The Big Glamorous Monster (or Lady Gaga’s Adventures at Sea): Improving Student Writing Through Dramatic Approaches in Schools

Bridget Kiger Lee¹, Patricia Enciso¹, and Austin Theatre Alliance²

Abstract
Drawing on assets-oriented, sociocultural theories of imagination and learning, the authors argue that the improvisational qualities and expanded resources of dramatic approaches to teaching make a positive difference in the quality of and persistence in students’ story writing. The authors describe findings from a controlled quasi-experimental study examining the outcomes of an 8-week story-writing and drama-based program, Literacy to Life, implemented in 29 third-grade classrooms in elementary schools with and without Title I funding located within the same urban school district in Texas. Pre- and post-measures of writing self-efficacy, story building, and generating and revising ideas showed significant positive results, especially for students in schools that receive Title I funding. Research findings and the sociocultural theoretical framework argue for increased resources in support of opportunities for students to practice combinatorial imagination and use cultural knowledge for creative writing, as was made possible through the Literacy to Life program.

Keywords
drama-based, creative writing, sociocultural theory, imagination, teaching artists, teachers, improvisation, self-efficacy, revising, equity

¹The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA
²Austin Theatre Alliance, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Bridget Kiger Lee, Department of Teaching and Learning, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, USA.
Email: lee.6237@osu.edu
The title of this article is also the title of a story written by third-grade students and performed by teaching artists in their school. In the story’s performance, the audience sees a T-shirt-clad man wearing a wavy blond wig dancing onto the stage to Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” bridge. Then he declares, “I’m Lady Gaga. And I live in a haunted mansion.”

From stage right, two artists appear as ghostly and zombie-like characters. Then, Lady Gaga calls for her “tuxedo boys,” who announce and enact their delivery of her fabulous footrest, her fabulous shiny crown, her fabulous toothbrush, and her fabulous glitter. Lady Gaga, however, seems unhappy: “I wish I had a glamorous monster to be friends with.” To which her fabulous footrest replies, “Lady Gaga! We could just take your fabulous boat out on the ocean!”

“Okay!” she replies. And the cast appears on stage with minimalist props suited for a fabulous boat ride at sea. After surviving a boat wreck and making friends with a surprisingly friendly monster, their story concludes with a Gaga-style dance party.

But perhaps, the most important part of the performance takes place just before the music starts, when artists on the stage introduce the story’s four young authors in the audience, who turn to the crowd, share their names, and shout, “And we wrote this story!”

This performance is an adaptation of the following children’s writing.

Once upon a time there was a tall Lady Gaga wearing a big, big dress dancing and singing. She lived in a fabulous haunted house where everyone (only the boys) wear tuxedos. And she wanted a good friendly monster to be fabulous together. And every day she checked all over the place at the haunted castle in the middle of the ocean to find the monster. She took a boat there for 5 minutes. Until one day she was singing, “Gaga ooh la la” and the waves rose up over the boat and the boat sank. She found the big glamorous monster locked in a cage at the bottom of the ocean named Candyman. He was locked up because he was bad to the people. Candyman fainted when he saw Lady Gaga and then they made friends.

Lady Gaga: Yay! I found him. Hey glamorous monster!

Monster: Growl

Lady Gaga: Do you want to be fabulous?

Monster: Yes. (In a growl)

Lady Gaga: Will you be good?

Monster: Oh yeah.

And ever since that day they were famous and rich and lived together singing and dancing.

The End.
This story content suggests a radically different approach to writing education, one that would be unusual in contemporary elementary schools, regardless of the arts-based or other resources available to students and teachers. The third-grade students who created this story were part of a school-wide program led by teachers and teaching artists who worked in multiple classrooms over 8 weeks. The team facilitated teachers’ and students’ use of improvisational theater tools as they told, wrote, and revised stories that would eventually be performed by the teaching artists.

Traditional writing education in elementary classrooms is increasingly influenced by district, state, and federal imperatives to improve student achievement on standardized tests. Currently, the purpose of daily writing instruction has focused on producing and filling in the blanks of formulaic sentence structures to satisfy the conditions for an acceptable test answer (Agee, 2004; Popham, 2001; Volante, 2004). Such test-oriented writing education is prevalent in Title I schools (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; Oakes, 2005), where students learn that writing is drudgery, requiring only superficial understanding of content and restricted use of language and expressive forms (Strickland et al., 2001). In contrast with a focus on instrumentalist writing education and outcomes, we are interested in understanding the value of resource-rich learning experiences and outcomes, specifically in terms of equity in learning opportunities among students in Title 1 and non–Title 1 schools. Drawing on assets-oriented (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) sociocultural theories of imagination and learning, we argue that drama-based teaching provides opportunities to collaboratively invent, improvise, and play with words and meanings that expand students’ writing, along with an increased sense of their potential to author and enjoy creative storytelling.

In this article, we describe the program features and pre- and postfindings for an 8-week story-writing and improvisational drama intervention, Literacy to Life, implemented in elementary schools that do and do not receive Title I funding located within the same urban school district in Texas. We present a research design and findings based on the following questions:

**Research Question 1:** How might an assets-oriented, sociocultural view of students’ knowledge and combinatorial imaginative capacity, as well as additional resources of time, planning, and artistic talent, be implemented in a classroom?

**Research Question 2:** Do self-efficacy, story building, and revision in writing shift for students who participate in Literacy to Life program compared with students who attend the final performance but do not participate in the program?

**Theoretical Frame: Assets-Oriented Sociocultural Theory and the Practice of Imagination**

When students and teachers begin to shift their attention to stories and the possibilities of what if, they engage in what Vygotsky (1978) described as a shift in the “field of vision” so that what might be stands in for what is. The incremental, collaborative practice of bringing a what if world into view is accomplished as children and adults...
agree to accept one another’s propositions. As in the performance of the Lady Gaga story, actors implicitly ask the audience to accept that the school stage is an underwater world and Lady Gaga has met, befriended, and released a monster. Whatever the proposition or shift in what is, all players are invited to resolve gaps in both how the world is made and what it means, as it is being made.

