

Children Watching (and Seeing) Each Other: A Lesson on Black Aliveness

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Abstract: In the post-COVID era, many early educational stakeholders have expressed worry over children's loss of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) opportunities, with hopes to correct for this through formal instruction. However, in this paper we invited children to interpret a video of their own play and we observed the emotional labor that they engaged in, especially through their ability to take on the perspective of other group members. This emotional labor, which we call *relationality*, appeared to be especially humanizing for Quentin, a Black boy, and the ways that he played and engaged with others. This work hopes to recognize the SEL resources that children already bring to school, and offer an example of how these resources show their ability to see one another.

Introduction

In the COVID-19 era, many early educational stakeholders feared Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) "loss" caused by a sudden shift to remote learning (Chen & Krieger, 2023). While some efforts have focused on formal SEL curricula that might help children "catch up", we argue that this perspective on children and childhood is potentially harmful. Viewing SEL instruction through this deficit lens insinuates that we are both viewing children as the "future problems" that they will become (Du Bois, 2015; Dumas, 2016), *and* dismissing the experiences that children have *outside of* the structured classroom (Chen & Krieger, 2023).

This study focuses on a group of first-grade students who, as part of a larger project, were invited to view video of themselves engaging in playful mathematical activities. As mathematics education researchers, we selected a video that we had found mathematically interesting, but wondered how students *in the video* might interpret this same episode (Vescio, in press). We found that the students expressed a natural inclination to take up emotional labor (Ruiz, 2024), particularly *relationality* (Quashie, 2021), offering a counter narrative to the egocentric child (Templeton, 2021) with pandemic-related emotional intelligence delays. Secondly, we began noticing the ways that Quentin, a Black boy in this focus group, and his ways of engaging mathematically were humanized by his peers. Therefore, we ask: While viewing video of themselves, how did first-grade students make sense of Quentin's play, particularly in ways that were humanizing?

Literature review

Concern with Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL), particularly in early childhood contexts, is long-standing (Denham & Brown, 2010). Zins and Elias (2007) describe SEL as children's "capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others" (p. 234). More particularly, most SEL scholarship draws on the CASEL (2003) model, which identifies five key components of SEL: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and self-management. SEL research has sought to establish ways of improving children's enactment of these five components (e.g., Al-Jbouri, 2023) and linking SEL skills to increased academic achievement (e.g., Denham et al, 2014). The perspective taken in much of this work is that the primary goal of SEL is to align children's behaviors with the goals of adults. For example, Denham and Brown (2010) write that SEL supports "children's success in social relationships and personal well-being" (p. 652); however, they go on to focus on the potential of SEL to improve academic success, including a six-page literature review of the links between academic success and each SEL component. Furthermore, Jones et al. (2023) argue that many SEL interventions are lacking in their cultural responsiveness, leaving out Black boys in particular. These interventions have also been criticized as sites in which whiteness is uplifted as the norm for ideal social interactions (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). From this perspective, there is a risk that Black children enter classrooms already pre-identified or inherently positioned as "problems" (DuBois, [1903] 2015) that must be fixed through direct instruction of social skills through a white lens.

In contrast, Ruiz (2023) proposes an alternative way of looking at children's social and emotional interactions. Rather than identifying skills that adults must help children develop to contribute to children's later success, she describes children's relational work in the classroom as "emotional labor," acknowledging that children are already using skills, like social awareness and self-management, and that they do this for reasons beyond pleasing adults or achieving academic success. She writes, "Children can use emotional labor to gain respect, comradery, and following from their peers" (Ruiz, 2023, p. 9). In the following analysis, we take up this perspective as we explore children's analysis of their own free play with a focus on the relational sensemaking children enacted to understand Quentin, a Black boy in this small group who is often positioned by teachers as disruptive.

