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Children Authoring Literacy and Community: A Discourse of Belonging in Elementary Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how young children use language and literacy to co-author belonging in early elementary classrooms that draw on foundations of restorative justice. Grounded in sociocultural and critical perspectives that position literacy as a relational social practice, the study conceptualizes belonging as a literate process through which children make meaning, connect with others, and participate equitably in classroom life. Using sustained classroom observation, video-based interaction analysis, and discourse analysis across three classrooms (Kindergarten–Grade 3), the analysis traces how children's talk, writing, and collaborative storying enacted what is theorized as a Discourse of Belonging. Through three analytic strands, (a) storying selves and others into belonging, (b) embodied and empathic listening, and (c) co-authoring shared literate worlds, the findings illustrate how children used literate actions to negotiate inclusion and agency. These everyday literacy events reveal belonging as an affective stance and a collectively authored literacy practice that enables children to imagine and sustain community. The study contributes to literacy research by demonstrating how discursive and multimodal forms of authorship support equitable participation and a sense of belonging in early learning spaces. Implications emphasize designing early literacy environments that foreground dialogue, empathy, and shared authorship as central dimensions of reading, writing, and learning together.

In education, adult decision makers often do not authentically listen to what young children express about their needs or the harms they experience in schools (Shalaby 2017, 2020). Listening to children requires disrupting systemic inequities and honoring how they resiliently imagine alternate ways of being, relating, and learning. Yet children's innovations are often silenced by standardized curricula and punitive discipline, which, particularly in the United States context, disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and children of Color (Davis 2019; Souto-Manning and Yoon 2018). In early literacy classrooms, this silencing often results in narrow, skills-based instruction with limited space for relational, child-authored practices (Dyson 2013, 2020; Milner IV 2020). These conditions reflect a broader education debt, the cumulative result of systemic inequities and underinvestment in marginalized children (Ladson-Billings 2006; Souto-Manning et al. 2021), mirrored in discipline practices that contribute to the preschool-to-prison pipeline (Allen and White-Smith 2014).

By expanding understandings of literacy as generated by children rather than for them, educators can adopt "stances that support [learners'] goals for articulating their dreams, ideas, and intentions" (Winn 2018, 221). Restorative justice becomes a framework for relational learning and community-building (Davis 2019; Holyoke 2024; Steinitz Holyoke 2022), centering dialogue, responsibility, and repair, that creates learning conditions in which children's voices and relationships matter (Winn et al. 2019). When paired with relational literacies, restorative justice offers a way to examine how children actively participate in the co-construction of meaning and community through

everyday classroom practices (Holyoke 2024). The goal is not to be right, but to make things right (Winn 2018; Vaandering 2010).

This paper contributes to international conversations about early literacy, belonging, and children's participation by examining how young children use language and literacy to negotiate recognition, inclusion, and community within formal educational settings. Situated within early childhood and early literacy research, this study draws on sociocultural, discourse-analytic, and multimodal traditions that conceptualize literacy as a relational social practice shaped through interaction and participation. Rather than treating belonging as a classroom norm or affective outcome, this study attends to how belonging is produced through interaction in everyday literacy events, an important focal area of exploration across diverse educational contexts shaped by linguistic, cultural, and social difference. This grounded theory study builds a theory from the systematic analysis of children's discourse (Charmaz 2014) to examine how children authored a *Discourse of Belonging*.

Literacy research has increasingly recognized that reading and writing are social, multimodal, and relational practices (Dyson 2018; Comber and Woods 2018; Rowsell and Pahl 2007). Within this field, belonging is integral to how children learn to participate, imagine, and communicate. The central question guiding the study is: *How do young children use language and literacy to co-author belonging in early elementary classrooms?* The study argues that children's literacy practices function as community-building efforts that at times resist dominant Discourses of compliance and standardization.

1 | Literature Review

This study is informed by scholarship that privileges the knowledge, identities, and literacy practices of young children, particularly in connection to community, agency, and belonging. The literature reviewed brings together scholarship that positions belonging as relational and interactional, while also drawing on literacy research that conceptualizes participation, recognition, and power as discursively shaped. The literature review brings together three intersecting strands of research, which each position children as active participants in meaning-making and community authorship. Across these strands, literacy is treated as a socially situated practice through which children negotiate participation, recognition, and inclusion in classrooms.

1.1 | Restorative Practices in Early Childhood and Elementary Contexts

Restorative justice, established in Indigenous and First Nations traditions, has been adapted in schools globally to challenge exclusionary policies and foster relational repair (McCluskey et al. 2008; Milner IV et al. 2019). Positioned as an alternative to punitive Zero Tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice emphasizes healing, accountability, and community building. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes restorative justice not only as a disciplinary alternative but also as a relational pedagogy that structures participation, voice, and engagement in classroom learning environments (Holyoke 2024; Parker-Shandal 2022; Lyubansky et al. 2022). From this perspective, restorative justice functions as an infrastructure for learning, shaping how relationships, norms, and belonging are co-constructed through everyday interaction rather than imposed through behavioral compliance.

In early childhood and early elementary settings, circle practices are common tools for sharing, listening, and co-constructing classroom norms (Knight and Wadhwa 2014; Pranis 2005). However, scholars caution that when restorative practices are reduced to procedural routines or isolated social–emotional activities, they risk being disconnected from their broader justice-oriented and relational commitments (Hollweck et al. 2019; Reimer 2020). This distinction is especially salient in early literacy classrooms, where restorative practices often coexist with standardized curricula that narrowly define legitimate participation and success (Steinitz Holyoke 2022).

Although many secondary-level studies have explored restorative literacies (e.g., Winn 2013, 2016), early childhood and early elementary research has more frequently emphasized teacher-led circles and social–emotional outcomes (Kehoe et al. 2018; Hambacher 2018), with limited attention to how children themselves use language, story, and text-making to enact restorative relationships. Scholarship by Ferguson and Dernikos (2023) connects restorative justice to curriculum materiality, analyzing how a commercially produced early literacy program orients discussions of racial injustice. Their study examined a Grade 2 Wit & Wisdom unit and argued that instruction reframes structural injustice as a decontextualized vocabulary concept, emphasizing cognitive word study over explicit engagement with race and lived experience. They conclude that efforts to regulate curriculum in the name of student comfort function as a reorientation toward whiteness. Their analysis highlights how literacy materials can constrain restorative justice possibilities when racialized histories and embodied experiences are reduced to neutralized, rationalized literacy tasks.

Similarly, Reimer's (2020) qualitative case study of a Canadian primary school examines students' experiences within a comprehensive restorative justice approach through the lens of Antonovsky's concept of sense of coherence. Drawing on interviews, observations, and restorative circle practices, Reimer demonstrates how restorative structures contributed to students' experiences of school as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful, highlighting the importance of relational practices in shaping students' sense of belonging and community. This scholarship amplifies the relational and structural dimensions of restorative classrooms; however, less attention has been given to how young children themselves enact belonging through literacy practices in everyday classroom interaction.

Although existing research documents how restorative frameworks shape classroom climate and participation at the level of school culture and instructional design, less is known about how young children use language and literacy to enact belonging, negotiate recognition, and navigate harm and repair through everyday literacies. The present study examines how children

author belonging through storytelling, collaborative composing, and peer interaction, positioning restorative justice as a discursive and relational process enacted by children as they co-author community through literacy.

1.2 | Situated Storytelling and Relational Literacies

Storytelling and composing are foundational literacy practices through which young children build identity, negotiate relationships, and participate in peer cultures (Boyd et al. 2018; Bustamante et al. 2018; Gallas 1992). In early childhood and early elementary classrooms, storytelling unfolds through writing, drawing, gesture, and play, situating literacy as a multimodal and socially organized practice rather than solely an individual act (Wohlwend 2015). Within peer cultures, children use storytelling and composing to negotiate meaning, position themselves and others, and make claims to participation and belonging (Flynn 2016; Wright et al. 2013).

Although this body of research foregrounds children's social meaning-making, less attention has been given to theorizing belonging itself as a discursive accomplishment within literacy interaction. Ethnographic and discourse-analytic studies of early writing demonstrate that children use composing as relational work, establishing recognition, negotiating inclusion, and shaping participation within classroom communities (Dyson 2018, 2019, 2024). Dyson shows how children's writing circulates among peers as boundary work, influencing whose stories are taken up, transformed, or marginalized and who is recognized as a legitimate participant in classroom life.

Multimodal studies of early writing foreground the embodied dimensions of children's composing. Rowe's (2019) analyses demonstrate how very young children participate in writing through gesture-based actions, such as circling, pointing, and marking that establish joint attention and shared meaning with others. Rowe's work conceptualizes these gestures as socially meaningful participation in writing events, positioning composing as collaborative, performative, and situated rather than seeing it as preparatory or pre-writing behavior.