In his theory of imagination in the development of the child, Vygotsky (2004) placed imagination at the center of the production of all cultural life. For Vygotsky, imagination is not simply about conjuring something out of nothing, or accessing creativity from within, but rather is about making sense of what is in front of us, of using cultural material to resolve a dissonance, or “discoordination,” of image, meaning, and being (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011). Vygotsky viewed this kind of resolution of interpretation and action as “combinatorial,” requiring references to historically and socially formed experiences and cultural knowledge (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011). Vygotsky’s theory of learning positions students and teachers as engaged problem solvers, seeking new ways to use culturally formed repertoires of language and experience to explore and express new understandings of the world and themselves through writing.

Usually, in writing education and other social interactions, students’ and teachers’ expressions and interactions are bound by implicit expectations for acceptable ways of being a writer and “doing writing.” Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) described historically formed activities and practices, such as writing education in school, as the material manifestations of “figured worlds.” Figured worlds are akin to narratives or story lines that “supply the contexts of meaning and action in which social positions and social relationships are named and conducted” (p. 60). Figured worlds are, therefore, sites for identity formation, as people participate in naming and being named within particular frames of meaning and practices. Although actions and story lines within figured worlds may be always available for reproducing or inhabiting identifiable categories of people who act within familiar plotlines, these same worlds can be “opened up” or “disinhabited” by improvising on usual ways of seeing and being (Holland et al., 1998, p. 238).

Improvising on and disinhabiting everyday life are the primary aims of play. As Vygotsky argued, in play, the field of vision is displaced, creating an imaginative framing so that meaning about the world predominates over the actual world (Holland et al., 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Drawing on a range of ethnographic studies of identity, agency, and cultural change, Holland et al. (1998) argued that the symbolic potential and use of materials, including stories, enables people to “shift the perceptual, cognitive, affective, and practical frame of activity” (p. 63), as they “organize and manage their own and others’ behavior” to “cast oneself as a new actor in a new social play” (pp. 280-281). To imagine, then, is to bring the world into being, to author oneself and other possible social positions within available figured worlds. In this study, we argue that drama-based pedagogies provide openings for imagining, improvising, and disinhabiting the figured worlds within writing education.

As other drama educators and scholars have argued (cf. Edmiston, 2003, 2014; O’Neill, 1995), drama-based pedagogies intentionally offer new social positions for children to try out and author new possibilities for themselves as speakers, actors, and
writers. Through drama, children are able to draw on embodied, experiential knowledge for new combinations of meaning, as they also listen to and interpret others’ ways of seeing and describing possible worlds (cf. Enciso, 2011; Medina, 2004). Children’s words, images, relationships, and worlds may come into focus as valued material for motivating and shaping writing (cf. Enciso, 2011; Heath & Wolf, 2005).

Children’s participation in the production of cultural life depends on their opportunities to imagine and shape worlds, using the materials and ideas they value in everyday life. Equity in learning, then, also depends on educators’ and policy makers’ advocacy for every child’s right to not only participate in but also contribute to cultural life (Stetsenko, 2010). Drama-based pedagogies may be an important way to provide opportunities for children to create worlds and contribute to cultural life through writing. We build on findings from drama and writing research to describe elements of the Literacy to Life curriculum and resources, including time, space, and guidance for building relationships, enacting possible events, and negotiating the meanings of objects and story lines.

Improvisational Drama in Support of Prewriting, Story Building, and Revision

Defining Improvisational Drama

In broad terms, drama-based pedagogies may include theater games (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Spolin, 1986), creative drama (McCaslin, 1996), story drama (Booth, 2005; Ward, 1986), process drama (Johnson & O’Neill, 1984), dramatic inquiry (Edmiston, 2014), and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1974). Teaching artists and teachers may borrow practices from multiple approaches and may be facilitated by the classroom teacher, by a teaching artist, or by two (or more) professionals who collaborate on their work with students (cf. Walker, Tabone, & Weltsek, 2011).

We use the term improvisational drama to describe the teaching artists’ use of the following features of dramatic pedagogy: (a) Elements of everyday reality represent something else and are publicly acknowledged as part of a shared imagined story (e.g., students represent story characters); (b) the teacher or teaching artists plan for, and actively participate in, the exploration of ideas and stories with the intention toward a learning goal; (c) the tools of improvisation are used as a means for initiating ideas, story building, and revising ideas and stories; and (d) children move their bodies to represent their ideas and relationships inside and outside of stories.

Improvisational Drama and Prewriting

For many children (and adults), writing is something to overcome, either by finishing quickly with the least possible effort or by waiting endlessly for the words to appear on the page. Educational psychologists Wigfield (2004), Bandura (1997), and others described the hurdle of “getting started” in terms of low self-efficacy for writing, or a belief that one cannot meet the expectations for writing. Overcoming low self-efficacy
in learning entails behavior modeling (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006), mastery experiences (Schunk, 1986), and constructive feedback (Pajares & Urdan, 2006). In other words, this suggests that students need to see writing modeled, experience the process of writing, and talk about writing.

Similarly, the hurdle to get started in writing is supported through sociocultural theories of imagination. Prewriting entails an understanding of oneself as someone who writes or will write successfully. However, as described above, this sense of oneself may be difficult to embody and enact under usual conditions of being assigned a topic and time frame with no particular audience for writing. By disinhabiting familiar figurations of being a student (who does not like writing) and trying on new possible ways of being a storyteller (who needs to find new words, characters, and settings to be performed on stage), and by being regarded as member of a group who is working collaboratively toward a resolution of a challenging problem, children may discover their capacity to not only meet but exceed expectations for being creative and fluent writers.

Moore and Caldwell’s (1990) exemplary study of the effect of improvisational drama on prewriting and increasing self-efficacy with primary-grade students informed the research design and writing measures for the present study. Moore and Caldwell randomly assigned 63 second and third graders at the student level to either the 15-week drama intervention or a control group, which used a discussion approach to prewriting. Teachers implementing drama as a prewriting activity received 32 hr of training over 8 weeks. The drama strategies included ensemble and theater games and writing dialogue based on group exploration of ideas through role-play, followed by drafting a story, and then enacting stories or scenes from the written text. As discussed above, the drama strategies are associated with self-efficacy constructs such as modeling behaviors (role-play) and enacting and revising scenes (constructive feedback). In addition, these drama practices align with Holland et al.’s (1998) theory of disinhabiting familiar ways of being students.