Theoretical frame

To explore the ways that the children's sensemaking proved especially humanizing for Quentin, we draw from Kevin Quashie's (2021) concept of *Black Aliveness*. Critical scholars have questioned the ways we study Black people, which often necessitate their death or marginalization (e.g., McKittrick, 2021). In *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being*, Quashie (2021) uses the aesthetic practices in literature to reimagine a world where Blackness and death are not inextricably tied. Quashie describes *Black Aliveness* as a quality that "assumes being," (p.2) of Black people and Black life. Using literature primarily from Black women writers and thinkers, he grounds the act of *Black Aliveness* in the concept of *relationality*, or the ability of a person to see themselves as connected to Blackness, Black people, and Black stories. Instead of treating it as "some other thing," to cast judgment on, a commitment to Black Aliveness shows a willingness to orient yourself toward Blackness in ways that seek relation above all else (Quashie, 2021).

A part of this (re)orientation as humans and researchers involves understanding Blackness as being specific, but not exclusive (Quashie, 2021). In other words, if we treat Blackness as exclusive, then presuppose the death, marginalization, pain, helplessness of Black people, it removes our ability and desire to relate to Blackness, and to therefore see Black people's full humanity. Quashie's work displays the messiness of finding Black life in an anti-Black society, and shows that the work is not to ignore Black pain, but to also recognize the existence of Black movement, living, and being more wholistically.

The following analysis in an early elementary math context seeks to add onto this theoretical framework by offering empirical examples of children engaged in relational work with one Black boy's play, and the ultimately humanizing space it created for him in a mathematics classroom, because of their ability to see, understand, and validate Quentin as he exists in mathematical play spaces. In taking up Quashie's theory, we position this work both as an empirical contribution and a theoretical exploration into more humanizing and child-centric orientations towards Socio-Emotional Learning.

Methods

This analysis was borne out of a larger study on playful mathematics classrooms in a public charter school in the southeastern United States. As part of the larger study, we regularly filmed participating kindergarten and first-grade students as they engaged in play-based mathematics activities. For this analysis, we selected one video clip in particular, which we refer to as the *Shape Magnets* video, featuring four students engaged in a free-play session from their kindergarten year: Brooklynn, Laura, Max, and Quentin (see Table 1 for participant information). In kindergarten, these four students were tablemates and often engaged in math play together, and in first grade, Quentin, Max, and Brooklynn remained classmates, but Laura was placed in a different class. However, this school is relatively small, with about 60-75 students per grade, therefore they were likely to have daily formal interactions inside of the classroom and informal interactions in spaces like during recess, lunch, field trips, etc.

Table 1
Participant Information

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Grade-Level in Video	Grade-Level during Interview
Brooklynn	Black	Girl	Kindergarten (September)	First Grade (March)
Laura	White	Girl	Kindergarten (September)	First Grade (March)
Max	Latino	Boy	Kindergarten (September)	First Grade (March)
Quentin	Black	Boy	Kindergarten (September)	First Grade (March)

During the Kindergarten episode, students played with shape magnets, using them to construct 3-D structures and frequently engaging in rich mathematical inquiry. For example, the four students debated the number of levels that Laura had built with her shape magnets tower (Excerpt 1). 18 months later, at the end of their first-grade year, Jamie (Author 2) interviewed these four children by inviting them to watch the video and act as interpreters of their own behavior (Harcourt, 2011; Lange & Mierendorff, 2011; O’Farrelly, 2021). These video-elicited interviews were first conducted with each child individually, using visual methods adapted from previous research (Luttrell, 2010; Luttrell, 2016; Clark, 2004). In these interviews, the student and interviewer watched the *Shape Magnets* video and each child was invited to pause the video to initiate discussion. After individual interviews, a focus group interview was conducted with all four students as they again watched the *Shape Magnets* video, this time together.

Excerpt 1

Original Shape Magnets Video

- 1 Max Dude, this is a tall—it’s a tall building! *[Looks at rocket and smiles]*.
- 2 Brooklynn It’s a toy rocket! *[Walks around Laura, touches top of rocket, and smiles. Returns to seat]*.
- 3 Max Wait so it has levels? *[Gestures at rocket]*. The building has levels! One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. *[Points to each level of rocket, then pauses]*. Eight. *[Points to roof]*. Eight levels! This thing has eight levels! *[Looks at Quentin and smiles]*.
- 4 Brooklynn It’s eight levels cause it’s a hotel. *[Looks at rocket]*.
- 5 Quentin One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. *[Touches each level of rocket, excluding roof, for each counted number]*. Seven levels! *[Looks at Max]*.
- 6 Max I thought it was eight levels. *[Looks at Quentin]*.
- 7 Brooklynn You’re counting too much. *[Walks around Laura to rocket]*. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. *[Touches each level of rocket, including roof, for each counted number]*.
- 8 Laura No that’s the roof. *[Touches roof]*. There’s no layer to the roof. *(Turns to face other students)*.
- 9 Brooklynn The roof don’t count. *[Looks down at table]*.