Critically oriented multimodal scholarship further illuminates how power, access, and recognition are embedded in children's literacy practices. Drawing on mediated discourse and nexus analysis, Wohlwend (2021) conceptualizes literacy as mediated action, embodied interactions with materials that carry histories of expectation about who may act, how, and toward what ends. From this perspective, gesture, object handling, and movement are not peripheral to meaning-making but central sites where participation and legitimacy are negotiated. As Wohlwend explains, "chains of small actions... constitute key literacies... that signal valued ways of making meanings and performing identities" (p. 21), rendering visible how inclusion and exclusion operate through classroom activity. Her work on artifactual literacies demonstrates how objects and texts function as identity texts, sedimenting cultural histories while also offering opportunities for children to take up, revise, or resist dominant narratives through collaborative storytelling and play.

Although research documents the relational, embodied, and multimodal nature of children's composing, it often does not connect this important work with theorizing belonging as a discursive process produced through literacy practices. The present study examines how children's storytelling and composing function as sites where belonging is actively authored, contested, and sustained through interaction, offering a justice-oriented account of composition as relational participation in classroom communities.

1.3 | Literacies of Belonging: Young Children's Agency in Context

Belonging carries many definitions and inconsistencies across scholarship (Allen et al. 2018; Russell and Mantilla-Blanco 2022), but a commonality of defining belonging is a focus on relationships and feelings about school (Allen et al. 2018). Given that literacy practices are embedded in social contexts, identities, and the discursive norms of classroom life (Dyson 2018; Barton and Hamilton 2012; Rowsell and Pahl 2007), it becomes a lens through which to see how belonging, connection, relationships, and emotional wellbeing at school are established, shared, and maintained. Research on literacies of belonging demonstrates that children use language and writing to claim recognition, negotiate participation, and resist exclusion within peer cultures and institutional spaces (Berryman and Eley 2019; Sherbine 2020).

Belonging, thus, is a socially and politically produced experience that emerges through interaction, recognition, and boundary-making practices (Allen et al. 2018; Russell and Mantilla-Blanco 2022; Erwin et al. 2024). Erwin et al. (2024) qualitative review of early childhood belonging scholarship found that much of the literature examines belonging about young children rather than with them, often relying on adult-centered interpretations of children's experiences. Their analysis undergirds how belonging is shaped through intersecting dimensions of identity, peer culture, place, and power, showing that institutional discourses and classroom practices routinely position some children as insiders while producing experiences of unbelonging for others. They conceptualize belonging as relational and shaped by institutional and social power dynamics, emerging through everyday encounters that affirm or constrain children's identities and participation.

The review highlights participatory and child-centered methodologies (e.g., photo-telling, digital storytelling, and peer culture ethnography) that foreground children's perspectives and illustrate how they interpret and negotiate belonging within classroom and community spaces. These findings suggest the need for methodologies that recognize children as active participants in the construction of belonging. When situated within literacy research, this orientation invites attention to how belonging may be enacted through children's talk, storytelling, and meaning-making practices.

Building on this framing, literacy research illustrates how children's agency emerges when their lived experiences are treated as valuable curricular knowledge (Souto-Manning 2010; Ghiso 2011). In one study, first graders used culture circles

to challenge linguistic segregation and build solidarity across difference (Souto-Manning 2010). These studies bring forward enactments of co-authorship, relational responsibility, and the disruption of hierarchical norms, principles that align with restorative and relational pedagogies. These belongings occur interpersonally and with materials in classrooms. Sherbine's (2020) postqualitative study of a second-grade literacy workshop traces how new forms of competence and participation emerge through a child's intra-actions with texts, peers, and materials. Focusing on a child whose literacy practices were often positioned as illegitimate, Sherbine shows how encounters mediated through objects, talk, and affect reconfigured participation and opened space for new ways of being recognized within the literacy workshop.

Belonging is co-constructed through classroom routines, peer practices, and children's invitations to participate meaningfully in literate life (Comber et al. 2017; Comber and Woods 2018). These processes involve boundary-making practices that determine whose stories, languages, and ways of being are recognized. For children historically marginalized by race, language, or class, opportunities to author belonging through literacy are both vital and precarious (Dyson 2018; Berryman and Eley 2019; Russell and Mantilla-Blanco 2022; Sherbine 2020). Literacy becomes a site where children negotiate identity, navigate inclusion and exclusion, and position themselves within contested classroom spaces. Although existing research documents how belonging emerges through interaction, fewer studies examine how belonging is discursively accomplished and sustained over time through children's storytelling and composing practices. This gap points to the need for closer attention to how children actively author, contest, and sustain belonging through literacy practices across everyday classroom interactions.

1.4 | Positioning This Study

Across scholarship on restorative pedagogy, children's storytelling and writing, and literacies of belonging, research consistently demonstrates that literacy is a relational and socially situated practice shaped by power, participation, and recognition. Restorative justice scholarship emphasizes dialogue, relational accountability, and community repair, whereas literacy research documents how children use storytelling and composing to negotiate identity and participation within peer cultures. However, these bodies of work have largely developed in parallel, leaving under-theorized how belonging is produced through children's literacies, particularly in classrooms explicitly oriented toward restorative and relational commitments.

The current study brings these strands into conversation by examining how young children use storytelling, writing, and peer discourse to author, negotiate, and repair belonging in early elementary classrooms. By centering children's discursive and embodied actions, this study extends existing research on peer cultures and relational literacies and offers a theoretically grounded account of belonging as an interactional, justice-oriented literacy accomplishment.

2 | Conceptual Orientations Toward a Grounded Discourse of Belonging

This grounded theory study is informed by sociocultural and critical traditions in early literacy research that conceptualize literacy as a set of social practices shaped through participation, power, and recognition (Barton and Hamilton 2012; Street 2016). These traditions did not function as a priori analytic frameworks but as sensitizing concepts (Charmaz 2014) that oriented analytic attention to how meaning, belonging, and social relations were produced through interaction. The grounded theory was generated inductively from classroom data; these theoretical traditions functioned as interpretive lenses during later stages of analysis rather than as coding frameworks. From this perspective, literacy is treated as a socially situated and interactionally produced practice through which children negotiate identities, relationships, and participation in classroom life. Consistent with this orientation, early childhood is approached as a pedagogical continuum extending into the early elementary years, where literate, relational, and identity practices are co-constructed through everyday activity.

Research in early literacy and childhood studies has demonstrated that young children use talk, storytelling, play, gesture, and embodied action to negotiate participation and membership in peer cultures and classroom life (Corsaro 2005; Dyson 2013; Wohlwend 2011). This work establishes children as active contributors to social meaning-making and provides analytic grounding for attending to children's discursive and embodied actions as consequential sites of participation. Building on this scholarship, the present study examines how children's literacy practices function as mechanisms through which social relations are organized, contested, and repaired. In doing so, the study aligns with scholarship that examines how alternative relational arrangements are enacted in practice, alongside critiques of structural constraint, foregrounding children's capacities to design and sustain relational possibilities through literacy (Kirkland 2025).

2.1 | Restorative Justice as a Relational Framework for Literacy

Restorative justice is conceptualized in this study as a relational framework for teaching and learning rather than solely as an alternative disciplinary approach (Winn 2018; Vaandering 2010). From a restorative perspective, community is sustained through dialogue, relational accountability, and collective responsibility for addressing harm and repairing relationships (Vaandering 2010; Winn 2018). This orientation centers voice, participation, and shared authorship of norms as valued in classroom life. When brought into conversation with sociocultural theories of literacy, restorative justice provides a framework for understanding literacy as an ethical and relational practice through which children participate in the co-construction of community. Within this study, a restorative orientation highlights how children engage in acts of negotiation, repair, and care through literacy practices such as storytelling, collaborative writing, discussion, and embodied interaction (Herrera 2020; Winn 2018).

Restorative justice, therefore, functions as an epistemological lens for examining how meaning, responsibility, and community are co-constructed through interaction. Contemporary scholarship has extended restorative justice beyond disciplinary reform to theorize how relational practices shape participation, voice, and knowledge-making in classroom communities (Pentón Herrera and McNair 2021; Winn 2023). From this perspective, restorative justice provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing how literacy practices operate as sites of relational accountability and repair.

2.2 | Belonging, Community, and Discursive Affiliation

This study builds a grounded theory of a *Discourse of Belonging* by analyzing how children use literacy to co-author community, negotiate identity, and resist exclusion across three early elementary classrooms. Drawing on Gee's (2001, 2015) theory of big-D Discourses, socially recognized ways of being, doing, and relating—this framework conceptualizes belonging as a form of discursive affiliation through which individuals are recognized as legitimate participants in a community. In this view, belonging is not an affective state or classroom outcome, but an identity practice enacted through participation in shared literate activity.

In this study, a *Discourse of Belonging* refers to the patterned ways young children use language, literacy, embodiment, and interaction to affiliate with one another, negotiate recognition, and co-author the social conditions of community in classroom life. Building from sociocultural understandings of literacy as plural, situated, and ideological (Barton and Hamilton 2012; Street 2016; Brandt and Clinton 2002), a *Discourse of Belonging* is conceptualized in contrast to dominant Discourses of standardization and compliance often present in contemporary schooling. It centers children's agentive participation in meaning-making and highlights how they redefine what counts as literacy, learning, and recognition in classroom life.