Moore and Caldwell evaluated changes in students’ writing through written story prompts completed every week. Using a one-word story prompt (“Fears”) as a prewriting assessment, they found that the control and intervention groups were statistically equivalent at the preintervention time. At postintervention, students involved in drama activities showed significantly more positive outcomes than students in the control group. The writing was scored on writing organization (sequence of events), style (well-constructed sentences, dialogue, expressive, consistent perspective), detail (originality, intrigue), and context (time and place, character development, well-developed detail). The researchers attributed the success of the students in the intervention group to using drama as a prewriting or rehearsal for narrative writing and idea generation.

Improvisational Drama and Story Building

Cremin, Gooch, Blackmore, Goff, and Macdonald (2006) were interested in the ways children not only overcome the initial roadblocks to starting the writing process but
also how they might produce more lengthy writing with clearer purpose and structure. Cremin et al. (2006) studied classroom-based contexts in which students were able to rehearse possible ideas through drama. The researchers go further, however, to suggest that drama pedagogy provides an imagined, yet authentic and immediate purpose for writing, which strengthens the quality of students’ embodied understanding and, therefore, the quality of their writing. This view of drama is supported by a sociocultural theory of play and displacement of what is to inhabit a world as it is being made.

In close collaboration with researchers, primary-grade teachers developed dramas based on picture books featuring “potent visuals and [a] tendency to leave gaps for the reader to inhabit” (Cremin et al., 2006, p. 275). This meant that at moments of heightened uncertainty or tension, the students and teacher could determine the needs and direction of the story and then imagine themselves as full participants in the story world. The research team found that when the purposes of writing were immediate and urgent, as when the text described a young boy who needed to be saved from drowning in a dangerous water tower, students wrote directly and persuasively to multiple audiences and expressively as first-person narrators, living through the moment of danger. The students’ writing showed evidence of a consistent authorial stance, immediacy, emotional investment, connection to the real world, and immersion in the full context and problems of the drama.

In contrast, when teachers facilitated drama to meet preset curricular writing standards, the quality of students’ writing and teachers’ and students’ reflections on the writing revealed a goal-specific orientation that took precedence over personal, emotional, or purposeful writing related to the drama world. Thus, the constraints of an imposed view of writing as a school task to be completed actually restricted the value and depth of experience that dramatic engagement offers. As Cremin et al. (2006) wrote,

> The [dramatic] situation had provided both an immediate purpose and an “intrinsic need” to write (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 118). The [case study] students’ writing, though brief, flowed with relative ease in contrast to their usual composing which their teacher reported tended to be undertaken with intense labour and much erasing. (p. 285)

**Improvisational Drama and Revision**

One of the many challenges to all writers is incorporating feedback into a revision. DeMichele (2015) tackled this obstacle in her study, which focused on improvisation and writing with high school students. Part of her work focused on the classroom culture that supports feedback and revision, in particular, collaborative story building and story structures. The researchers employed a quasi-experimental pre–post design across three classrooms in the same school. All classrooms allotted similar amounts of time for writing instruction; however, in the intervention classroom, the teacher used improvisational drama to enhance and guide writing. Students participated in various storytelling and writing improv games that focused on a fundamental rule of improvisation: *Yes, and*. Using this framing, the students’ positioning shifted from being solely
responsible for shaping and evaluating meaning toward collective authorship and revision (Sawyer, 2004). Rather than focusing on judging the quality of ideas, students moved toward building upon one another’s ideas.

After 6 weeks with approximately 9 hr of writing instruction, the students in the classrooms focused on improvisation significantly increased the number of complete thoughts and sentences they wrote as compared with the students in the comparison classroom, who also increased in number of words. The author attributes this growth to the Yes, and story structure used in improv: “By continuously practicing to accept another’s idea and give their own, without fear of rejection they learn to trust not only their classmates but themselves as well” (DeMichele, 2015, p. 21).

In summary, the three studies described above valued and evaluated students’ writing in terms of depth of detail, expressivity, and sense of presence and emotional involvement in the imagined world of the stories they wrote, enacted, and revised. In addition, students had opportunities to play, to shift the field of vision, as they took up new perspectives and embodied characters’ concerns to understand the story world in relation to their personal lives (Vygotsky, 2004). These ideas and relationships among improvisational drama, pre-writing, story building, revision, and play informed Literacy to Life as the teaching artists, teachers, and students imagined and transformed their classrooms through writing.

**Method**

**School-Level Contexts**

During the 2012-2013 academic year, the Austin Theatre Alliance received funding to support the use of drama-based pedagogies in the elementary writing curriculum. In Title I schools, we collected data in 29 classrooms, including 14 intervention classrooms and 19 wait-list control/control classrooms. Most of the students in the Title I schools (92%-97% of students) qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and identified as minority status (92%-98%). These schools were classified as meeting the standards or performing below standards, and teachers and students had limited access to arts or other enrichments.

In the two non–Title I schools, we collected data in 12 classrooms, including seven intervention classrooms and five wait-list control/control classrooms. As compared with the Title I schools, fewer of these students (5%-34%) qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and identified as minority status (33%-43%). Both these schools were classified as high performing on standardized tests, and teachers and students had access to multiple arts programming and other enrichment resources for their classrooms. (See Table 1 in the online supplementary archive for the schools’ demographics.)

Following procedures for a quasi-experimental design, we selected control classrooms that were comparable in demographics and location to the intervention classrooms. To help account for a potential teacher selectivity bias, most of the control groups were wait-listed to receive the intervention in the spring semester. When possible, we randomly assigned at the classroom level for the intervention; however, we were not able to do this for all classrooms due to logistics and preferences in schools.
Development and Design of Literacy to Life

The Literacy to Life program was developed with consideration of previous studies and their findings, as well as in discussion with teachers who referenced existing curricula in the district. In addition, the program’s practices and goals were aligned with a district-wide focus on creative learning by providing more engaging, arts-rich experiences for students. Two professional teaching artists worked in each classroom with approximately 20 students for 90 min, once a week for 7 weeks.

