’s responses and was lavish with positive affirmation such as this exchange:

Figure 1

Bobby's Language During an Early Session



Mr. Woods: Why do you think they want to share this meme?

Bobby: Because, [pause] it's a cartoon?

Mr. Woods: Mhm, I think that's a good point. You know you-- if you like the cartoon, you might want to share this meme.

Bobby, responding to the discussion question with hesitation, was affirmed that he made a “good point”, and his response was extended with additional detail.

The tutor built a relationship with Bobby that prioritized Bobby's language learning. For example, Mr. Woods would consistently check for understanding and define unfamiliar words to connect to Bobby's lived experiences, such as unpacking the term “brag”:

Okay, so if you brag about something you're really proud about it and you like tell everybody. Oh, yay! Oh, yay! Oh, yay! I did something. Like maybe if you got 100% on a test or something. You would come home and tell [Bobby's sister] and go, “ooh, I got 100%!” and that would be- that would be fine, because that's good news. But if you- but that would be kind of bragging a little bit because it's something good that you did. Okay. Have

you ever- Is there anything- Have you ever done anything you would brag about?

The focus on language learning across the virtual summer literacy program was evident. During Bobby's first session with his tutor, he used 64 unique words across 70 statements or sentences represented by a word cloud (Figure 1). The larger and darker the word, the more often it appears. “Yes” and “Yeah” are the most frequently used followed by “Because”, “cartoon”, “pickle”, and “weird”.

By comparison, in the ninth session, Bobby used 132 unique words across 77 unique statements or sentences (Figure 2). “Yes” and “Yea” remain common responses, but the range of terms, particularly those relating to Bobby's personal identities (e.g. Asian, Georgia) increases substantially.

Over the course of the summer literacy program, Bobby and Mr. Woods spent extended periods of time in genuine conversation, building a relationship. Spear (2014) affirms that relationships play a role, “in restoring agency and in reinventing the self” of individuals impacted by trauma to “aid in restoring and transforming individuals by recognizing and accepting them as well as their stories” (p. 67). Mr. Woods used microaffirmations to create a warm, responsive relationship with Bobby, something Samuels et al. (2020) found is an intentional move to counteract the microaggressions marginalized learners are likely to face. These microaffirmations, such as affectionate nicknames, positive affirmations, and attention to Bobby's questions and use of language built a relationship that resulted in increased sharing from Bobby about his personal testimonies.

Inviting Testimony

During a session on Juneteenth, Bobby's group member, Omarr, did not attend. The tutor and Bobby analyzed a meme to mark Juneteenth, the anniversary of the last enslaved persons in the U.S. learning of their emancipation. The meme featured Black-Canadian musician Drake and referenced the Black Lives Matter movement and the All Lives Matter counter-protest (Figure 3). Two weeks earlier,

Figure 2

Bobby's Language During a later Session

the death of George Floyd had sparked protests in Bobby's local community. Following the shooting death of another Black man, Rayshard Brooks, by a White officer, riots broke out on the edges of the peaceful protests. This included the fast-food restaurant, where Brooks had been killed, being burned down. The day before Bobby and his tutor met, the police officer involved in Brooks' death was

charged with murder, one of the demands of Black Lives Matter protestors.

Initially, the tutor checked for understanding, asking Bobby if he was familiar with Black Lives Matter and what it meant. Bobby associated the movement with "protests" and, "It's about people who feel like it's more important than ever. Like where they go, how they feel, what they're doing". Bobby made the connection between the meme and the events happening within the community explaining

He [Drake] sad about all lives matter because, about police who kill Blacks, because some people. Well, I watched the news about Willy's, you know that one guy who was Black he went to Willy's [sic] I mean Wendy's. He went to Wendy's and police told him to go and he won't go. He didn't listen, and then he got shot.

"Testimony invites students to share their memories, ideas, and views of life while serving as a tool for literacy."

Bobby reads Drake's body language as being "sad" about All Lives Matter, and in particular sad about "police who kill Blacks" connecting it to the media images he had seen on the news about Rayshard Brooks' death.

The tutor's questions were leading at times, as he asked Bobby "Why is it important to say Black lives matter right now?" and Bobby's responses similarly evoked support for Black Lives Matter and Black protestors. For example, Bobby explained that Drake is happy in the meme because Black Lives Matter represents "Blacks want freedom" and "I think that Black Lives Matter, they want justice. And they want power." Each sentence evoking microaffirmations from his tutor.