This theorization is further informed by Bakhtin's (1986) concept of heteroglossia, which frames classroom discourse as dialogic and layered with multiple voices, histories, and positionalities. From a Bakhtinian perspective, meaning is produced through response, uptake, and addressivity rather than individual expression alone. Through shared storytelling, gesture, silence, and collaborative text-making, children's discursive practices become sites of negotiation and repair, a "grand story" (Genishi and Dyson 2015) through which belonging is continually re-authored. Belonging is an interactional accomplishment produced through actions in response to others' words, gestures, and texts, as children take up, resist, and revoice one another within shared activity.

Belonging and community, as theorized in this study, are dynamic discursive processes rather than static states. Belonging is conceptualized as an interactional accomplishment, produced moment by moment through discursive uptake, alignment, and response as children position themselves and others within shared activity. Community is correspondingly theorized not as a stable container or fixed membership, but as an ongoing social achievement enacted through children's literacy practices. This framing positions both concepts as produced through interaction rather than existing as affective dispositions or teacher-created conditions, requiring analytic attention to how children actively author and sustain these relational processes through everyday literacy events.

2.3 | Positioning the Grounded Theory

Integrating restorative justice with Discourse theory, dialogic perspectives, and sociocultural literacy frameworks situates belonging as a semiotic, relational, and justice-oriented practice. Although these traditions offer tools for understanding participation, identity, and relational practice, they have not been brought together to theorize how belonging is produced, sustained, and repaired through children's literate action in restorative-oriented classrooms. The grounded theory developed in this study addresses this need by making visible how young children actively author the social conditions of community through literacy.

3 | Methods

This study uses a qualitative, multi-case grounded theory design (Charmaz 2014; Thomas 2016), conducted in three early elementary classrooms in a large urban public school district in the United States. Grounded theory served as the primary methodological approach for generating theory about how belonging was produced through children's literacy practices across sites. Grounded theory guided inductive category development across cases, whereas interactional and multimodal discourse analysis provided the analytic tools for examining how those categories were enacted within focal literacy events. This integration allowed for analytic attention both to emergent theoretical patterns and to the moment-by-moment interactional processes. Informed consent was obtained from participating teachers and parents or guardians, and children provided verbal assent prior to participation. De-identified excerpts are shared in this manuscript to illustrate analytic claims.

The classrooms represented diverse sociocultural contexts. Each classroom regularly used restorative practices (e.g., circles and conferencing) as part of classroom participation, problem-solving, and relationship repair. The study examined how restorative justice as a way of being shaped everyday literacy interactions and participation within classroom communities. Although situated in specific sociocultural contexts, the analytic focus on children's discourse, embodied action, and interaction during literacy activity offers theoretical insight into how belonging is locally constructed and negotiated through language and participation. Findings are offered as analytic generalizations rather than as claims of representational transfer, offering conceptual relevance for researchers and educators examining identity, participation, and inclusion across early childhood and early literacy contexts.

3.1 | Participants and Sites

Across the three schools, classroom routines emphasized relational learning and restorative practices, including regular circles and conferencing. The participating teachers, all white women, were dedicated to culturally responsive and justice-oriented teaching. Ms. Ryan (names are pseudonyms), a district literacy leader, taught kindergarten at Prosser Elementary; Mrs. Lara, a former assistant principal, taught first grade at Wheelock Elementary; and Ms. Kelly, in her second year, led third grade at Roosevelt Elementary, where she facilitated ongoing restorative work. At Prosser, the kindergarten class included 18 students: 10 Black, 6 Latinx, 1 Asian American, and 1 Biracial. Wheelock's first-grade class had 22 students: 13 white, 6 Latinx, 2 Asian American, and 1 Black. Roosevelt's third-grade class included 23 students: 12 Latinx, 6 white, 2 Black, 2 Biracial, and 1 Asian American. All three classrooms used restorative circle and conferencing practices (Boyles-Watson and Pranis 2015), and children frequently initiated or facilitated them for book talks, sharing work, problem-solving, or repairing harm.

3.2 | Researcher Positionality

I identify as a white woman and former classroom teacher and administrator. My relationship to the research is shaped by my racial identity, social context, and prior role as a classroom insider-outsider. I approached this work with humility, striving to center children's perspectives. I positioned myself as a "friendly adult" (Dyson and Genishi 2005), building trust through daily classroom participation, community circles, and attending family events.

My goal was to learn from and with children, not about them. I acknowledge the power I held in selecting, interpreting, and presenting children's stories and language. As a white researcher in classrooms serving predominantly children of Color, I remained attentive to the ethics of representation and sought to honor children's brilliance, relational knowledge, and agentive literacies without appropriating or flattening their experiences. I also recognize that children's participation occurred within adult-structured and researcher-present contexts, which shaped interactional possibilities; analytic attention to hesitation, silence, non-uptake, refusal, and peer-led redirection was therefore central to examining how power and agency operated within literacy events.

3.3 | Data Collection

Data were collected through sustained classroom observation across the three classrooms over 4 months. I visited each classroom multiple times per week, with an average of 45 visits per classroom. Many visits included multiple literacy events (e.g., shared reading, literacy choice time, writing workshops, grammar mini-lessons), yielding field notes and recordings of approximately 160 distinct literacy episodes. Literacy episodes were defined as bounded segments of classroom activity in which talk, text, and embodied action were organized around shared meaning-making. These episodes served as the primary unit of analysis because they foregrounded moments where participation, recognition, and belonging were mediated through interaction. Video data supported detailed transcription and multimodal analysis of children's talk, gesture, gaze, spatial positioning, and use of artifacts. Reflective memoing accompanied data collection and analysis, supporting analytic trustworthiness and theoretical sensitivity.

Additional data included student artifacts, classroom documentation, group interviews with children, and semi-structured interviews with teachers (Creswell and Poth 2017). Children's interviews included drawing prompts (Gibson 2012) to elicit creative expression. Teachers participated in two reflective interviews and co-viewed video segments using reflective accounts to talk into and about their teaching practices (Thomas 2016).

3.4 | Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a layered approach that integrated constructivist grounded theory with discourse analysis of classroom interaction. Grounded theory supported inductive theory-building across cases, whereas discourse and multimodal interaction analysis served as the primary analytic lenses for examining how belonging was enacted within focal literacy events through talk, embodied action, and text-making.

Analysis proceeded through iterative phases of open coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2014). Initial open coding of 40 literacy events across the three classrooms generated 49 codes describing children's discursive moves, embodied actions, and uses of artifacts during literacy events. Examples of codes included action-oriented and interpretive codes such as: "shared writing," "community literacies," "embodied literacies," "story extension," "repair initiation," "silence as uptake," and "artifact-mediated invitation." Through constant comparison within and across classrooms, these codes clustered into focused codes representing patterns in how children negotiated participation and recognition. For example, codes related to pronoun shifts (we/our/us), embodied alignment (leaning in, circling up), and affective language (glad, sad, belonging) were examined together as recurring interactional markers of collective affiliation, and were synthesized into focused codes representing how children enacted belonging through coordinated linguistic and embodied action.

As analysis continued across the full corpus of 160 literacy episodes, three analytic categories consistently surfaced in moments where children negotiated participation and recognition: narrative positioning of self and others, embodied demonstrations of attention and care, and collaborative construction of shared norms. These categories, storying, listening, and co-authoring, were developed through iterative movement between corpus-level grounded theory coding and fine-grained discourse analysis of focal events.

Purposeful sampling for discourse analysis was guided by the evolving coding scheme. Focal episodes were selected because they (a) featured children's storytelling or composing, (b) involved visible negotiation of participation (e.g., invitations,

refusals, gatekeeping, collective uptake), and (c) demonstrated children's active construction of relational norms or repair of social bonds. Episodes were revisited across analytic cycles as categories developed, and disconfirming cases were used to refine category properties and relationships.

Theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2014) was assessed as category stability across later episodes and across sites; by approximately episode 131, additional episodes largely elaborated existing category properties and conditions rather than generating substantively new categories. Later discourse analyses were used to closely examine category boundaries and specify how the categories were interactionally accomplished (e.g., through uptake, alignment/misalignment, repair, strategic silence, and artifact-mediated participation).

3.5 | Discourse Analysis: Ethnography of Communication and Interactional Sociolinguistics

Discourse analysis in this study operated at two complementary levels (Jaworski and Coupland 2014). First, ethnography of communication (Cameron 2001; Johnstone 2010) characterized focal literacy events as communicative practices situated within classroom communities. SPEAKING grids documented *S*etting (physical and temporal location), *P*articipants (roles and relationships), *E*nds (purposes and outcomes), *A*ct sequence (ordering of actions), *K*ey (tone and manner), *I*nstrumentalities (forms of speech and channels), *N*orms (interaction and interpretation rules), and *G*enre (event type) for each focal event. These grids were created for individual events, compiled across events within each classroom, and compared across sites, supporting comparisons of how literacy events were socially organized, how participation was invited and managed, and how interactional norms varied across classrooms.