Lesson sequence, drama frame, and social practices. The Literacy to Life residency encompassed three cycles of story-writing processes, beginning with brainstorming, then revision, and finally journal writing during each 90-min lesson. Although each session followed the same structure, teachers and teaching artists shifted the particular writing skill focus in relation to student-generated ideas developed in previous lessons.

During the first minutes of the first session, the teaching artists introduced themselves as Story Wranglers and posed a dramatic problem to the students. They explained that all the Story Wranglers’ stories were lost. As the name implies, Story Wranglers needed stories to wrangle, and they implored the students to help them create and write more stories. Each student received a journal in which to “wrangle” or write stories. This initial framing of the relationship between the students and the teaching artists suggested a shift in the purpose (and figured world) of writing and the expectation of expertise among the young writers. This framing of the students as assistant story wranglers was intended to establish a collaborative effort (inhabitation) that would entail new rules and practices for working together.

The teacher and teaching artists introduced and reviewed agreements for how they would approach their writing and drama time together. They agreed to adhere to the following guidelines: Every idea is a good idea, respect each other, respect the magic sign, and lots of ideas, fun ideas, new ideas. By the second session, students recited the agreements together. Following their guidelines and agreements process, teaching artists facilitated whole-class theater games, including Yes Circle, Name and Motion, Transform Us, Yes Let’s, “This is not a . . . ,” and others (Dawson & Lee, 2017). Games focused on one or more of the agreements and the story work for that day. For example, in Yes Circle, students stood in a circle, each student said his or her name, and then everyone else exclaimed, “Yes!” In this game, everyone contributed and students also practiced projecting their voices for later enactments. These skills and foci were discussed during the reflection time after the game.

In another game, “This is not a . . . ,” the students sat in a circle, held a roll of tape, and said, for example, “This is not a roll of tape, but a crown for the Queen of England.” Students used the roll of tape as a crown and modified their voice to imitate a queen. The focus of this game was to accept “lots of ideas, fun ideas, and new ideas.” The teacher and teaching artists referenced these games throughout the lesson as students collaboratively created stories. A teaching artist might say, “Remember how we came up with as many ideas as we could during ‘This is not a . . . ’? Let’s try to do that again for possible story characters.”
Next, the teaching artists introduced the first of three iterative cycles of story making in the classroom. The first cycle was whole-group focused and was used as a way to model the writing process for the next two cycles. First, the teaching artists introduced a range of writing steps: Brainstorm ideas, create a first draft using a story spine, revise the writing, and publish the draft for an audience. All these approaches were designed to be playful, interactive, and embodied. For brainstorming, all the students said, “Brainstorm” while wiggling their fingers on their head and talking like zombies. Then the teaching artists divided the class into two to three groups who brainstormed ideas for characters for 1 min. This process was repeated for generating potential story settings.

In the second part of the first cycle of the writing process, the teaching artists chose one to two characters and settings to create a first draft of a story with the whole class. Students said, “First draft” while waving their index finger in the air like an English parliamentarian. The teaching artists used a story spine to give a structure to the first draft of the story:

Once upon a time,

he/she/it/they wanted,

but,

then,

ever since that day . . .

Once a draft of a story was created on the board with the whole class, the teaching artists moved the work toward revision with their “toolbox.” This toolbox was similar to the Revision Toolbox metaphor discussed by educator Georgia Heard (2014); however, the Story Wranglers’ toolbox was slightly different and also included an embodied gesture to accompany each tool. When students opened the toolbox, everyone made a creaky sound as if it were old. Inside the toolbox were multiple tools for students to use in revising their first draft, including organization (the gesture and sound of a pneumatic hammer), word choice (shouts of “extreme!”), and main idea (the gesture and sound to represent a light bulb idea). The students suggested revisions based on organization (sequencing of the ideas), word choice (using strong descriptive and original words), and naming the main idea. Throughout each step, teaching artists responded to student suggestions by asking questions such as, “Why might you think that?” “How might that happen?” and “What else can we do?” After all steps were completed, the teaching artists crossed through “First Draft,” wrote the agreed-upon main idea as the title, and wrote “The End” at the bottom of the story.

The final step in the first cycle of the Literacy to Life lesson was to publish. Everyone said, “3, 2, 1, publish” while clapping an imaginary movie director’s board. For the whole-group story, the teaching artists enacted the story for the students. This
transformation from writing to performance required some confidence and skill with improvisation, which the teaching artists enthusiastically provided. They also modeled an interest in and commitment to revision of their improvisations. For example, if the written idea said, “They rolled on the floor all day long,” the artists would begin this enactment, but then stop to question out loud whether they wanted to have an action that lasted all day in their story. Once their performance was finished, they asked the students in the audience for suggestions that might clarify their story. Together, they used performance and writing as modes to review and revise their ideas.

For the next 30 min, the lesson moved into the second cycle of the work. Small groups of students worked through each of the writing steps with a teaching artist or teacher. Then they performed their newly created stories for the other groups and received feedback for suggested revisions. For the last 15 min and final cycle of the lesson, students wrote their ideas in their individual journals. Teaching artists did not offer a writing prompt at this point, but rather encouraged students to capture the ideas that they heard that day or to go through the writing process to create a new story. Each session was structured to follow the same sequence; however, the teacher and teaching artists focused on a particular skill in subsequent weeks, such as organization, word choice, main idea, and the concept that every idea is a good idea.

In the eighth week, teachers collected student journals and a group of professional actors (many of whom were the teaching artists from the classroom) adapted students’ stories into a series of short, energetic sketches to perform for the entire school. Students across the school then saw their peers’ writing brought to life on stage in a public celebration of their work. Every student who participated in the program had a story performed, whether it was conceived by a small group or by an individual. At the beginning of each performance, the teaching artists invited the authors to stand, state their names, and exclaim, “This is our story!” in front of their peers at the school. All students in the Literacy to Life program attended their school’s performance—including students in the control classrooms at those schools.