Bobby began to provide additional details to explain his interpretation of the events that were occurring in his community: "It's [the meme] . . . about what's going over the words, and how many people going crazy about it. Like robbing and stealing and breaking the building and putting the fire, police, fire cars." The tutor continued to ask probing questions,

Figure 3

The Drake Meme Bobby and Mr. Woods Analyzed During Their Session



all lives
matter

black lives
matter

inviting Bobby to continue to talk about his experiences and perceptions of the events.

Testimony invites students to share their memories, ideas, and views of life while serving as a tool for literacy (Duffy et al., 2013). Mr. Woods invited Bobby to share his testimony, or experiences related to the topic. In this way, Bobby was positioned as an agentive meaning maker who could move beyond simply restating information to make personal, intimate connections to the topic from his full range of experiences. For Mr. Woods, his microaffirmations continued to point Bobby towards the sociopolitical aspects of Black Lives Matter, affirming Bobby's connections to freedom and power. Cartun and Dutro (2020) described the importance of teaching literacy through a lens of critical power and justice, which invites students to be open to sharing personal testimony.

Personal Testimony

At that point in the session, Bobby moved from discussing his interpretations of the current events to providing his own testimony, or explicit and implicit insights into his life experiences.

Mr. Woods: Why do you think people are stealing, robbing?

Bobby: Because I think Black just want what they want. They don't care about Asian because Asian didn't do nothing about, to them. They just, they just hurt people. Asian didn't do nothing wrong to them, they just do wrong to Asian. Like my mom, she work nails and many customers talk wrong about her, about how she feel. Like talking rude to her. She just try to be nice to her. She didn't want to have no problem about protestors hurting her nail shop.

Testimonies are the myriad of ways youth “provide insights into their life experiences” (Dutro, 2017, p. 333), with particular attention on “how students are positioned in relation to power and oppression in schools and society” (Garcia & Dutro, 2019, p. 379). Bobby’s testimony provides insight into his life

experiences, detailing the experiences his mother has had as a female Asian immigrant, and how those life experiences have positioned him as a male Vietnamese American immigrant in relation to Black Americans, his family’s socioeconomic class, and powerlessness during protests.

Bobby’s testimony was vulnerable and invited potential risks: of being misunderstood, judged, his experiences being negated or rejected, and the potential discomfort if he was challenged. Sharing this testimony, Bobby represents a trend across youth participants: youth moved towards personal testimony within positive, affirming relationships that included modeling and inviting risky testimonies.

Youth Drawing from Racialized Trauma as a Resource for Testimony

Exploring Bobby’s testimony further, the context of how it was shared, and the response from Mr. Woods demonstrates our second finding: youth drew from racialized trauma as a resource for their testimonies to understand themselves and the worlds in which they live.

Trauma and Oppression

Bobby’s testimony began with “I think Black just want what they want. . . They just, they just hurt people”. In these excerpts, Bobby vocalized an internalized stereotype of Black people being angry and violent, a racialized assumption that he drew from within his testimony. Chang (1993) introduced a critical race reading of antiblack sentiments held by Asian Americans as a continuation of the model minority myth; an “us versus them” mindset where Asian Americans are a monolithic group who, through hard work, demonstrating the ability of non-White racial groups to be academically and economically successful (Wing, 2007). As Shih et al. (2019) explain:

The model minority stereotype reinforces the illusion that racism is no longer a problem in the United States. It promotes the notion of the United States as a meritocratic society . . .

[and] those who fall behind are believed to be because of their own poor choices and/or inferior culture. . . By pitting minority groups against one another, it diverts attention from challenging institutional racism and structural inequality and hinders other racial minorities' demand for social justice (p. 419).

Bobby's conception of a monolithic Black community being "pitted against" a monolithic Asian American community within his testimony successfully diverted attention from a shared experience of "institutional racism and structural inequality" (Shih et al., 2019, p. 419).

Bobby identified clearly as an Asian American and Vietnamese American throughout the program, and had internalized the belief that, in his words, Black persons "don't care about Asians" and "do wrong to Asians". His internalization of the model minority myth worked itself out in antiblack sentiments he drew from to share his testimony. Change (1993) describes the double-edged sword of the internalized oppression as it first, "den[ies] the existence of present-day discrimination against Asian Americans and the present-day effects of past discrimination" then, "legitimiz[es] the oppression of other racial minorities and poor whites" (p. 1260). The model minority myth furthers racialized oppression while maintaining an invisibility around Asian experiences with racialized oppression.