Second, interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 2015) supported micro-level analysis of meaning-making, attending to contextualization cues that signaled how utterances should be interpreted. Analysis focused on interactional processes through which children positioned themselves and others: uptake (how children responded to or extended others' contributions), alignment (agreement, affirmation, building on), misalignment (disagreement, resistance, redirection), repair sequences (addressing communicative breakdowns, relational tensions, or moments of emotional and social vulnerability), and silence or withdrawal (strategic non-participation). Transcripts documented what children said and how, including volume changes, emphatic stress, overlapping talk, and pauses (marked in seconds). Embodied actions were transcribed using descriptive brackets: gaze direction, pointing, tracing, leaning in or away, and proximity shifts. Special analytic attention was given to: pronoun use and shifts (I/you/we/they), evaluative language (good/bad, right/wrong), boundary-making moves (invitations to join, rule assertions, exclusions), and collective constructions (our, together, us).

Multimodal analysis treated children's composing as an embodied, mediated action. Following Rowe (2019), children's pointing, tracing, and embodied demonstrations were documented as integral components of meaning-making during writing and storytelling. Consistent with Wohlwend's (2021) emphasis on mediated action in peer cultures, artifacts were analyzed as mediators of participation that shaped whose contributions were recognized and how membership was negotiated. Mediated discourse perspectives (Scollon and Scollon 2003) supported the analysis of how classroom routines, tools, and interactional histories patterned children's possibilities within literacy events.

These levels worked together where SPEAKING grids illuminated event-level structures that made interactions possible, whereas interactional sociolinguistics revealed how children navigated, reproduced, or transformed structures through talk and embodied action. This integration was informed by Gee's (2001, 2015) notion of big-D Discourses, which requires attention to broader participation patterns and to the local enactment, and by Bakhtin's (1986) dialogic principle that meaning emerges through response and uptake across turns. Analytically, across literacy events, I followed how children took up, extended, and built upon one another's contributions; how stories and identities were shared and collaboratively constructed; how invitations to participate were issued and negotiated; and how children initiated and enacted repair, connecting these interactional moves to emerging grounded theory categories through constant comparison. Analytic rigor was supported through sustained engagement in each classroom, repeated video review, iterative memoing, constant comparison across cases, triangulation across observations, video, artifacts, and interviews, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytic decisions and category development.

4 | Findings

The findings illuminate how young children constructed a *Discourse of Belonging* through literacies that were affective, relational, and agentive, moving beyond inclusion toward the co-authorship of community. This discourse emerged through iterative inductive coding and systematic discourse analysis, revealing belonging as a layered relational process enacted across talk, text, embodied action, and shared classroom routines. Belonging functioned as an interactional accomplishment, produced, negotiated, and sometimes contested through children's participation in literacy events.

This grounded theory theorizes belonging through a braided strand of three interwoven elements: (a) storying selves and others into belonging, (b) embodied and empathic listening, and (c) co-authoring shared literate worlds. These strands were not discrete themes but recursive analytic dimensions that surfaced repeatedly across episodes as children aligned with, extended, resisted, or repaired one another's contributions within literacies. Belonging emerged when children coordinated these practices across time and interaction, producing recognition, membership, and community through everyday literacy events.

Findings draw from focal vignettes selected from a larger corpus of 160 literacy episodes. Although the analytic claims cross sites, they are presented without collapsing the unique cultural, racial, and sociopolitical contexts that shaped each

FIGURE 1 | Layla's illustration of community.

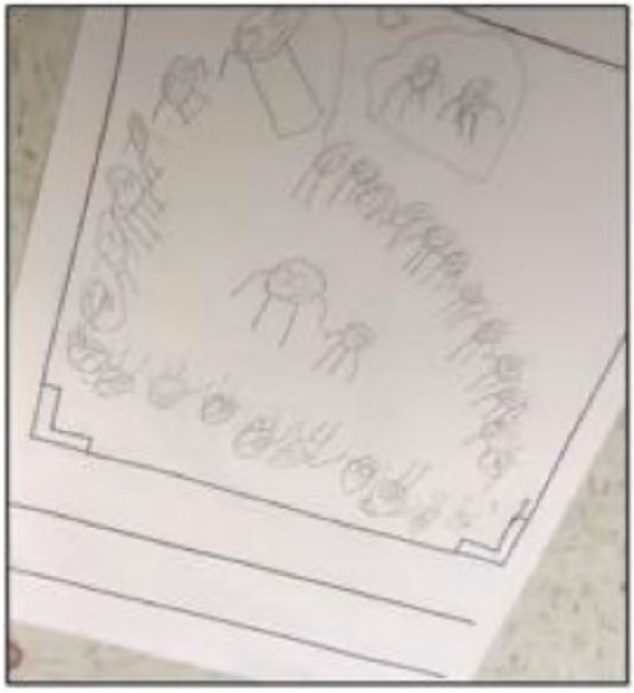

FIGURE 2 | Darnell's composition.

space. Children are referred to as children rather than students to foreground their agentive participation in meaning-making and to disrupt colonial schooling logics that position children of Color, particularly Black and Indigenous children, as subjects to be managed rather than co-authors of community. These findings attend to moments where belonging was successfully co-authored, and to the interactional conditions under which it was constrained or renegotiated, often within adult-structured participation frameworks.

4.1 | "Our Hearts Into One:" Stories of Belonging

This strand illustrates how belonging was constructed through talk. Analytically, this included children's use of shared metaphors, collective pronouns, and evaluative language to position themselves as part of a "we," as well as interactional moves that aligned individual contributions with group meaning. The title comes from Layla, a Thai-American first grader, who explained, "community means it's our hearts into one." In her composition (Figure 1), she elaborated, "the 22 hearts in our classroom are coming into one; being in a community means coming together." Layla's repeated use of collective imagery ("our," "into one") functioned discursively to collapse individual identities into a shared moral and relational stance; however, her illustration both communicates a visual synthesis of coming together, and maintaining individual identities through the hearts around the larger one in the center. Layla, who often shared her cultural experiences, reflected an ethos of harmony and collective practice that resonated with her peers.

Children developed classroom-specific literacy practices, often facilitated by teachers but extended by the children. These practices circulated through everyday talk and text-making, becoming recognizable routines through which children affirmed membership and mutual responsibility. When a child was absent, kindergartners would pause to "wish them well," whereas third graders wrote get-well cards. In first grade, children suggested adding a group celebration after individual recognitions to situate each person's contributions as part of the collective community. As Jordan shared, "it's us, we are here. We're together!" Such utterances worked as alignment moves, reinforcing belonging through repetition, agreement, and collective framing.

The following vignette illustrates how these discursive practices were taken up and elaborated through children's composing and embodied action within restorative routines.

4.1.1 | Example 1: "It Protects Us" (Darnell, Age 5)

Darnell, a curious, energetic, and loving kindergarten child, was often punished or given "time away" outside of the kindergarten community. These disciplinary exclusions align with well-documented racialized patterns of early schooling, in which Black boys are disproportionately positioned as disruptive or unsafe (Gilliam et al. 2016). Such positioning risks becoming the dominant narrative through which children like Darnell are known and remembered. However, within this kindergarten classroom, Darnell was recognized as an active participant and leader in restorative circle practices. Rather than being positioned as a problem to be managed, the interactional space was open for him and his peers to author meaning and membership. He created a composition (Figure 2) anchored in the core circle practices of the classroom.

Below is Darnell's explanation of his composition to Ms. Ryan.[1]

***1 Ms. Ryan*:** So can you point and tell me about the things in your picture?

***2 Darnell*:** Um, these are the people. And these are the aliens trying to get back to the moon. [Traces the larger circle with his finger]

***4 Ms. Ryan*:** Are they holding hands?

***5 Darnell*:** Yeah. [Traces the aliens' hands back and forth]

***6 Ms. Ryan*:** Why are they holding hands?

***7 Darnell*:** 'cuz. 'cuz they want to go back to space.

***8 Ms. Ryan*:** Okay. And are the people in your circle holding hands?

***9 Darnell*:** Yeah. [Points to people]

***10 Ms. Ryan*:** Hmm. And why did you decide to make a circle?

***11 Darnell*:** 'cuz, well, 'cuz, I decided to make a circle because we make a circle on our carpet. [Points to circle again]

***13 Ms. Ryan*:** Mm. What's important about it?

***14 Darnell*:** We get to learn stuff in the circle.

***15 Ms. Ryan*:** And why do you think we sit in a circle? What does it do?

***16 Darnell*:** It protects us.

Meaning in this exchange was produced through the coordination of talk, embodied action, and material artifacts (Scollon and Scollon 2003). While narrating, Darnell repeatedly traced the circumference of the circle (lines 2–3, 11), an embodied action sustaining the circle as the central semiotic object. This tracing functioned as an authorizing move, guiding Ms. Ryan's uptake and stabilizing the topic across turns. Her questions oriented to his gestures rather than the written text alone. When Darnell traced (line 2), she asked about what he is tracing (line 4); when he pointed to people (line 9), she asked about their positioning. This coordination allowed the artifact to mediate the interaction as a dialogic event, rather than producing an evaluative initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) sequence (Cazden 2001).