We reviewed transcripts of the individual and focus group interviews, indexing episodes in which children demonstrated perspective taking. In line with our theoretical framework, we later narrowed these episodes down to instances specifically featuring Quentin. We then crafted memos about these videos, exploring how children related to Quentin’s activities. Below, we highlight four episodes in which Brooklynn, Laura, and Max humanized Quentin in their sense-making, particularly in ways that reflected *relationality*.

On Quentin as the analytical focus

For the purposes of this analysis, we focus our lens on the ways in which Quentin’s peers expressed relationality to his story and way of being in a mathematical play space. Our focus on Quentin stems from his positioning by adults at school as behaviorally challenging. Quentin could be described as both highly social and mobile. In small-group playful contexts, like in the Shape Magnet activity, his consistent efforts to connect with others in his class was easily seen as legitimate participation. But in whole-group lessons, he was often dismissed and labeled as disruptive. Ultimately, his behavior proved so “disruptive” that he was moved mid-year to a new kindergarten classroom. Though he did well in his new classroom, his reputation followed him to first grade, when this secondary analysis of the shape magnet video took place.

Though Quentin carried an exogenous reputation from adults as a troublemaker, there is evidence to suggest that this same characterization did not affect his peers. More generally, across the project, Quentin can be seen inviting his classmates in to generative mathematical play, encouraging collaboration, and successfully sharing with others. Specifically in relation to the focal group in this study, Brooklynn has been observed in the classroom specifically requesting to be Quentin’s partner. When Laura watched the *Shape Magnets* video for this study, she identified the ways in which Quentin was “being nice” to her, through his ability and willingness to share and solve problems as they related to her creation. Therefore, Quentin does not seemingly experience the same degree of labelling and dismissal amongst peers as he does adults.

Findings

In her work on visual methods with young children, Templeton (2021) challenges traditional perspectives of children, writing, “The notion—often an abstracted and watered-down understanding of the preoperational stage of Piaget’s theory—that children are ‘egocentric’ and thus overfocused on themselves and their own interests, is contested in and through these children’s images and narratives” (p. 10). Throughout Brooklynn, Laura, Max, and Quentin’s interviews, we too recognized a ‘talking back’ to this narrow view of children, particularly as Brooklynn, Laura, and Max remained open to taking on Quentin’s perspectives and stories in the *Shape Magnets* video.

Laura: “Because he thought mine was really big and he thought that wasn’t fair.”

One of Laura’s first observations was a clip featuring Quentin as he contested the number of shapes that she had used for her tower (see Excerpt 2). Repeating what she heard Quentin say in the video, Laura restated, “She’s got too much” (turn 1). As we paused the video to discuss her noticing, she went on to explain his reasoning (Figure 1): “Because he thought mine was really big and he thought that wasn’t fair,” (turn 5). As she elaborated, she defended the unequal distribution of resources, explaining that it was necessary for her to create a large tower so that all of her “plants could have their own space” (turns 5-9). Despite this justification, though, her initial perspective taking of Quentin demonstrated an openness to his story of fairness, in addition to her own.

Excerpt 2

Laura’s Discussion of Quentin and Fairness

- 1 Laura “She’s got too much.”
- 2 Jamie What’d you say about too much?
- 3 Laura Um no [Quentin] said that.
- 4 Jamie Why do you think he said that?
- 5 Laura Because he thought mine was really big and he thought that wasn’t fair, but that was fair because I was building a garden house. And it was really big so like the plants could have their own space. Like flowers could go, tomatoes can go. Like I can make some red [*looks through shape magnets*]. I could use reds. [*Holds up red shape magnets*]. These type of triangles and put them as tomatoes. Use these for I don’t know like sunflowers. [*Holds up yellow shape magnets*].
- 6 Jamie Yeah.
- 7 Laura If it was taller everything could have their own space.
- 8 Jamie Oh, I see.
- 9 Laura If it’s smaller not everything could have their own space.

