

April 2019

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Catherine Compton-Lilly
University of South Carolina

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Recommended Citation

Compton-Lilly, Catherine (2019) "Being Child-Centered and Focusing on Children: A Longitudinal Case Study," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 51: Iss. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol51/iss3/10>

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Being Child-Centered and Focusing on Children: A Longitudinal Case Study

by Catherine Compton-Lilly, Ph.D.

“Whole child,” “child-centered,” “child-study,” and “kid-watching” (e.g., Calkins, 1983; Goodman, 1978; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Noddings, 2005)—all of these phrases focus on children. As educators, it is hard not to focus on children. While standards, textbooks, testing, and curriculum often compete for our attention, we ultimately teach the children and it is the children who drive our work and keep us coming back to our classrooms. This paper explores what it means to know children. Specifically, I draw on data from a longitudinal study that is currently in its eleventh year to examine the development of literacy and literate ways of being over time for children in immigrant families. I utilize a methodology, outlined by Wortham and Reyes (2015), to explore how one child, Adam, presents and depicts himself across modalities and across time. Through this exploration, I explore Adam’s sense-making and how he uses literacy and other communicative modalities to present himself across time (Compton-Lilly, 2014, 2017).

Understanding how children come to view themselves as readers, writers, students, and people is important for teachers. Schools often fail to recognize and honor the longitudinal emergence of children’s identities and ways of being. For example, as grade levels frame time according to grade level and when children move from grade to grade, relationships with former teachers are often severed. This is even more true when children move from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. Very few adults have longitudinal knowledge of individual children. These understandings are particularly important for children who have been historically underserved by American schools. For immigrant children who often bring different languages, cultural backgrounds, and educational experiences to classrooms, forming and maintaining relationships with adults can be even more precarious.



**Catherine
Compton-Lilly, Ph.D.**

In this article, I consider the longitudinal experiences of Adam, a young man from a Muslim Moroccan family living in the American Midwest. I have followed Adam through Grade 11, but only address Grades 1 through 7 in this article. Specifically, I ask how Adam represents himself through drawing, writing, and talk.

Mapping Represented Identities

In our research, we are following nine children from early elementary school, through middle school. Each year, we invite them to draw a picture of themselves and answer interview questions about literacy, schooling, and themselves. In addition, we invite parents and other family members to share their thoughts about the children’s school and literacy experiences.

While Wortham and Reyes (2015) focused on the language used in classrooms, I draw on a multimodal data set that includes not only talk, but also Adam’s drawings and writing. I use their framework, which attends to spatial, temporal, and personal elements of representation (Table 1). Specifically, I ask how Adam locates himself in time and space. Consonant with “child-study” and “child-centered” approaches, I focus on who Adam is and how he presents himself. Thus, the events that I link together in this article, are moments of self-depiction as Adam moved through school.

Table 1

Framework for Analyzing Classroom Language Usage (adapted from Wortham & Reyes, 2015)

Analysis Type	Definition
Spatial Analysis	Spatial analysis attends to information about place. In spoken or written language, this includes words and phrases such as <i>here</i> , <i>there</i> , <i>next door</i> , or <i>at school</i> .
Temporal Analysis	Temporal analysis attends to temporal language: <i>now</i> , <i>then</i> , <i>after</i> , or <i>last month</i> .
Personal Analysis	Personal analysis often attends to pronouns—I, you, them, she—but also references to himself in relation to others (i.e., <i>the other kids at school</i>).

Adam's Presentation of Self

When asked to draw a self-portrait in Grades 1 and 2, Adam waxed philosophical in both his drawing and his writing. In Grade 1, he portrayed himself looking straight out of the paper. He located himself in Morocco surrounded by a sunny sky filled with birds (Figure 1). He spoke about his grandmother and explained that “she died and right now she is with Allah.” He wrote in first-person:

“I am looking at the sckieey and I meyde a smy-myas in eid and I am hipp in Eid.”
(I am looking at the sky and I made a smile in Eid and I am happy in Eid.)



Figure 1. Grade 1: Adam's self-portrait.