A critical discursive shift occurred as Darnell moved from fictional "aliens" (line 2) to the classroom routine "our carpet" (line 11), collapsing storyworld and classroom practice. His pronoun use marked this shift: "these are the aliens" (line 2, third person) became "we can make a circle on our carpet" (line 11, first person plural). The first-person plural deictic "our" indexed shared ownership of the physical space and practice, positioning Darnell as an insider to the classroom community. Through this shift, the circle became an action-in-place that carried the social history of collective learning and care (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Notably, children did not typically hold hands during circle time (lines 4–8); yet, Darnell emphasized this physical connection, foregrounding proximity as a meaningful feature of belonging, echoed in classroom routines occurring daily, such as huddled decision-making and shared problem-solving.

In line 14, Darnell's explanation, "we get to learn stuff in the circle" (line 14), the collective "we" positioned learning as shared activity, whereas the expansive noun "stuff" resisted narrow academic framing. In the classroom, "stuff" that Darnell referenced included questions, stories, check-ins, and problem-solving, relational forms of knowledge that exceeded content instruction. Through this utterance, Darnell took up identity-in-practice as a legitimate member of a learning community, one in which protection and participation were mutually constituted, aligning with restorative justice pedagogies that position learning as inseparable from recognition, care, and shared responsibility (Winn et al. 2019).

A key shift occurred in lines 15–16, when Ms. Ryan asked, "Why do you think we sit in a circle?" positioning children as agents, and then followed with, "What does it do?" shifting the grammatical subject from "we" to "it." This shift opened interactional space for Darnell's response: "It protects us." Protection was attributed to the circle itself rather than to a teacher or individual. In naming the circle as protective, Darnell implied that protection was necessary. Given his history of exclusion in other school contexts, this claim carried layered meaning: safety was not assumed but enacted through shared structure and collective being and becoming together within that structure. Belonging was located in collective practice rather than in adult authority alone. Protection was narrated as something produced through participation in a communal structure, not granted or controlled by adults.

4.1.2 | Example 2: "Community and Connection Are the Same" (Jordan, Age 6)

In interviews, children discussed and defined community. The first-grade classroom served primarily children who identified as white. Often in such settings, children of Color are positioned as needing to conform to dominant ways of knowing and participating (Dyson 2018; Souto-Manning 2021). Against this backdrop, a Black child, Jordan, took up leadership in shaping the interactional norms through which community was defined. Alongside Jordan, Dylan, who identified as Latino, and James and Jacob, who identified as white, participated in the exchange.

***1 Erica (researcher)*:** What does community mean in your classroom?

***2 Jordan*:** You agree, add on, or *respectfully* disagree.

***3 James*:** I agree with Jordan.

***4 Erica*:** Can you tell me more about that?

***5 Jordan*:** Yeah because you help them. You give them more information and community and connection are the same.

***7 Dylan*:** It's like a family!

***8 Jordan*:** And community and connection are the same. We decided that. And we do that.

***10 Jacob*:** It's all being here .. it's being connected.

***11 Dylan*:** When we are together in the circle and everyone sits down...and people bring special things.

***13 Jacob*:** We get to hear people's thoughts.

***14 Dylan*:** It's everyone's powerful words.

***15 Jordan*:** [Add on signal]

***16 Erica*:** Jordan, you wanted to add on to what Dylan said about people's powerful words; what did you want to add?

***18 Jordan*:** That they say people's powerful words. That reminds me of...um. powerful words in a book we read. And in the book she was telling all about her life (points to *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai 2017) on the bookshelf). And we have lots of books that we read like that!

***22 Jacob*:** We share feelings.

***23 Jordan*:** ¡I feel increíble!

***24 Jacob*:** I don't like to share my ideas, but I listen.

***25 Jordan*:** I teach them. And if they don't have a friend, I can be their friend. I ask them questions. I just know when they need that.

Jordan's opening (line 2) performed metadiscursive work by naming participation norms before defining content. His triadic list "agree," "add on," or "respectfully disagree," established a closed set of legitimate responses, excluding options like "question" or "challenge." The pronoun you, not we, positions Jordan as a rule-giver. James's immediate enactment (line 3), "I agree with Jordan," performed the first option Jordan listed and ratified his authority to establish or recount these norms.

Meaning circulated across speakers through uptake and repetition. Dylan's "family" metaphor (line 7) was stabilized through repetition ("community and connection are the same," lines 5, 8), which he marked as a collective decision: "We decide that. And we do that" (line 8). This shift from definition to enactment from what community means to how we do it anchors belonging in practice rather than remaining in the abstract.

Jordan's "add on" signal (line 15) reclaimed interactional agency within the adult-initiated interview. The follow-up (line 16) aligned with Jordan's signal, momentarily suspending the typical IRE pattern (Cazden 2001) and elevating child-directed expansion. Jordan's subsequent pointing to *Malala's Magic Pencil* (line 18) connected classroom talk to textual resources, situating children's lived experiences in dialogue with published narratives. This gesture-plus-talk reflected Rowe's attention (2019) to how children use pointing, artifact reference, and explanation to compose meaning about texts and writing.

Multilingual resources further expand participation. Jordan's "¡I feel increíble!" (line 23) indexed affect and belonging through shared linguistic knowledge, claiming Spanish as a community resource even as a non-native speaker. Jacob's statement "I don't like to share my ideas but I listen" (line 24) authorized silence as meaningful engagement. In Gee's terms, children took up identities-in-practice that valued relational attentiveness alongside speaking.

Jordan's closing statement "I just know when they need that" (line 25), framed belonging as an attunement enacted through everyday interaction rather than as rule-following or adult direction. His leadership is relational rather than hierarchical. In Figure 3, Jordan redrew the interview itself and revised the researcher's prompt to ask, "What does community and helping look like?" This re-authoring of the question mirrored classroom practices in which children enter, reshape, and extend one another's stories, further demonstrating how belonging was co-authored through literacy and interaction. Through this interaction, children collaboratively defined community as a set of practices they enact: agreeing, adding on, listening, sharing powerful words and languages, and knowing when someone needs connection.

Although these vignettes illustrate children's agentive participation in authoring belonging, not all interactions unfolded this way. Across the corpus, children's contributions were sometimes acknowledged but not taken up or redirected to align with instructional goals. These moments revealed how participation remained shaped by institutional norms and adult authority, even within classrooms committed to restorative practice (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

FIGURE 3 | Jordan's composition on community.

Such instances did not undermine the *Discourse of Belonging*; they clarified its negotiated nature. Belonging functioned as an ongoing interactional accomplishment requiring uptake, alignment, and repair. Attending to these tensions strengthens the grounded theory by showing how children's agency emerged within, and at times against, the power relations structuring classroom life.

4.2 | "I'm *So* Glad You're Here": Compassionately Valuing One Another

This second strand examines how children enacted a *Discourse of Belonging* through embodied listening, positioning presence, silence, and compassionate response as powerful forms of literacy. Across the corpus, belonging emerged through talk and gesture, proximity, gaze, and affective attunement, underscoring listening as a multimodal, relational practice. In contrast to dominant classroom discourses that frame listening as compliance or behavioral control, children in this study enacted listening as agentive participation, shaping interactional space so that peers could be seen, heard, and valued (Winn et al. 2019).

Through embodied listening, children recognized collective responsibility for one another's emotional and academic well-being. The title of this strand comes from Zara, a thoughtful Black girl who, following repeated interpersonal conflicts, looked at a peer and said simply, "I'm so glad you're here." This functioned as an interactional recognition, repositioning the other as worthy of presence and care, despite disagreements in the moments (and hours) prior. The examples that follow

illustrate how children used embodied listening to interrupt individualism, redistribute authority, and co-author moments of communal repair.

4.2.1 | Example 1: "We Need to Talk" (Keyla, Age 5)

One morning, the kindergarten community experienced several interpersonal and classwide conflicts, resulting in multiple restorative and peace-building circles. Tensions were high, marked by repeated arguments and visible frustration. After completing a peace circle with two children, following two whole-class restorative circles, Ms. Ryan sat on the carpet as the children transitioned back to literacy stations. She lingered while Jerrika fell asleep on her lap. Keyla, a Black girl known for her empathy, noticed this shift and responded through embodied action.

***1 Keyla*:** Ms. Ryan, we need to talk.

***2 Ms. Ryan*:** Okay! What do you want to talk about?

***3 Keyla*:** [pauses]. ... We need a circle.

***4 Ms. Ryan*:** Okay. Let's do it.

***5 Keyla*:** [Quickly bounces back to her literacy table and whispers to her peers to join her and that Ms. Ryan needed a circle. The girls pause their work. Analie and Noelle walk toward Ms. Ryan while Keyla retrieves the talking piece.]