Brooklynn: “Probably he’s making you think...”

During her own one-on-one interview, Brooklynn also demonstrated openness to Quentin’s story, this time finding amusement in how he named his creations (see Excerpt 3). Throughout the video, Quentin frequently renamed his creation, at first calling it a race car as he playfully exclaimed, “Ohhhh race car!” Later, Quentin switched his creation to a “bus” in response to a disagreement between him and Laura over who should have a particular shape magnet, to which he explained, “I need it for my bus!” Noticing this switch during her interview, Brooklynn wondered about Quentin’s thought-process. She made three conjectures: (1) “Probably he’s making you think,” (turn 9), (2) “He’s tryna get one of them,” (turn 11), and (3) “Every kind of car he has in mind he has to name it,” (turn 16). In this first conjecture, she reasoned that Quentin wanted the other students to “think.” Similarly, in her second conjecture, she suggested a strategic nature to Quentin’s switching, in that he was perhaps naming different cars so that he could gain access to different shape magnets. Finally, in her third explanation, Brooklynn speculated that Quentin simply had different cars in mind when playing with his shape magnets. Overall, these three conjectures suggested not only an openness to Quentin’s actions, but a desire to fully capture his reasoning (see Figure 2).

Excerpt 3

Brooklynn’s Noticing of Quentin’s Cars

- 1 Brooklynn Quentin made a car. And a race car. And a chicken in a race car.
- 2 Jamie Chicken in a race car!
- 3 Brooklynn Why is everything in a car?

- 4 Jamie I don't know that's a good question.
- 5 Brooklynn ...
- 6 Jamie At first he said a normal car, now he said a race car, now he's saying a school bus.
- 7 Brooklynn What do you think about that?
- 8 Jamie Because first he said a normal car, then he said a race car, now he's saying a bus.
- 9 Jamie Yeah that's a lot of different things, isn't it?
- 10 Brooklynn Probably he's making you think and then he's gonna switch up the names.
- 11 Jamie Yeah.
- 12 Brooklynn Like every minute. Probably every second when he's tryna get one of them and they're talking too, he's probably gonna make like a name. It kinda looks like a house with like a mini garage and then like the thing which you can cling your all of the scooters on it.
- 13 Jamie What makes you think that?
- 14 Brooklynn Because he's saying a lots of cars. And it makes me confused.
- 15 ...
- 16 Brooklynn He told you. I told you he's saying a race car. He's saying different stuff!
- 17 Jamie He's saying different stuff? Why do you think he's doing that?
- 18 Brooklynn I don't know. He's saying stuff and stuff and stuff and stuff and stuff and stuff and stuff and stuff. Every kind of car where he has in mind he has to name it.

Max: "What are you doing, Quentin?"

Finally, the children's perspective taking of Quentin also extended to his mathematical reasoning. For instance, Max spent significant time in his interview attempting to understand Quentin's counting strategy in the *Shape Magnets* video (see Excerpt 4). Following an episode in the video in which Quentin had counted seven levels to Laura's tower, Max paused the video in disagreement, "That's not seven that's six. But why is there blue on the bottom?" (turn 1). Taking a closer look at the Laura's tower in the video, he reasoned that perhaps Quentin had counted the blue piece twice: "He counted the blue two times" (turn 5) (see Figure 3). While it would have been easy for Max to simply label Quentin's counting as 'wrong,' he instead remained open to Quentin's counting as he sought to understand how he had reached seven.

Excerpt 4

Max's Discussion of Quentin's Counting

- 1 Max What are you doing Quentin? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven [*counts levels of Laura's tower in the video*]. That's not seven that's six. But why is there blue on the bottom?
- 2 Jamie I don't know. So I heard you say, "What are you doing Quentin?" Can you talk to me about why you said that?
- 3 Max Yeah because he was counting the wrong steps.
- 4 Jamie He was what?
- 5 Max He was saying, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven," but there's only six because one, two, like one, two, three, four, five, six [*counts levels of Laura's tower in the video*]. But he was like, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven." He counted the blue two times.
- 6 Jamie Oh okay so what did you what do you think was happening there when he was counting?
- 7 Max He missed—no counted the blue two times.