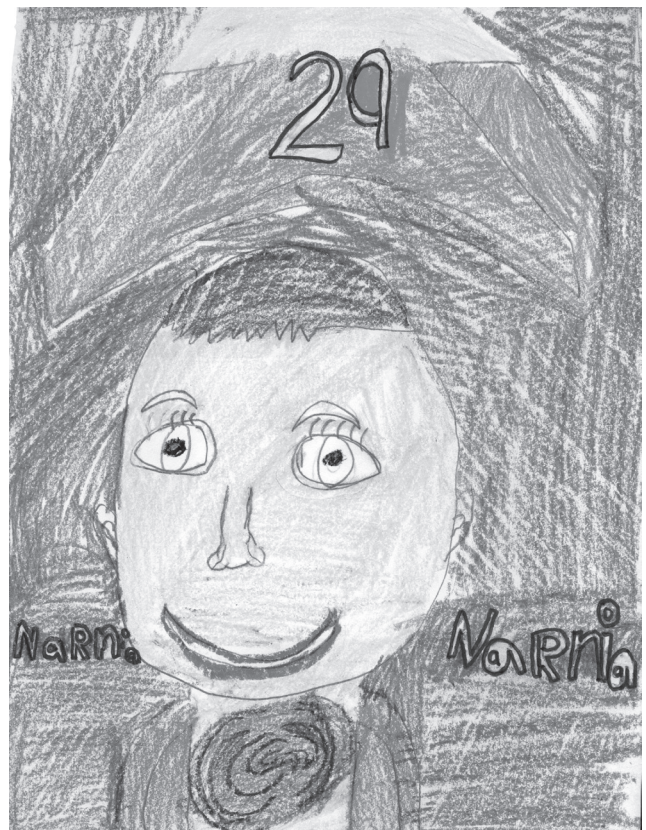


Figure 2. Grade 2: Adam's self-portrait.

In Grade 2, Adam continued to adopt a celestial focus. Adam again depicted himself staring out from the page. The insignia and number from his basketball uniform floats over his head and references to his favorite book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, flank his face (Figure 2). His writing is again ephemeral:

Onse I was playing in the clouds. I was in my basketBall soet. I was flipping.
(Once I was playing in the clouds. I was in my basketball suit. I was flipping.)

In Grade 3, Adam's face and shoulders again consume the entire page (Figure 3). When asked to talk about his picture, Adam explained, "This is me when I am happy." Across the three self-portraits, Adams uses the indexical "I" to present joyful feelings.

Grade 1 - I am looking, I made a smile, I am happy in Eid.
Grade 2 - I was playing, I was in my basketball suit, I was flipping.
Grade 3 - This is me when I am happy.



Figure 3. Grade 3: Adam's self-portrait.

While the Grade 3 self-portrait contained few clues about Adam's identity and interests, he proudly reported that he was a good artist. A few minutes later he told me that he had "messed up," although his

drawing looked perfectly fine to me. He then compared himself to his cousin, who he reported could "draw a picture almost like a camera took the picture." Adam rationalized this by explaining that his cousin was "a teenager though."

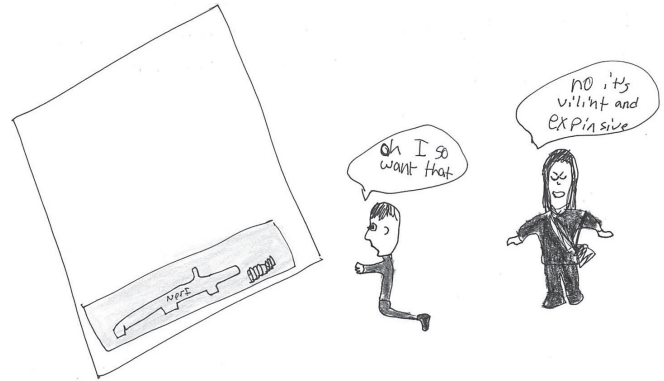


Figure 4. Grade 4: Adam's self-portrait.

Adam's Grade 4 portrait is very different from his earlier depictions. Rather than expressing childhood joy, Adam's portrait and talk reflect his everyday life. His pictures moved from dreamy ephemeral depictions that evoke his deceased grandmother to depictions of lived events. Unlike his earlier images, his fourth-grade image consumes only a small portion of the paper, yet it presents a more complete and connected narrative. Adam has drawn himself and his mother at a local toy store (Figure 4). Adam is kneeling in front of a toy sniper rifle while his mother stands nearby dressed in her Burka. Speech bubbles capture their reported speech with Adam saying, "Oh, I so want that" and his mother responding "No, it's vilint [violent] and expin-sive [expensive]."