***8 Ms. Ryan*:** Okay, so what do you want to talk about?

***9 Keyla*:** Ms. Ryan go first [Hands her the talking piece]

***10 Ms. Ryan*:** What should we talk about?

***11 Noelle*:** Feelings.

***12 Ms. Ryan*:** Feelings? Okay. I'm feeling... It's a mix. I'm feeling frustrated. And, I'm feeling at peace.

***14 Noelle*:** I'm feeling happy!

***15 Ms. Ryan*:** [Nods and smiles]

***16 Analie*:** I'm feeling good!

***17 Keyla*:** I'm feeling happy!! Because we are having a circle. And now we have to say how we felt during reading time.

***19 Ms. Ryan*:** During reading time?

***20 Keyla*:** [Emphatically nods and hands the talking piece to Ms. Ryan]

***21 Ms. Ryan*:** During reading time I was reading with Leo, and also with Natalie and Anthony. And they were doing reading powers...[inaudible]...and it was amazing!

***24 Noelle*:** I was. I read myself. And listen myself, and I was reading, and then ... I stop! [Shows a stop signal]

***26 Analie*:** I was doing snap, snap power

***27 Keyla*:** I was doing good! Okay, so...

Keyla's opening utterance, "Ms. Ryan, we need to talk" (line 1), reframed participation by asserting a collective need ("we") rather than requesting permission. The pronoun "we" and not "I" and the use of the verb "need" (rather than "want" or a request, "can we") positioned Keyla as a leader and initiator of community action. Ms. Ryan's immediate uptake, "Okay!" (line 2) ratified this shift, encouraging Keyla to design the flow of classroom activity. When Keyla announced, "We need a circle" (line 3), she was naming not just a structure but also a mediational tool through a classroom practice established with relational meaning (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

Keyla's movement back to the literacy table, whispering to peers and retrieving the talking piece (line 5), coordinated bodies, artifacts, and space into a new interactional event. Her movement to retrieve the talking piece functioned as an inscribed gesture, an embodied action that authored the circle into being before the talk resumed (Rowe 2019). When Keyla handed Ms. Ryan the talking piece and instructed her to go first (line 9), she inverted conventional adult–child authority, repositioning the teacher as a participant within a child-initiated literacy event. As was common in co-constructing learning in this space, Ms. Ryan sustained this inverted structure (line 10: "What should we talk about?").

The children named their feelings (lines 11–17), and their contributions were brief but cumulative. Keyla's declaration, "I'm feeling happy!! Because we are having a circle" (line 17), made explicit through the conjunction "because" the causal relationship between emotional state and collective practice, naming the circle itself as producing happiness. Through this utterance, Keyla positioned the restorative structure as a child-activated resource, and a distinction central to how embodied listening functions within the *Discourse of Belonging*.

Keyla expanded the purpose of the circle, insisting that the group reflected on "how we felt during reading time" (line 17). The deonic modal "have to" asserts obligation, whereas the tense shift from "I'm feeling" to "we felt" from present to past bridged affective and academic discourse. As the girls referenced "snap snap power," stopping, and reading with others (lines 24–26), they narrated literacy learning through embodied strategies, self-monitoring, and self-regulation. Their talk-about-reading functioned as metacommunication, making literacy visible as action rather than product (Rowe 2019).

The circle closed with the girls leaning in for a group hug, reinforcing the event through embodied affirmation. In contrast to national data documenting the disproportionate punishment of Black girls for perceived disruption (Morris 2019), this classroom moment positioned Black and Latina girls as leaders and designers of community. Keyla, a 5-year-old Black kindergartner, orchestrated repair through embodied coordination, reading her white teacher's emotional state, retrieving the talking piece, directing participation, and bridging affect and academics. This moment illustrated the complexity of children's agency within racialized structures, where Keyla demonstrated sophisticated relational literacy while also performing emotional labor that research documents Black girls are disproportionately expected to provide in educational settings (Morris 2019). Her leadership was real, and the burden of that labor was also real. Through minimal talk and maximum gestural action, the girls authored repair that integrated emotional care and academic reflection, exemplifying

how embodied and empathic listening operates within the *Discourse of Belonging* as relational labor.

4.2.2 | Example 2: "It Takes Courage," (Reed, Age 6)

As was true in each classroom, the first grade often moved to a circle when children had something special to share. In the example below, two children had asked to share, one about a new kitten, and another about her grandmother moving into hospice. As Reed, a white child, explained in his interview, "we're both happy and sad" in circles, and circles were a place to "share stories." As the conversation dwindled about Arlo's new kitten, Mrs. Lara suggested "another community member share about something that happened in her family. We want to make sure that her voice is heard."

***1 Charlotte*:** So on Saturday or Sunday my grandma went to a place that helps her feel better and it makes me really sad that she is going to die soon. And my mom and dad and brother are really sad too. And she's really gonna die in a month maybe..... And I really want her to stay with me like before.

***5 Reed*:** Did you know there is a way? Did you know when someone dies they are still with you? Because they are an angel, and they are going to be still with you. When I was born, my grandpa died, and so he's with me right now. And so is my, um, my .. angel sister.

***8 Arlo*:** Um, well some people say, and I believe this, but there is a stairway to heaven and to get there you just need to love them.

***10 McKenna*:** I had something sad too. My dog died and my two cats.

***11 Charlotte*:** nods

***12 Grayson*:** What did you like about your grandma?

***13 Charlotte*:** that she babysitted us a lot. And when my brother was asleep she'd let me watch TV while he was sleeping.

***15 Hunter*:** how old is your grandma?

***16 Charlotte*:** Um. I don't know. I think it is 90 something.

***17 Violet*:** What did you like to do with your grandma?

***18 Charlotte*:** I just said. I like to hang out with her a lot. When my mom and dad are out of town. She comes and we hang out.

***20 Mrs. Lara*:** So that was our last thought. I think that we should say thank you to Arlo for sharing her experience about the kitten and Charlotte for sharing her experience about her grandma. Because it takes...

***23 Interjecting Overlapping talk*:** Courage! And compassion! Thank you!

***24 Reed*:** it takes courage to talk about it

***25 Mrs. Lara*:** That's right; it takes a lot of courage to share about your own life.

***26 Charles Alan*:** and it takes a lot of resilience.

Charlotte's opening narrative was marked by hesitation and pauses (line 4), 5 s of silence before, "and I really want her to stay with me like before." This 5-s pause functioned as an interactional space that the class collectively maintained, with no interruption or hurrying or guidance from the teacher. This matters in an early elementary space when a common discourse is often overlapping and excited talk; the patience and pause were taken up as communicative practice where Charlotte was processing and the community waited; elevating belonging through talk and silence. Silence functioned as discourse (Scollon and Scollon 2003), a shared holding that sustained participation rather than treating a pause as a failure to communicate or a termination of a discursive turn-taking.

Reed's response (lines 5–7) shifted from witnessing to connection through narrative parallelism. His opening, "Did you know there is a way. Did you know when someone dies they are still with you," repeated the interrogative structure "Did you know" twice, framing what followed as knowledge-sharing rather than interruption. He then offered a personal narrative: "When I was born, my grandpa died, and so he's with me right now. And so is my, um, my...angel sister." The hesitation ("um, my...angel sister") marked affective labor; naming a deceased sister required a pause, yet Reed completed the utterance, adding a second loss that paralleled the first. The conjunction "And so" linked his grandfather and sister as parallel presences, constructing a patterned claim: death does not end relationship. Through this structure, Reed transformed personal disclosure into relational alignment, using story to enter Charlotte's grief and sustain shared emotional space. In doing so, belonging was enacted through narrative co-presence. Although Mrs. Lara's framing of the circle created the structural space, the sustained engagement with grief was collectively negotiated by children. They extended Charlotte's narrative through alignment, parallel storying, and sustained uptake. Through these interactional moves, grief remained present within the group exchange, and belonging was enacted as the shared holding of difficult knowledge.

McKenna's "I had something sad too" (line 10) extended this pattern. The adverb "too" signaled alignment; her sadness joined Charlotte's rather than competing with it. Charlotte's nod (line 11) functioned as embodied uptake, ratifying McKenna's alignment without shifting narrative ownership. Together, these moves accumulated stories as collective witnessing rather than individual performance.

Peers then asked Charlotte questions (lines 12–18), each question, "What did you like?" "How old?" "What did you like to do?," followed by a parallel structure: Wh-word auxiliary/copula + subject + predicate. This repetition created rhythmic continuity, sustaining attention without evaluation or topic shift. These questions functioned as affiliative moves, keeping Charlotte's story centered rather than redirecting toward comfort or closure. Unlike traditional classroom questioning that seeks correct answers, these questions invited elaboration and maintained Charlotte's grandmother's presence in the classroom interaction.