Figure 1

Laura Justifies Her Tower's Height



Figure 2

Brooklynn Considers Quentin's Car



Figure 3

Max Counts with Quentin



Focus Group: “So you’re making me my garage?”

In this final episode we highlight the children’s *relationality*, or openness to encountering and connecting to Quentin. This was especially evident in the focus group interview, during which all four students viewed the *Shape Magnets* video together. While watching the video, Brooklynn first shared that she and Laura were “building each other’s houses” (see Excerpt 5) (turn 1); however, following Quentin’s questioning (turn 5), she took up his bid and switched her creation to a garage that she had built for him (turn 7). Perhaps most interestingly, given the nearly two-year gap in between the filming of the *Shape Magnets* video and the children’s viewing of it, Brooklynn went on to say, “Because I remember Quentin asking me, ‘Make me a garage’” (turn 13), suggesting that she sought to connect to Quentin in this moment. This resulted in both comments from Laura and Max about their own garages (turns 12-16), as well as a compliment from Quentin: “I liked how you build my garage” (turn 22). Taking up this compliment, Brooklynn even went on to remark about a shape magnet that she *wished* she had had so that Quentin could “press the button” and “drive in the garage” (turn 25).

Excerpt 5

Brooklynn’s Negotiation of Her Creation in Relation to Quentin

- | | | |
|----|-----------|---|
| 1 | Brooklynn | Me and Laura was building each other's houses. |
| 2 | Laura | Well we— |
| 3 | Quentin | Wait I think— |
| 4 | Jamie | Okay go ahead. What's your question? Now we're gonna ask each other questions. |
| 5 | Quentin | So was you building a pool and she was building a little house thing? Cause it look like that could go with it and like a house and a pool outside [<i>points to Brooklynn and Laura's creations in the video</i>]. |
| 6 | Jamie | What do you think Brooklynn? |
| 7 | Brooklynn | I was making a garage. |
| 8 | Jamie | You were making a garage? |
| 9 | Quentin | Oh now I understand. |
| 10 | Jamie | That was a great question Quentin. |
| 11 | Quentin | And I have one more thing. |
| 12 | Max | Yeah it looks like my dad's garage. |
| 13 | Brooklynn | Because I remember Quentin asking me, “Make me a garage.” |
| 14 | Laura | It looks like my dad's garage. |
| 15 | Quentin | Oh okay. |
| 16 | Laura | But my dad's garage is completely empty! |
| 17 | Quentin | So you're making me my garage. |
| 18 | Jamie | Does anyone else have any— |
| 19 | Quentin | And then Max comes in and breaks my garage. |
| 20 | Laura | You don't even have a garage! |
| 21 | Jamie | Does anyone else have a question for Brooklynn? |
| 22 | Quentin | Um I liked how you build my garage cause I like my garage she built for me cause I like my garage. |
| 23 | Brooklynn | I wish that I you know those little straight lines where we got for the shape magnets? |
| 24 | Jamie | Yeah. |
| 25 | Brooklynn | I was I was finding that so then Quentin can press the button and then the thang can go down and he can drive in the garage. |

Discussion and conclusion

By focusing on the ways that Quentin labeled is interpreted, even 18 months later, by his peers, this study first shows the ways that children’s emotional labor can be overlooked in narratives about “learning loss” in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, by foregrounding children’s voices, it allows outsiders to see Quentin in a new light, separate from the “troublemaker” label that is often handed down to him by adults. Finally, the children’s relational work served as a source of humanization of the activities of Quentin boy in ways that are synergistic with a framework on *Black Aliveness*. Because his peers are not evaluating his behavior through an adult lens, they were able to *see* Quentin and his activities in ways that aren’t grounded in his “misbehaviors.”