Underneath the self-portrait, Adam has written a slightly different account of the picture, writing:

This is a rifle sniper im looking at that day I was really looking into buying it but my mom said no and I said next time she said maby.

(This is a rifle sniper I'm looking at that day. I was really looking into buying it, but my mom said "No" and I said "Next time?" She said "Maybe.")

Interestingly the speech bubbles in the illustration do

not match the reported speech when Adam wrote about this picture. In the captioned illustration, there was no “maybe” or “next time.” When I asked Adam if he drew himself on his knees because he was begging for the gun, Adam responded, “No, I was on my knees looking for the best one that like had a good box and stuff. Cause the ones that have ripped bags, [sometimes] something [is] inside could be gone.” He then laughed and added, “[I] was also begging.”



Figure 5. Grade 5: Adam's self-portrait.

In Grade 5, Adam produced another full body pose of himself this time standing next to a soccer ball in front of goal posts (Figure 5). Once again, he has drawn his team logo on his shirt. The depiction is detailed with spiky hair and cleats on his shoes. The sun shines down from the upper right-hand corner of the picture. Portraits from the next two years are headshots. In Grade 6, he is again wearing an athletic shirt with the team emblem over his heart, but is no longer smiling as he was in earlier pictures (Figure 6). He has written:

I'm from Morocco and I'm very athletic. I love to run and play sports my favorite sport is soccer and



Figure 6. Grade 6: Adam's self-portrait.

running. I love to play video games and hang out with my friends. My favorite animal is a horse I love to ride them. I love to read the Qur'an and memorize.

Unlike Adam's earlier writing in which he describes his joyful actions, *looking* and *playing*, this time Adam chains together a series of I-statements. He focuses on activities that he enjoys: running, playing sports and video games, hanging out with friends, riding horses, and the Qur'an. While in the picture Adam is again wearing his soccer uniform, his accompanying talk references a vast range of physical activities and activities that involve friends, which includes those from his Qur'anic studies classes who will continue to emerge as his primary circle of friends.

In Grade 7, Adam drew only a disembodied head surrounded by a dark background (Figure 7). Together the dark color and his serious expression have a decidedly somber effect. His writing remains upbeat and is again



PTRI Adam #3
Seed

Figure 7. Grade 7: Adam's self-portrait.

filled with I-statements as he references being from Morocco, his best friend, and his middle school classes (Figure 8). He explains, "I don't play any sports at the moment because it's 'winter', but I am going to start snowboarding again soon!"

Adam's Configurations of Self

A longitudinal lens allows us to consider Adam across time. Through his words, drawings, and writing we observe the marvelous and intriguing ways in which Adam presents himself. Across time, he presents himself in different ways and highlights various dimensions of himself using words, images, and writing. We witness how he locates himself spatially, temporally, and personally.

As a young child, we witness Adam presenting himself in the ephemeral space of his native Morocco, surrounded by the ocean, birds, and the spirit of his grandmother. The depiction has an ephemeral quality created by the sun and sky. Adam not only identifies

MY name is Adam I am
a 12 year old boy from Morocco.
My best friend is (friend's name) (he was
my best friend from a long time. This year
I'm in 7th grade at (school name)
Middle School I have eight class periods
(1 La, 2 SS, 3 math, 4 math, 5 unified arts, lunch, 6 French,
7 reading, 8 science.) I don't have a favorite
class because they are all equally the
same. School is not that hard. I don't
play any sports at the moment
because it's "winter", but I am going
to start snowboarding again soon! and
that all about Adam 2015 (its almost
2016)!

Figure 8. Grade 7: Adam's self-portrait writing.

the holiday, Eid, but assures me that his grandmother is now with Allah. Adam is engaged and agential; he is looking, smiling, and happy. Adam uses I-statements to describe himself looking up at the sky during a “happy” celebration of Eid. As he reflects on his picture, he

remembers his grandmother. The picture presents more of a feeling than a story. There is no plot, no tension, merely the trees, birds, and the shining sun. This depiction is analyzed using the framework in Table 2.

Table 2

Analysis of Adam's Portrait and Writing, Grade 1

Grade 1 Self-Portrait	Message	Contextualizations
Spatial Location	Adam's face with trees and birds in the background	In Morocco on a beach
Temporal Location	Celebration of Eid	Located during the Muslim holiday of Eid; His Grandmother is “now” with Allah
Personal Location	“I am looking at the sckieey/sky and I meyde a smymyas/smile in eid and I am hipp in Eid.”	I am looking. . . I made. . . I am. . . Agential first-person accounts

Over time Adam's depictions turn to everyday life. He tells the story of a recent visit to a toy store. Adam describes the “sniper rifle” that he wants and admits that he might have been begging his mother. Adam's mother declines his request.