Bobby's experiences with power and oppression were further explored within his testimony. Bobby's mother worked at a nail shop where she had experienced rude behavior from, the tutor inferred, Black customers. There was also fear that the protests, which were geographically close to Bobby's mother's nail shop, could result in damages to the store or further reduced business. In his state, the governor had reopened nail salons in late April, so Bobby's mother had returned to work only two weeks

prior to this conversation after six weeks of unemployment. There is a longer history that Bobby's testimony is alluding to. Yellow peril was a historical phrase used to spur fears that Asian immigrants would take jobs and opportunities from others within struggling economies (Chang, 1993). In the modern day, yellow peril persists as Asians are positioned as "unable to assimilate and are, therefore, perpetually foreign" (Lee et al., 2020, p. 406). Bobby, with limited knowledge of the model minority myth or yellow peril, has internalized the historical legacy of oppression these racialized assumptions represented and drew from them as resources to make sense of his own racialized experiences.

"As youth began to share their testimonies, they similarly shared stories that reflected racialized trauma; each testimony drawing from the repertoire of their valued knowledge."

Bobby was indeed sharing a testimony: insights into his life experiences, the explicit and overt, the implicit and subtle. He was drawing from his own traumatic experiences with internalized and ideological oppression as a resource for understanding the multimodal memetic text and its connections to current events in his local community. Bobby did not communicate an intersectional understanding of racial oppression across non-White racial groups, nor did he recognize the shared oppressive macrostructures experienced

individually and collectively by both Asian Americans and Black Americans (Lee, 2015; Museus, 2008); structures that created and sustained the internalized and ideological oppression Bobby was communicating (Wing, 2007). Routinely, as youth began to share their testimonies, they similarly shared stories that reflected racialized trauma; each testimony drawing from the repertoire of their valued knowledge.

Instructional Responses to Testimonies of Racialized Trauma

Our third finding further considers the tutors' instructional responses to testimonies of racialized trauma. Examining the rest of Bobby and Mr. Wood's

session, we see the complexity of trauma informed literacy practices that seek to center youth agency and healing in light of two common practices: (a) adult centered testimony and (b) privileging content coverage over testimony.

Adult Centered Testimony

After Bobby shared his testimony, the tutor took back the narrative control from Bobby, and quickly responded, “Sure,” and then redirected the conversation to a yes or no question asking: “So, do you- do you understand why somebody might want to, you know,” then paused to define a new term, “I think that the term is called looting. You know there has been some looting and, in the protests. Now, most of the protests have been very peaceful, but there has been some looting,” before turning back to asking the same yes or no question: “Do you understand why someone might want to do some looting in the- in a protest? Do you think there would ever be a time that would be okay?”

Bobby’s testimony was not acknowledged by Mr. Woods and the routine microaffirmations were absent; instead, the topic was redirected to define a new term: looting. The tutor posed a yes or no question about the new term. Bobby responded to the yes or no question:

Bobby: No.

Tutor: Okay, that’s fine. I think a lot of people feel that way. It’s kind of scary when things like that happen, do you think so?

Bobby: Yes.

Tutor: Have you been- have you been like scared about any of this stuff that’s been happening.

Bobby: No. I, just concerned.

Tutor: Concerned?

Bobby: Yeah.

Instead of inviting testimony—as similar lines of questioning had successfully done before—the open-

ended questions about whether or not Bobby was feeling scared became an adult centered conversation pattern. Bobby went from active storytelling to one-word, short responses.

To better understand Mr. Woods’ pedagogical decision making, three days after this exchange he encouraged Leah to review the video from the session, expressing, “it was an interesting conversation” and in a later interview, expressed discomfort with the content of Bobby’s testimony, explaining he “felt unprepared” to respond. Mr. Woods was making in the moment decisions about how to respond to a testimony that contained evidence of internalized and ideological oppression and expressed antiblack sentiments—and was disquieted that he did not know how to respond appropriately in the moment. Brownell (2020) describes her work with Black female youth who similarly replicated disquieting storytelling practices in a maker space. Her participants took on cross-racial identities to reenact historical myths that upheld colonial victory narratives. She cautioned that the ideologies and sociopolitical histories that construct learner-led literacy practices are deserving of questioning and critique, even as the literacy practices are valued. Similarly, Mr. Woods was wrestling with valuing Bobby’s testimony and the experiences it represented, while not agreeing with the valued knowledge that it contained.