Measures

Self-efficacy for prewriting. We measured self-efficacy for prewriting through a pre- and post-survey with 10 statements (see supplemental file for survey). Example statements include (a) “When writing a story, it is easy for me to get ideas” and (b) “When writing a story, it is easy for me to get started.”

Story building. We used a writing prompt task at pre- and postintervention to better understand the effects of Literacy to Life on generating ideas and story building. Students were given 5 min to respond to either of the following prompts: (a) “You won’t believe it, but here’s what happened . . .” or (b) “You are an inventor. Tell a friend what happened the day you tried out the time machine you just invented.” Specifically, we coded for the number of words and descriptive words used, the sequencing of ideas within a story (introduction of characters, logic of action, resolution), and the
originality of the ideas as compared with peers’ ideas. All these elements directly relate to the Literacy to Life lessons.

**Idea generation and revision.** To measure students’ abilities to generate new ideas and revise an idea multiple times, we asked students to complete two tasks: a circle-drawing task (similar to a Torrance test) and an alternative uses task. The tasks measure students’ ability to generate ideas, revise ideas, and create original ideas. Students were given a picture of a circle and asked, “What else can this circle be?” They then had 2 min to draw their ideas. For the alternative uses task, students received a sheet of paper with the direction, “Write as many uses for a cup as you can.” They then had 2 min to write their ideas.

These tasks were coded in multiple ways: the number of interpretable ideas in response to the prompt, the number of different categories, and the number of unique or original ideas relative to the responses by all participants in our sample. For example, responses on the circle task that represented the category of food (e.g., an ice cream cone and a cookie) were scored 1 point for the category. Details were scored 1 point for each additional feature of the drawing (e.g., chocolate chips on the cookie). We considered students’ ability to generate details through visualizing ideas as a proxy for, or parallel with, the demands of generating details in written narratives.

**Teacher perceptions of student writing.** To support our interpretation of the student data, we asked teachers to complete a brief pre- and post-survey addressing their perceptions of their students’ writing skills (see supplemental file for survey). In parallel with the student measures, the survey consisted of 11 Likert-type questions and three short-answer questions related to the teacher’s perceptions of student self-efficacy for pre-writing and the student’s ability in story building and in revision of ideas.

**Procedure and Validity**

Pre- and postmeasures were administered to both the intervention and control groups within the same period of time. Students worked alone for 15 min to complete the measures. Once completed and collected, a deidentification code was assigned to each packet and the students’ names were blacked out and covered. This allowed for unbiased coding and random distribution of packets among coders. Only one person had access to the identification code, and this researcher did not code any of the measures. All coders attended two trainings and completed at least 20 practice packets that were reviewed by the first author before coding official student data. All packets were double-blind coded by two coders; however, no packet was coded by the same two coders. If the discrepancy in codes was one to two points, the average of the codes was used. If the discrepancy was larger than two points, the primary researcher blind-coded the packet and settled the dispute. If these methods did not resolve the discrepancies, then the data were not used. All disagreements were resolved.

All data were analyzed using 2012 SPSS. Because individual students were followed throughout the process via the deidentification coding, we were able to analyze
the data at the student level for greater understanding of Literacy to Life’s impact. We
used t tests for independent samples to compare both the means and change in means
between each student in the intervention and control. We also included the adjusted
effect estimates, for which applied educational research and evaluation have practical
significance when the effect is larger than .10 (Lipsey et al., 2012).

Results

Effects of Literacy to Life on Self-Efficacy, Story Building, and Revision
Within Similar Schools

We address our second research question through the analysis of the measures compar-
ing student writing outcomes within similar school contexts.

Self-efficacy for prewriting. The data show that before the Literacy to Life program,
students in the control classrooms were significantly more positive about getting
started in writing. However, at the end of the 8-week residency, participating students
significantly increased their self-efficacy for writing, whereas their peers in control
classrooms decreased in self-efficacy.

Before the Literacy to Life program, students in the control classrooms were more
positive about getting started in writing. However, at the end of the residency, participat-
ing students significantly increased their self-efficacy for writing, whereas their
peers in control classrooms decreased in self-efficacy. In both comparisons, students
who participated in the Literacy to Life program were more positive and efficacious
about getting started with the writing process, whereas students who did not partici-
pate remained less positive and efficacious (see Table 2 in the online supplementary
archive).

Story building in writing. Among Title I students, the control and intervention stu-
dents were not significantly different on any measure at preintervention. Yet at
postintervention, the participating students used a significantly higher number of
words \( (d = .35) \) and showed more clarity (logical order) in the sequencing of ideas
\( (d = .16) \). In addition, originality in writing, measured by word choice and per-
sonal, unique ideas, changed for Title I students in the intervention; however, their
change approached, rather than met, significance (see Table 3 in the online supple-
mentary archive).

Among the students in non–Title I classrooms, the intervention and control class-
rooms were significantly different at preintervention. The students in the intervention
were significantly more positive on all measures before the intervention. At postinter-
vention, the comparison classrooms caught up to the intervention classrooms on one
measure (sequencing), but all other measures remained in favor of the students in the
intervention classrooms. These findings do not present clear results and limit the
extent to which we could attribute any differences in change to the program. Once
again, the data show that all participating students increased in their number of words,
sequencing of ideas, and originality of ideas by the end of the program (see Table 4 in the online supplementary archive).

**Revising and generating new ideas.** Among Title I students, none of the variables were significantly different at preintervention, which suggests that, statistically, the control and intervention classrooms were not significantly different prior to the intervention. On five of the six revising and generating ideas measures, Literacy to Life students showed significant positive growth as compared with students who did not participate in the program. Adjusted effect estimates for the intervention group as measured against the control group range from $d = .15$ to $d = .36$ (see Table 5 in the online supplementary archive).

All the variables were significantly different at preintervention in favor of the Literacy to Life students. The differences remained at the end of the program such that the participating students were still stronger for these measures. In most comparisons, participating students were better able to generate and revise ideas after participating in the Literacy to Life program.