Adam uses “I” to situate himself in the story and use “my mom” to reference his mother. The writing that Adam did once his picture was complete was notably less harsh than his speech bubbles; Adam remained hopeful that she would say “yes” next time. This

Table 3

Analysis of Adam's Portrait and Writing, Grade 4

Grade 4 Self-Portrait	Message	Contextualizations
Spatial Location	In a store	Store is represented by the shelf on which the sniper rifle is located
Temporal Location	“that day. . .” “Next time?” She said “Maybe.”	Past and future, being described from a location in the present
Personal Location	“I” “my mom” “She”	Pronouns used in telling an informal narrative

abbreviated narrative presents a situation and a resolution—the beginnings of a true narrative account. This is the first time Adam depicts himself engaging with other people. See Table 3 for analysis.

By middle school, few clues are provided about spatial location. Temporally the portrait is located in the present with a concluding temporal reference to the upcoming new year; Adam writes, it will “soon be 2016.” While he references himself within time, Adam

does not connect the flow of time to his development or his future aspirations. Adam presents a fact-based account of himself. We learn the name of his best friend and his school, he tells us what classes he is taking and diplomatically describes himself as liking all his classes. Finally, he presents himself as capable student by assuring me that his classes are not too hard. His interest in sports has moved from team sports to recreational sports, including horseback riding and snowboarding. For analysis, see Table 4.

Table 4

Analysis of Adam’s Portrait and Writing, Grade 7

Grade 7 Self-Portrait	Message	Contextualizations
Spatial Location	No background, no objects are presented	Place is not established; in the drawing, the focus is on Adam’s face only; the style is serious
Temporal Location	“My name is. . .” “I am. . .” “I have. . .” “my best friend from a long time” “I am going to start snowboarding again soon.” He notes that it is 2015 and will soon be 2016	Most of Adam’s writing addresses the present; Past is referenced in his longstanding friendship; Future is referenced in his plans to start snowboarding soon and in the coming new year;
Personal Location	“My best friend. . .”	Only Adam’s best friend is referenced as “he”

Conclusions

This longitudinal analysis does not discuss Adam as a reader. We do not learn what level he reads at or whether or not his writing meets grade level standards. Instead, Adam is presented as the young Moroccan, Muslim, sports fan growing up in the Midwest United States. He tells us about things that matter to him—his family, religion, interests, friends, school, and sports. I argue that while knowing children as readers and writers is important, it is perhaps even more important to know children as people.

Being “child-centered,” is an aspiration for many teachers. We care deeply about our students. We have their best interests at heart; and we want to see them thrive and become successful young adults. I have been honored to witness Adam as he emerges into a delightful young man who strives to do well in school, enjoys his classes, and explores new interests and activities as he moves into adolescence. Significantly, Adam’s becoming that I describe in this article is very different from the development that is often over-emphasized in schools. These are important noticings. In this paper, watching

Adam mature is not about standards, grade levels, test scores, and covering curriculum. It is about knowing Adam as a person and attending to the multimodal and enacted ways of being that make Adam who he is.

Over time, we witness changes in the amount and the type of information that he shares, his use of multiple modalities to convey thoughts, ideas, and experiences, and changes in his interests and values. In this article, my goal has been to re-direct our gaze to children. Educators have referred to this stance as the “whole child,” “child-centered,” “child-study,” and “kid-watching” (e.g., Calkins, 1983; Goodman, 1978; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Noddings, 2005). Adam’s case helps us to take our focus off standards, textbooks, testing, and curriculum and return to focusing on children. All children, including Adam, bring much more to classrooms than their academic abilities. By focusing on Adam as a person, we gain insights into his interests, dreams, and passions, which are significant considerations if we aspire to help all children learn.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Catherine Compton-Lilly teaches courses in literacy studies and works with professional development schools at the University of South Carolina. She has a passion for helping teachers to support children in learning to read and write. Her interests include examining how time operates as a contextual factor in children’s lives as they progress through school and construct their identities as students and readers. Dr. Compton-Lilly is the author/editor of several books and has published widely in educational journals. She can be reached at comptonlilly@sc.edu.