The circle's closing (lines 20–26) invited collective meaning-making through overlapping talk. When Mrs. Lara began "Because it takes..." (line 20), and multiple children interjected simultaneously: "Courage!" and "Compassion!" (line 23). This overlapping completion, where children spoke over the teacher to finish her sentence, demonstrated collective ownership of

the circle's moral framing. The exclamatory intonation and choral effect position courage and compassion not as teacher-imposed but as community-recognized values. Reed then individualized this with, "it takes courage to talk about it" (line 24), shifting from choral exclamation to complete proposition. The demonstrative "it" referred anaphorically to Charlotte's sharing, whereas the verb "takes" positions courage as a resource required, not an innate quality possessed. This construction named the moral work explicitly, transforming private grief into shared understanding.

Embodied and empathic listening, as a strand within the *Discourse of Belonging*, operated through temporal holding (the 5-s pause), narrative accumulation (Reed and McKenna offering their own losses), affiliative questioning that sustained rather than redirected, and collective moral naming (the choral "Courage!"). Belonging was accomplished by holding sadness and not seeking to resolve it. Charlotte later said she was "still sad, but it helped," making clear the circle did not erase pain but provided a collective holding of it.

Charlotte's grief, as a white child, stemmed from personal loss rather than institutional harm, a distinction in theorizing restorative practices and *Discourses of Belonging*. The classroom's response demonstrated how restorative circles can support emotional expression, while requiring attention to how grief and harm are differently produced across racialized contexts. Recognizing this difference strengthens, rather than diminishes, the need for pedagogies that respond to interpersonal loss and institutional injustice. Charlotte's story later circulated through the classroom in formal literacy practices as students chose to compose about loved ones during open writing time, demonstrating literacy as a social practice that enacted the *Discourse of Belonging* through listening, narrative layering, and collective care.

4.2.3 | Example 3: "We Can! And We Can Be Heroes!" (Third Grade Champions, Age 8–9)

Children regularly engaged in circle reflections before and after read-alouds. In one third-grade circle focused on heroes, children shared about family members, neighbors, and historical figures such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Harriet Tubman. As children explained their choices, they repeatedly echoed that "our lives wouldn't be the same today," and "things would be worse," and "made things more fair" by trying to "stop racism" and "tell people what was bad." Children borrowed fragments of one another's explanations as the talking piece moved around the circle, layering meanings across turns.

***1 Javi*:** [Quietly, looking down] My dad is my hero. But I don't really talk about him here because he was deported.

***3 Children*:** [Lean forward toward Javi. Two children signal "me too" and a number of children nod]

***5 Javi*:** [Continues louder, looking up] My dad is my hero because he taught me a lot of things. Like he taught me Spanish and other things. He is my hero even though I don't really get to see him.

***8 Children*:** [Lean forward and nod as Javi passes the talking piece to Christopher]

***9 Christopher*:** ... [Looks to Ms. Kelly]

***10 Ms. Kelly*:** you can share your hero or, like we do in morning circles, you can always pass

***12 Christopher*:** [Nods] .... we'll. I .. don't have a hero [Passes the talking piece to Ms. Kelly]

***14 Ms. Kelly*:** Okay, Christopher said he doesn't have a hero. Do we think we can Change that?

***16 Many voices*:** we can!! [Talk over one another] and we can be heroes!

***17 Ms. Kelly*:** okay, we aren't going to solve that right now, but we will keep thinking about it and working together. Okay?

***19 Christopher (and others)*:** nod

***20 Ms. Kelly*:** Okay, we are going to keep thinking about this as we are in our reading time. But you had heroes who you know who taught you things, or did something for you or someone else, or heroes that made the world better.

Javi's opening, "My dad is my hero. But I don't really talk about him here because he was deported" (line 1), coordinated speech with embodied withdrawal, as he participated with a quieter voice and downward gaze. The conjunction "but" (line 1) marked a shift from declaration to hesitation, whereas "I don't really talk about him here" positioned the classroom as a space where the story might have been withheld. "Really" softened the claim, and "here" marked spatial and social boundaries around what can be said or heard. Peers leaned forward, nodded, and signaled recognition (lines 3–4), reducing physical distance without interrupting his speech. Two children used "me too" gestures as solidarity markers, which indicated a shared experience without requiring Javi to pause or respond. This signaled connection while maintaining space for the vulnerability to remain with Javi's turn-taking. Listening was enacted through posture, movement, and gaze (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

As Javi's volume increased and he looked up (line 5), the community's nonverbal alignment sustained his discourse and his connection to their embodied listening. The absence of verbal response allowed vulnerability to remain centered without being recentered toward comfort, and the physical motion of leaning in created an interactional space that supported his disclosure (lines 3–4). In the classroom's ongoing "grand novel" (Genishi and Dyson 2015), Javi's narrative became part of a shared understanding of heroism grounded in relational care, language, and lived experience.

Christopher, a child who frequently declined to participate in whole-group discussions, after witnessing Javi's narration and with Ms. Kelly's gentle invitation, quietly said, "I don't have a hero" (line 12). This negative construction, "don't have" positioned absence as present-tense rather than a sustained deficiency. The verb "have" implied possession; negating it refused the praise that everyone must possess a hero.

Ms. Kelly's response, "Do we think we can change that?" (line 14), invited peer action without requiring Christopher's revision. Her

discourse move differed from her silence during Javi's disclosure. When Javi named deportation (line 1), she did not speak, allowing peers' embodied responses to drive the connection and response, and resisted naming trauma as taboo in a classroom space. When Christopher stated "I don't have a hero" (line 12), she entered with a question directed to the group, not to Christopher. This differential uptake indicated intentionality in elevating children's existing *Discourse of Belonging*; Javi's story of loss required witnessing without intervention, whereas Christopher's statement of absence prompted collective problem-solving. As a white teacher, Ms. Kelly's strategic silence during Javi's, a Latino child, disclosure of state violence acknowledges harm she cannot repair, whereas her verbal facilitation of Christopher's uncertainty mobilizes peer support for what might be addressed collectively.

The chorus of "we can!" (line 16) emerged from peers, signaling collective responsibility without compelling Christopher to participate differently. Ms. Kelly's "we aren't going to solve that right now" (line 17) sustained Christopher's stance while keeping the question open for children to take up; neither fixing nor dismissing.

Embodied listening operated through physical proximity (leaning forward), gestural recognition ("me too" signals), and strategic silence. Belonging was accomplished through alignment rather than agreement, not only with verbal response. By holding space for vulnerability (Javi's story), refusal, and collective affirmation (Christopher's comment), children enacted a *Discourse of Belonging*, making room for what cannot be fixed, loss, absence, and uncertainty, alongside collective care.

Across classrooms, embodied and empathic listening functioned as a patterned literacy practice through which belonging was sustained in moments of vulnerability. Listening operated as relational coordination enacted through silence, gaze, proximity, narrative alignment, and strategic uptake, rather than as compliance or turn-taking alone. Through these interactional moves, children redistributed authority by holding emotional space collectively, sustaining silence and connection simultaneously. Belonging was accomplished through temporal patience, shared witnessing, and coordinated restraint. The *Discourse of Belonging* was therefore enacted in what children said and in how they moved, waited, and responded. Listening functioned as relational labor and recognition, making room for grief, uncertainty, and structural harm within everyday literacies.

4.3 | "Work Together, Stay Together": Co-Authoring the Classroom Community

This third strand illustrates how children co-authored their literacy learning and classroom norms through repeated practices of collaboration, negotiation, and revision. Authorship extended beyond writing to include designing agreements, initiating peer support, and shaping relational norms. Through these multimodal acts, children enacted the *Discourse of Belonging* as a lived literacy practice: shared meaning-making, collective responsibility, and joy.

The title here emerged in the kindergarten class, where "work together, stay together" was collectively composed as a community agreement. Across classrooms, children co-authored similar commitments and revisited them as living texts, modifying language, adding new values, and reflecting on their meaning. In first grade, for example, the class amended their agreements to include "have fun," signaling a collective stance that joy was necessary for belonging. These revisions did not resolve conflict but held it as generative, positioning disagreement and repair as part of togetherness rather than a disruption.

FIGURE 4 | Third grade champion's PD poster.

Across the classrooms, children designed and directed much of their literacy learning. They asked for more time on projects, proposed authentic reading and writing purposes, and engaged in collaborative literacy experiences. Their classroom environments were filled with children's texts, labels, posters, and public messages, material traces of how children's ideas and identities actively shaped the learning space. Third graders were invited to share their restorative justice learning at a district professional development session. Children co-created a large poster (Figure 4), debating language and layout to represent their collective work. The process of composing, negotiating words like "kind," "champion," and "no bullying," became a literacy event through which children redistributed authority for meaning-making. The rainbow design embodied their relational values and positioned them as civic authors, using visual and textual literacies to represent their classroom community to adult audiences.

Tyree, in another example, created a poster to help peers navigate conflicts in the cafeteria. After receiving peer feedback, he revised the language and visuals to ensure clarity and inclusion. Other children wrote public messages calling peers to care for shared spaces, picking up trash, organizing materials, and treating the classroom with love. These initiatives were student-authored rather than teacher-created assignments, reflecting a shared ethic of responsibility. Although children often co-authored physical texts, the broader finding illustrates how they shaped literacy practices and social life in the community.