To better understand Mr. Woods and Bobby’s exchange, the literature on trauma informed literacy practices and youth testimony considers how silencing is forced upon the youth speaker rather than an agentive choice of the youth (Cardell & Douglas, 2020), or misinterpreted and appropriated by the adult listener to affirm their own curricular agenda (Zembylas, 2007). From this perspective, we do not offer interpretations of Bobby’s responses which he did not offer his own interpretation during his exit interview. We, instead, consider research that explores the idea of silences as testimonies—acts of agentive avoidance and self-preservation, particularly for communities of Color who have historically been marginalized and exploited in educational research (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Ultimately, we focus on the instructional moves that Mr. Wood employed that

elicited these silences rather than assigning meaning to Bobby's response. When Mr. Wood was a witness to Bobby's testimony of racialized trauma, he responded by placing his own experiences and meaning making at the forefront of the conversation. In this and other sessions across cases, when testimonies of racialized trauma were shared, diverting the conversation back to the adult tutor foreclosed continued testimony.

Privileging Content Coverage Over Testimony.

The tutor, sensing Bobby's silences, reverted to another instructional practice that had positively elicited testimony—warm affirmation of Bobby's responses. After Bobby expressed he was “concerned”, Mr. Woods responded:

Yeah, I think we're all concerned. You know that's- I think it's a concern. There's a lot of different things to be concerned about, you know, there's concerns about the protest and there's concerns about the, you know, people that have been hurt. And, you know, why we're protesting. I think that, you know, that's a really good point. You know that we can be concerned about stuff like that.

After a short pause where Bobby did not speak, the tutor reverted back to the content, “So, we know who's been pictured in this meme. And we know what he's known for . . . who's this guy?” and Bobby responded, “It's Drake.” The rest of the session focused on traditional instructional practices related to vocabulary growth and reading comprehension.

Bobby's testimony of racialized trauma and Mr. Wood's response—an adult-centered discussion that privileged content coverage—represented several testimonies across cases in the study. When testimonies contained complex examples of ideological and internalized oppression, instructional moves that created barriers to further youth testimony routinely recentered the adult tutor's voice and centered program material's content. Privileging content coverage over youth voice is a common pattern in urban education (Milner, 2013), literacy education (Demko, 2010), and within educational

systems that have increasingly valued coverage and efficacy at the expense of teachers' intellectual, pedagogical, and bodily autonomy (Coffee et al., 2017). Mr. Woods' instruction was effectively trauma informed: it led to Bobby's testimony of racialized trauma. However, his response to Bobby's testimony did not lead to naming or challenging the systemic causes that created the conditions for Bobby's experiences, nor challenging the “traumatic individual, institutional, and systematic consequences of racism” that Bobby was making sense of in his own life (Dutro & Bien, 2014, p. 9). In effect, it exposed Bobby's wounds without providing the critique needed to heal the wound.

Limitations and Future Research

We present Bobby as an illustrative case recognizing that case studies have “a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 309) or tell “victory stories” (Lamont Hill, 2009a) of the research. Rather, we explored Bobby's complicated testimony and Mr. Wood's troubling responses as an illustrative case to demonstrate instructional practices that support youth testimony do not exist in static categories of effective or ineffective. Rather, instructional practices are part of complex, in the moment decision-making process during literacy instruction. While this is well noted within literacy research (e.g. Irvine, 2002; Maniates & Mahiri, 2011; Nash & Panther, 2019;) it is essential for understanding work that takes up issues of traumatic experiences and racialized trauma.

We also share Bobby's testimony cautiously to avoid what Tuck (2009) calls damage-centered narratives. Thus, the critique is not of Bobby, but rather our findings and implications critique the media outlets, educational systems, and macrostructures within society that create racialized trauma and sustain oppression for youth like Bobby and the other youth participants in this study. We, like other researchers within trauma informed literacy practices and healing pedagogies, desire to shift our efforts to preventative solutions that address poverty, structural racism, and contributing factors to oppressive forces that create trauma (Alvarez, 2020). However, until that collective work is completed, we

offer implications that are reactive: to support youth by better understanding the resources that are available to frontline educators during traumatic experiences: building relationships, designing responsive curriculum, and trauma informed literacy instructional practices.