**Teacher perceptions of student writing.** At preintervention, teachers’ perceptions of student writing ability were not significantly different between control and intervention classrooms. At postintervention, teachers in Literacy to Life classrooms perceived a significantly more positive improvement in their students’ writing than teachers in control classrooms, with an adjusted posteffect estimate of $d = .81$.

At preintervention, teachers’ perceptions of student writing ability were not significantly different between control and intervention classrooms; however, control teachers’ perceptions were more positive. At postintervention, teachers in the intervention classrooms perceived growth in students’ writing ability and surpassed control teachers’ perceptions of students; however, the growth was not significant from pre- to postintervention. In other words, non–Title I classroom teachers perceived limited change in students’ ability in relationship to writing from pre- to postintervention in comparison with the control classrooms (see Table 6 in the online supplementary archive).

**Effects of Literacy to Life on Self-Efficacy, Story Building, and Revision Across Schools**

To understand the potential effects of Literacy to Life and availability of resources on students more fully, we looked at differences across schools. To better understand what was typically happening in writing classrooms with students who did not participate in the program, we compared the two control groups at Title I and non–Title I schools, neither of which received the intervention, but did see the final performance. In addition to intervention and control comparisons across Title 1 and non–Title 1 classrooms, we compared Title I intervention classrooms with the non–Title I control classrooms.
Self-efficacy for prewriting. At the preintervention, the control non–Title I classrooms were significantly more positive in their self-efficacy for prewriting than students in intervention Title I classrooms \((p < .05)\). However, at postintervention, the Title I Literacy to Life students caught up to their peers in non–Title I classrooms, and there was no longer a difference in their self-efficacy for prewriting between the schools.

At both pre- and postintervention, the control groups did not differ: The students in Title I schools remained behind the students in non–Title I schools. Because the control groups did not show the same growth as the intervention students at the same school, this suggests that Literacy to Life had an impact on self-efficacy for participating students in the Title I schools. (See Table 2 in the online supplementary archive.)

Story building in writing. At the preintervention, the control non–Title I classrooms were significantly stronger in writing achievement on three of the four areas: number of words, number of descriptors, and originality of ideas. However, at postintervention, the Title I intervention classrooms were on par with the non–Title I classrooms on three of the measures, with significant adjusted posteffect estimates (number of words, \(d = .30\); number of descriptors, \(d = .23\); originality of ideas, \(d = .27\)).

If effects on writing could not be attributed to Literacy to Life, then we would expect to find that the postintervention results of the control group of Title I students similarly met or exceeded those of non–Title I students on these measures. At preintervention, the control group of Title I students performed below the control group of non–Title I students on all the writing measures. At postintervention, however, the control group of Title I students remained well behind the control group of non–Title I students on all the writing measures. And, in many cases, the gap had widened. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that changes in participants’ performances on self-efficacy, writing, and creativity measures can be attributed to the Literacy to Life program. (See Tables 3 and 4 in the online supplementary archive.)

Summary of Results

In sum, across most measures of writing, generating ideas, and revising ideas, the data show significant growth for students who participated in the Literacy to Life program. In particular, the data suggest that students who attended low-resourced schools (as designated by Title I status) experienced significant positive change in comparison with their peers at similar schools who did not participate in the program. This significant positive growth was shown in three of the four writing measures, the teachers’ perceptions of student writing, and five of six revising and generating ideas measures. This is not necessarily surprising given the resources of time, teaching artistry, and attention to the writing curriculum afforded by this program.

However, the most striking finding relates to the comparison between Title I and non–Title I schools. Participating students at Title I schools who started well behind their peers in non–Title I schools who did not participate in the program experienced a very different trajectory of growth. At the end of the 8-week residency, students in Title I schools caught up to, and even surpassed, students in non–Title I schools on
three of the writing measures (number of words, number of descriptors, and number of original ideas) as well as the self-efficacy for prewriting measure.

Focusing on an assets-based approach to creative writing may have afforded students the opportunity to explore new ideas and imagine possibilities. This positive improvement suggests that the Literacy to Life program encouraged positive self-efficacy for prewriting and increased skill and confidence in idea generation and revision. Rather than learning conformity to predetermined forms of expression, students had the opportunity to value and experiment with creative problem solving. Conversely, students in Title 1 schools who did not experience Literacy to Life resources, showed diminished growth in writing, relative to their peers in both Title I and non-Title I intervention schools. Students who experienced continued limited writing and creativity resources in Title I schools showed declining self-efficacy, motivation, and creativity in their approach to writing.

**Discussion**

State testing mandates have constrained the forms and content of writing education, such that creative writing has been marginalized in literacy education. We argue that when children lose opportunities to take risks with ideas, combine images in novel ways, and collaborate to evaluate and revise ideas, they also lose the right to see themselves as writers who are capable of imagining, evaluating, and producing possible worlds. In terms of both their writing and the meaning of imagination in learning, such a loss is not trivial.

As seen in the findings of the pre- and postmeasures for Literacy to Life research, students within Title I schools that participated in the program either matched or surpassed their peers in non–Title I schools on nearly all postmeasures. Within the same or comparable Title I schools, students in the control groups fell further behind their peers who participated in the program. Furthermore, by the end of the 8-week program, without the resources provided by Literacy to Life, students in Title I schools remained behind their peers at non–Title I schools. In contrast, Literacy to Life program participants in Title I schools either matched or surpassed their peers in non–Title I schools on nearly all postmeasures.

Thus, in a relatively short period of time, skilled teaching artists and teachers, informed by improvisational drama, authentic story-writing practices, and elementary-level writing goals, supported historically and systemically low-resourced schools in providing students with experiences that made a difference in writing development overall: that is, getting started with writing, generating, and valuing ideas from personal and collective knowledge sources; valuing and using a wide range of vocabulary; and writing without stopping or getting stuck. These findings suggest the need for further investigation into how and why this program may provide equalizing opportunities for students to discover their own and others’ potential as writers who can transform everyday knowledge and experiences into valued creative writing forms.
**Relationship to Past Research**

The difference in children’s writing and idea generation and revision may be associated with the children’s differential access to the artistic resources, curricular design, collaborative approach, and ongoing purposeful evaluation of ideas that marked the overall implementation of the program. Furthermore, as a comparative study involving nearly 700 participants, the Literacy to Life research contributes important findings in support of meta-analysis findings that drama-based pedagogies have a moderate to large effect on achievement in writing across grade levels (Lee, Patall, Cawthon, & Steingut, 2015).