Often, concerns about learning loss, though well meaning, carry with them uncomfortable implications: that schools and classrooms are the only (or most important) spaces of learning, that children do not themselves bring epistemic resources to classrooms, and we therefore must be filled-up with the skills that adults have identified as important, and that time at home is time wasted in the grand scheme of education. In this analysis, we engaged in watching video of students *with* the students who were recorded. We not only found that students whose earliest formal schooling years were impacted by the pandemic brought with them an ability to engage in serious emotional labor, but such labor allowed them to see Quentin, a Black boy and his play, as reasonable, interesting, and mathematical, even in the face of adults who consistently dismiss him as a disruption. While calls to recognize Black people's humanity are relevant and urgent for adults, we witnessed children engaged in this work without prompting as they watched and noticed Quentin's participation in the *Shape Magnet* video.

Black Aliveness is a theoretical framework to reorient Black people and their stories to their life, rather than restricting their stories solely to oppression. Scholars such as Quashie who are skeptical of the deficit framing that often is implied of scholarship on Black people have called for a change in orienting ourselves to Blackness and our Black participants. This study offers a hopeful example of the ways in which four children are engaged in this work as they viewed video of themselves from a previous mathematical play activity. In the episodes described above, we show how children in the group used emotional labor to take on the perspectives of Quentin, allowing us to see empirical examples of peer relationality with Black stories. This emotional labor worked to create a space where Quentin's actions were seen as interesting, relevant, and sensible, which is unlike the perspective many white teachers take on Black boys in their classrooms (Ferguson, 2010; Love, 2014).

What's more, Quentin himself took up these orientations by his peers, suggesting that these moments of humanization functioned both on the part of Brooklynn, Laura, and Max through their *acts of humanizing*, as well as for Quentin through the act of *being humanized*. For example, Quentin took up Brooklynn's invitation to renegotiate the meaning of the shape magnets in the focus group interview, as he shared, "I liked how you build my garage 'cause I like my garage she built for me." This is especially notable given the nearly two-year gap in between the initial filming of the video and the focus group interview. While it is unlikely that Brooklynn and Quentin remembered this kindergarten encounter, their willingness to bend reality towards each other further supports the labor and expertise involved in young children's relational orientations towards one another.

The quote above also exemplifies another point: in highlighting moments of emotional labor of three students that exemplify their relationality to Quentin's story, we do not want to imply that Quentin was a passive recipient of others' labor, or a passive object of humanization in this space. Instead, we want to make clear that these relational practices were being done by all four children to each other, which becomes especially salient in an anti-Black world that consistently tries to put distance between Blackness and ourselves. For example, Quentin frequently engaged in the emotional work of humanizing his peers and their activity throughout his own one-on-one interview, as well as the focus group interview, even going so far as to create entire narratives around the shape magnet designs that his peers had once created in kindergarten. This was most notable during a nearly 3-minute long exchange, in which Quentin made several narrative-based bids to Laura concerning her creation, such as, "I have a question! *Turns to Laura*. Is it a control room in your hotel? Where it control the elevators to go to the first floor?" He similarly inquired about Brooklynn's design as he turned to her and asked, "So was you building a pool and [Laura] was building a little house thing? Cause it look like that could go with it and make a pool outside?" Thus, while we center the present analysis on the humanization of Quentin, given our prior observations of his positioning within mathematics contexts, future work will explore, in greater depth, Quentin's own role in facilitating these humanizing encounters.

We are not arguing that all children engage in this work—or even that these particular children would center relationality in all contexts. We also want to recognize the intersectional nature of the work that we must engage with in more extensive analysis. We fully recognize that Quentin was not the only Black person in this small focus group, and the ways that peers ultimately relate to Quentin and Brooklynn will look different from one another in a longer, more nuanced analysis. Therefore, we do not want to conflate a focus on Quentin's story in this brief analysis as a complete picture of relationality in children's emotional labor that can be theorized through Black Aliveness. Rather, we offer the argument as an existence proof (Flyvbjerg, 2004) that children are already doing important emotional labor in classrooms and that efforts to recognize it, uplift it and learn from it are at least as important as post-pandemic SEL initiatives. Further, we offer this as an example of children engaged seriously in a relational praxis that recognizes and affirms the ways of being for one Black boy that can provide an empirical example of Black Aliveness in the Learning Sciences.

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