Implications of our work include expansive, holistic definitions of trauma that do not equate adversity, trauma, and abuse but rather understand the continuum of traumatic experiences to include oppressive forces and consider the range of individualistic responses to these experiences (Alvarez, 2020). These individualistic responses to traumatic events, such as Bobby's testimony of racialized trauma, can be drawn from as resources in strengths-based literacy instruction while acknowledging the risk that youth take when telling them (e.g. Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2016). However, these testimonies are not to be romanticized as unproblematic as they are experienced, interpreted, and shared within the same societal macrostructures that create and sustain internalized and ideological oppression. Rather, youth language, literacies, and valued knowledge can be centered within literacy curricula and instruction while still being examined and critiqued by the youth who value them (e.g. Brownell, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Furthermore, testimonies like Bobby's represent valued knowledge connected to youth identity and racial identity construction (e.g. Baran, 2018). Spear (2014) contends, "trauma disrupts and alters one's identity. Stories arise not only in efforts to remember the past but also in hopes of creating meaning, putting together the fragments, and reestablishing a sense of order" within healing (p. 64). Bobby was constructing his own racialized identity within his testimony that was connected to racialized histories, antiblackness, and internalized racialized oppression. His own racialization was largely invisible to him and unnamed by his tutor under the

legacy of the model minority myth (Lee et al., 2020). Implications for literacy scholars and educators include disrupting the Black-White binary that leaves racialized oppression unnamed for Asian American and Pacific Islanders (Chang, 1993). Intentional instructional moves could take the form of centering Asian American narratives and histories, and following testimony with dialogue that includes naming and discussing racialization to work towards healing within youth racial identity formation.

Drawing from this study, Mr. Woods provided examples of how to build relationships that move youth, like Bobby, towards testimony. For educators working with youth, our findings demonstrate that racialized trauma is part of the full repertoire of resources that youth can draw from to make meaning of their complex sociopolitical realities and identities. However, it provides caution with how educators

respond to youth testimony. In particular, this work adds to empirical and theoretical literature that challenges standardized curricula and teacher-centered dialogue (Royal & Gibson, 2017). Bobby, illustrating the multiple cases being studied, was more likely to share testimonies when his tutor held his lessons loosely, valuing positive relationships that led to dialogue. Conversely, when

Bobby's tutor was uncertain how to respond to Bobby's testimony, he moved into an adult-centered conversation that privileged content over testimony. One implication for further research is understanding how educators in this study and across diverse schooling settings routinely foreclose youth testimony and recenter the adult or content—often without realizing it. Such work could consider how these responses can be named and replaced within literacy instruction to intentionally invite youth testimony.

Within this study, the use of multimodal texts with youth literacy practices proved useful for helping learners read the world around them (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2016) and were explored elsewhere for their ability to spark critical discourse. The use of

"Youth language, literacies, and valued knowledge can be centered within literacy curricula and instruction while still being examined and critiqued by the youth who value them."

multimodal texts in this study was also connected to eliciting testimony. Additional research on how multimodal texts can elicit testimony in ways that move beyond identifying testimonies of racialized trauma and into concerted healing action is warranted. Balliro & Palu-ay (2019) provide one such example in their description of an art project collaborative where a booth was set up on a college's campus for students to tell stories of their racialized trauma. These testimonies are now available in their library's archives as counterstories to content in its historical archives, suggesting ways multimodal testimonies can challenge histories of racialized trauma within curriculum and become healing pedagogies.

Conclusion

In this study, testimony was considered as a trauma informed literacy practice with the potential to support healing pedagogies for adolescent youth experiencing racialized trauma. Although trauma is often viewed through a deficit lens, our study highlights the significance of recognizing youth testimony as a source of healing. Using Bobby and Mr. Woods as an illustrative case, we found youth moved towards personal testimony as part of relationship building, drew from racialized trauma in

its various forms as resources in their testimonies, and adult responses to testimonies of racialized trauma reinforced oppression by foreclosing opportunities for active healing. Ultimately, testimony was a viable trauma-informed literacy practice when educators made instructional decisions that privileged and invited youth testimony and resisted recentering the adult.

In his entrance interview, Bobby was interested in discussing Asian American culture, and the rumors related to COVID-19 beginning in Wuhan, China. As a Vietnamese American, Bobby was part of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community that was facing increased anti-Asian racism (e.g. Cheng et al., 2021) and at increased risk for anxiety related to discrimination (Wu et al., 2021). These risks have only increased in the time since this study concluded and the murder of six persons, four Asian American women who worked at spas, within Bobby's community, again, put a spotlight on anti-Asian racism (Abusaid, 2021). The practice of youth testimony as a way to contend with trauma has the possibility of providing a space for youth like Bobby to critically share their world while simultaneously engaging in the practice of healing from racialized trauma as it continues and persists.

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