**Using a structure to create a story world.** Similar to Moore and Caldwell’s (1990) research in which dramatizing stories became a rehearsal space for collaborative storytelling, immersion, and evaluation, the Literacy to Life drama-based pedagogy taught students to recognize and use a story spine or structure while they were also encouraged to bring multiple ideas and images together into the story world space. By enacting their ideas, students experienced the perspective of different characters (and objects) as they were also asked to elaborate on and evaluate the meaning of these story features for the story overall. In this sense, the students’ drama experiences were similar to the experiences of immersion in vivid imagery (McNaughton, 1997; Moore & Caldwell, 1990), immediacy (McNaughton, 1997), and sense of urgency (Cremin et al., 2006) that supported students’ writing in related drama pedagogies.

**Using teaching artists and teachers.** The Literacy to Life program also shared with related research the important feature of trained educators and teaching artists. As McNaughton (1997) and other researchers have argued (Cremin et al., 2006; Edmiston & Enciso, 2002; Johnson & O’Neill, 1984; Medina, 2010; O’Neill, 1995), when teachers are part of the drama, as coparticipants in the world, they are able to introduce and support shifts in register, create the need for further explanations, and ask questions about others’ thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. Similar to previous research on improvisation and writing (DeMichele, 2015), teaching artists in Literacy to Life were able to support young writer/actors in part because they understood the mechanics and risks of improvisation, and thus, they could genuinely value and delight in the students’ ideas. They could also raise questions alongside the students about the meanings and relationships among the elements of the story world. Even the simple statement “Every idea is a good idea” shifted attention from the constraints of seeking only one main or valued idea to considering the range and value of the student’s own and others’ resources and directions for creating a story.

In addition, it is important to include teachers in the improvisational drama work (Lee et al., 2015). In a focused study on how a collaboration developed between teachers and teaching artists (Lee, 2013), the researcher found that a mutual need and value between teachers and teaching artists was of the utmost importance. In Literacy to Life, both the teaching artist and teacher expertise were needed and valued in this partnership to help students create new stories. Using a structure for dramatizing that
was informed by the district’s and teacher’s curricular writing goals, teachers and teaching artists facilitated risk taking, modeled talk about writing, and enacted revisions through performance and writing. All the participating teachers indicated that they would continue to use these strategies, with 67% saying they would use them on a daily or weekly basis beyond the time in the program. Just as DeMichele (2015) placed a high value on knowing the students in the classroom, the teachers served as the link between Story Wrangler sessions. They posted students’ stories created within the Literacy to Life program on large paper hanging on the walls, they implemented improvisational strategies between sessions within the writing and other areas of the curriculum, and finally, they mediated the teaching artists’ understandings of the growth and ability of their students.

**Using the tools of improvisational drama.** In Literacy to Life, teaching artists and teachers introduced tools and frameworks for understanding students’ ideas so they could generate images, relationships, and plots and evaluate them as they moved from brainstorming and enactment to immersion, revision, and finally performance. As in classroom-based drama, where the immediacy of the drama world creates doubled perspectives—as participants in the story world and spectators on the world from the standpoint of the everyday world—Literacy to Life enabled children to experience the world from within the story and as an audience to the world, transformed on stage by teaching artists. As audience members and evaluators, children could directly experience the images and relationships they had conjured and revised for themselves and others.

**Relationship to Sociocultural Theories of Imagination and Learning**

The positive changes and benefits in writing for students in Title I schools may also be understood through sociocultural theories of play and imagination. In contrast with a deficit view (and practice) of writing, which continually reinforces the assumption that children are not capable of understanding or performing for a predefined form and standard of writing, a sociocultural theory of learning views children as interpreting and transforming available resources (linguistic, visual, embodied, real, and imagined) to solve problems in increasingly complex situations.

We argue, along with Cremin et al. (2006) and others, that drama enables participants to generate, embody, visualize, and negotiate knowledge resources. In this sense, children are always capable of making sense of and transforming available resources for new purposes. Conversely, the absence of resources—that is, material and practices with which to consider options and new forms of problem solving—will result in children showing limited interest in, or value for, the problem at hand. Too often, children are given limited resources for thinking about or transforming the world for meaningful purposes. By placing multiple possibilities in juxtaposition (whether perspectives or story elements), new relationships and meanings come into view.
Discoordination and imagination in creative writing. In creative writing, a primary activity is the transformation of available materials for new purposes. Indeed, according to Vygotsky (2004), all learning depends on using cultural material to resolve a dissonance, or discoordination, of image, meaning, and being. Vygotsky viewed this kind of resolution of interpretation and action as combinatorial and the work of imagination (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011).

The Literacy to Life program invited discoordination and the playfulness that comes with combining and juxtaposing images. As the students generated images and saw their ideas realized through the playfulness of mini-performances in the classrooms and the more formalized performance for the school, the children’s humor and serious realities began to merge in new representations of possible worlds, as in Lady Gaga and the Haunted House, outlined in the opening of this article.

The young authors’ inventions are surreal and full of imagery, creating many combinatorial possibilities for staged interpretations. The setting, for example, shifts from Lady Gaga’s house, to her boat, to the bottom of the ocean, and back to Lady Gaga’s house. The following excerpt presents both highly entertaining juxtapositions (waves rise up, boat sinks; glamorous monster; bad to people) and gaps in the narrative, to be resolved by the reader, or in this case, the teaching artists.

Until one day she was singing, “Gaga ooh la la” and the waves rose up over the boat and the boat sank. She found the big glamorous monster locked in a cage at the bottom of the ocean named Candyman. He was locked up because he was bad to the people.

For some educators, the young authors’ narrative may be considered imprecise and flawed. However, the collaborative work between authors and facilitators meant that narrative ambiguity could be treated as artistic opportunities. Through the skilled interpretations and performances of teaching artists, children’s images and ideas were valued, recombined, and extended beyond the page to a satisfactory staging for an appreciative audience.

The authors conclude with transformations from bad to good and friendless to forever friends, a structure of contrasts and resolutions, using Gaga-esque and monster-esque voices, that reflects fairy tale and cartoon genres in which the leading characters happily forego enmity for harmony.

Lady Gaga: Yay! I found him. Hey glamorous monster!

Monster: Growl

Lady Gaga: Do you want to be fabulous?

Monster: Yes. (In a growl)

Lady Gaga: Will you be good?

Monster: Oh yeah.
And ever since that day they were famous and rich and lived together singing and dancing.

The End.

The social practices of the Literacy to Life program supported children in taking risks, working together, generating many ideas, transposing and shifting ideas among peers, and revising them in relation with an audience’s perspective. All these practices are consistent with the underlying experiences of play and imagination that enable children to suspend disbelief and consider alternative ways of viewing their own and others’ resources and contributing to a situation. Unfortunately, these are precisely the kinds of experiences that have become the exclusive right of students who attend schools where the teachers have time to play with children or invite their playfulness into learning.

**Changing the figured worlds in Title I classrooms.** Children need to play, to release the “field of vision,” to test propositions, consider alternatives, and produce new relationships between objects, meanings, and ideas. We produce cultural life through imagination, through the resolution of gaps and barely defined images, and through the relationship between good and fabulous, loss and discovery. As the results of this empirical study confirm, through playful improvisation within an arts-based writing program, the quality of children’s writing improved in measurable ways.

As participants in the practice of generating and revising ideas, children also began to improvise on who they are and how they see themselves as students and writers. As participants in the figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) of writing in Title I schools, students are typically positioned in a deficit story line that continually reinforces the assumption that they do not and cannot succeed as writers. Teachers and students inhabit and reproduce this category of person on a daily basis, always anticipating the confirmation that writing is a school task, or “dummy run” (Britton, 1970), with limited relevance for a wider audience.

The Literacy to Life program introduced several significant shifts in the figured world of school writing. Teaching artists introduced the importance of full inclusion and acknowledgment of children’s personal interests and capacity to play, they reinforced the value of idea generation and risk taking, they rejected the practice of evaluating an idea too soon, they valued a process of collaborative representation and revision of meaning, and they placed high value on the images and embodied representations of a story based on children’s everyday interests and popular cultural knowledge. Through these practices, according to Holland et al. (1998), the children were able to disinhbit the figured world, as they improvised along with the teaching artists in the recovery of the lost stories, sought by the Story Wranglers. At the same time, the children were taught specific, embodied ways to participate in writing as coauthors, coactors, and potential playwrights.

As Story Wrangler assistants, the children needed to be someone other than the category of “student who cannot write.” They participated in the imaginative framing of meaning, so that meaning about the world predominated over the actual everyday
categories and practices of being a student. Again, the pleasure of being other than a
student, in a newly figured world of an artists’ collaborative, is a tremendous motiva-
tion to children. As human beings, children want to be valued, important, and involved
in meaningful experiences. Why should such joys be available only to children who
have the luxuries of time and testing proficiency (perfectly matched to the privileges
of social class)? We argue that through the available resources of drama and teaching
artists working in collaboration with teachers, all children, especially those experienc-
ing the conditions of high poverty at home and in school, can be invited into figured
worlds that allow them to imagine themselves as capable producers of wonderfully
entertaining, playful worlds. Through such experiences, children’s writing grows, as
does their confidence in themselves as writers.

Limitations and Future Research
This study and others like it would benefit from extensive observations in the class-
room while the intervention is and is not being implemented. Observations could not
only add to the thick description and specificity of the Literacy to Life techniques but
also guide the researchers in understanding whether and when the teachers take up the
language and practices of Literacy to Life. In addition, a 3-month follow-up with writ-
ing and idea tasks would help attribute the differences in writing to Literacy to Life or
to a novel experience that generated excitement around writing. Finally, we did not
match the data at the student level across schools. This requires caution in interpreta-
tion of the findings without a thorough understanding of how specific drama strategies
may or may not be affecting students based on other relevant factors (e.g., prior read-
ing level, identification of disabilities, mobility rates).

Given these limitations, however, the current findings contribute significantly to
the writing and drama research literature. This study suggests that Literacy to Life
offers students the authority to recognize, use, and value imagination and persist in
their ideas in writing. Assets-based, resource-rich experiences for students in Title I
schools give students the opportunity to meet or surpass their peers at non–Title I
schools on creative writing and idea generation and revision.

In his recent book on the roles of teachers and administrators in closing the oppor-
tunity gap for students who are learning in Title I schools, Paul Gorski (2013) made a
number of recommendations for instructional strategies that work. His list includes
incorporating music, art, and theater across the curriculum; incorporating movement
and exercise into teaching and learning; making curricula relevant to the lives of low-
income students; and promoting literacy enjoyment. The Literacy to Life program
brought all these practices into the lives of students and teachers. The program is rep-
licable and shows tremendous promise for engaging children in learning that takes
hold as it also opens new possibilities for understanding—or reintroducing—writing
as a way to recognize, use, and value imagination as a central process in learning.
Without imagination, we are asking children to accept already finished facts and for-
mats, while giving them nothing in return. With imagination, we are valuing the ways
all children author and contribute to new possibilities for their world.
Authors’ Note
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Supplemental Material
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Author Biographies

**Bridget Kiger Lee** is a postdoctoral researcher at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on the effects of drama-based pedagogy on various academic-related outcomes, the processes by which teachers shift pedagogical practices and the effects on student outcomes, and the development and application of research on arts-based pedagogies for use in educational policy.

**Patricia Enciso** is a professor of literacy, literature, and equity studies at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on imagination in sociocultural theory and the ways youth and teachers mediate story worlds through literary reading, drama, and storytelling.

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