4.3.1 | Example 1: "We Need to Write": (Noelle, Age 5)

Children regularly articulated what they needed within literacy events, exercising authoritative voices in shaping

classroom practices. In kindergarten, writer's workshop was a beloved time of day, one in which children frequently requested more time to joyfully compose their stories. Early in the school year, during writer's workshop, Noelle, a Black girl, led the call and response typically used by Ms. Ryan to share information with the classroom community. Call and response has been described as an "expression of identity" within African American communicative traditions (Adjapong and Emdin 2015, 70), a cultural literacy practice through which speakers coordinate collective attention and action. Noelle drew on this culturally rooted discourse practice to mobilize the class.

***1 Noelle*:** Kinder, Kinder!

***2 Class Community (collectively)*:** Garten, Garten!

***3 Noelle*:** [Standing up, in louder voice] Kinder, Kinder!

***4 Class Community [Pausing their work and talk]*:** Garten, Garten!

***5 Noelle*:** It's loud in here... We need quiet. We need to write. Ms. Ryan, put on music? We need to write!

***7*:** [Children smile and nod, while Ms. Ryan turns on the music]

Noelle initiated the call and response (line 1), and when participation was partial, she repeated it more urgently (line 3), shifting her footing from peer participant to facilitator of collective action (Gee 2015). The repetition, coupled with her increased volume and stance, reorganized the interactional space. As classmates paused their talk and work to respond (line 4), her leadership was affirmed through coordinated peer uptake. Through timing, voice, and shared response, she restructured the workshop environment, drawing collective attention back to writing as a shared endeavor.

Her next utterance (lines 5–6) performed diagnostic and directive work at the same time. "It's loud" named the condition of the room; "We need quiet. We need to write" asserted obligation through parallel structure and repeated first-person plural pronouns. The insistence on "we" framed the call not as personal preference but as collective advocacy for composing. At the same time, the appeal for quiet echoed a familiar school discourse in which silence is associated with compliance and control. Here, though, the quiet was a student-initiative shared request, rather than an imposed state of compliance from a teacher. When Noelle asked, "Ms. Ryan, put on music?" she softened her directive without relinquishing authority, shaping the material and affective conditions of literacy learning. Ms. Ryan's immediate response affirmed Noelle's leadership, redistributing responsibility for managing the workshop environment.

Noelle's action coordinated multiple semiotic resources, call-and-response, bodily stance, shared routines, and ambient sound, drawing on African American communicative traditions as an organizing structure (Adjapong and Emdin 2015). In many classrooms, particularly those serving Black and Latinx children, vocal leadership is disciplined rather than recognized. Here, Noelle's cultural practice functioned as pedagogical leadership. Writing was positioned as a communal practice requiring collective awareness. Through this exchange, belonging was enacted through the negotiated shaping of classroom norms. Noelle did not wait for permission to protect writing time; she authored the conditions for it, working within and subtly reorienting dominant school discourses toward shared literacy work.

4.3.2 | Example 2: "We Asked When Someone Needed Help" (Celia, Age 8)

The third graders regularly engaged in "peer coaching." After trying the practice for the first time in September, they debriefed. Ms. Kelly facilitated, asking what it meant to be a "peer" and a "coach," documenting children's responses on an anchor chart using their exact words. Kelesy, a Black girl, defined *peer* as "classmate," while Javi explained that coaching meant "passing information." Ms. Kelly then asked if learners had ever been students, and every child raised a hand. When she asked if anyone had ever been a teacher, the class responded the same way. This opening exchange disrupted traditional hierarchies, positioning all children as participants in both teaching and learning. The discussion continued:

***1 Ms. Kelly*:** What else?

***2 Easton*:** We ask questions!

***3 Ms. Kelly*:** Okay! Did Javi do that for you as the student today? And did it help you as the coach?

***5 Easton and Javi*:** [Smile and nod]

***6 Faith*:** and if they need something you can tell them.

***7 Ms. Kelly*:** Okay! And what else?

***8 Celia*:** We asked when we needed help. And also hand signals. Leigh would ask me if I knew how to do it, and I would say yes.

***10 Leigh*:** And, I said if I needed help I would do this [waves]

***11 Ms. Kelly*:** Very cool. And you know what else was cool? Celia, your coach was Leigh. And then when you finished, you said, "Can I be a coach?" and you did. You coached Isabela! So you passed it along... If you were a coach, what made you successful today?

***15 Amanda*:** Not telling the answer, but giving the problem

***16 Ms. Kelly*:** So not telling the answer but giving clues to help

***17 Justin*:** We let them think about it

***18 Ms. Kelly*:** Thinking time is really important

***19 Amanda*:** Yeah. That's how we can do the problem. We can do it together.

As children elaborated on what coaches do, they collectively authored the norms of the practice. Easton's "We ask questions!" (line 2) and Celia's "We asked when we needed help" (lines 8–9) used first-person plural pronouns, indexing shared responsibility. The pronoun choice positioned participants as potential askers *and* givers of help, collapsing the helper and helped binary. Celia emphasized mutual inquiry and consent, framing a collective ask for when help was needed. Further, Leigh's demonstration, "if I need help I would do this [waves]" (line 10), illustrated how gesture functioned as

a consent mechanism, a visible and non-verbal request allowing the coach to offer rather than impose or assume support. This mediated action (Wohlwend 2021) redistributed authority by making help-seeking an empowered choice rather than a deficit.

Ms. Kelly's narration of Celia's transition from learner to coach (lines 11–14) reinforced fluid role movement; "Can I be a coach?" (line 11) repositioned Celia from recipient to initiator. Coaching was a fluid role to fill, not one held by a small group in the class, illustrating literacy learning as a co-authored, multidirectional process. Amanda, who frequently left the classroom for small-group support, articulated her coaching stance as "not telling the answer, but giving the problem" (line 15). The contrastive structure of "not telling, but giving" framed thinking time as shared intellectual labor. When Justin added, "We let them think about it" (line 17), the group collectively affirmed patience and agency as core literacy values. Using "let" indicated a granted permission, which positioned coaches as someone who created space, and the pronoun "them" amplified the learner's agency; they do the thinking, not the coach.

In these exchanges, authority moved through questions, time, and invitation rather than answers. This interactional pattern mirrored restorative principles of relational accountability and non-domination (Pranis 2012; Winn 2018), where responsibility was shared, voices were heard, and competence was collective. As Amanda concluded, "That's how we can do the problem... we can do it together" (line 19), the shift from the singular task to collective "we" positioned literacy learning itself as interdependent. Within the *Discourse of Belonging*, literate competence was enacted not as independence but as coordinated thinking in relation.

4.3.3 | Example 3: "Kings and Queens of Kindergarten" (Izaiah and Keyla, Age 6)

The final example draws on Ms. Ryan's concluding interview, triangulating classroom observation with teacher reflection. Ms. Ryan recounted a familiar early literacy task, sorting books by genre (in this case, fiction and informational), during which the children unsettled conventional categorizations. She reflected:

> They are internalizing this idea that they are readers. And they are writers, and they are part of this larger community [...] they are not limited to little books, and decodable readers. They have a greater depth of reading and books that feel real to them.

During the activity, Keyla and Izaiah placed *King of Kindergarten* (Barnes 2025) in the nonfiction pile. When Ms. Ryan asked why, they explained, "It was all real," and "The things that he did are the things that we do." In these brief responses, genre was redefined through lived experiences and knowledge. "It was all real" made a categorical claim: the copula "was" and the quantifier "all" refused qualification. Realness was framed as recognition and validation of their embodied knowledge.

Their second statement constructed equivalence through parallel structure and pronoun shift. "The things that he did are the things that we do" repeated "the things" in both clauses, aligning the character's actions with their lives. The movement from third-person "he" to first-person plural "we" collapsed the distance between narrative and lived experience. Genre, in this moment, was not a formal property of text but a relational judgment grounded in shared practice. When another child added, "You always ask questions, and I'm going to prove it," the adverb "always" invoked classroom history as evidence, and "I'm going to prove it" positioned the child as a knowledge-maker rather than a respondent. Together, these utterances shifted children from answering to defining what counted as real.

In continued discussion, children extended their reasoning by declaring that they were "the kings and queens of kindergarten," as fact and truth. The text was not about the character, but about naming and reflecting their perspectives and experiences in their lives. In claiming the title as their own, Keyla and Izaiah moved from evaluating the book to inhabiting it (Lysaker 2018; Holyoke 2024). Their reasoning drew on shared classroom histories and on recognition of Black childhood in the narrative. Naming the book as "real" claimed it as part of their social world and authored their identities as kings and queens through literacy. As Ms. Ryan reflected, "They felt strong enough in a literacy community to... push back on the norm." Belonging was enacted through interpretive authority and self-positioning.

Across classrooms, co-authoring functioned as a patterned literacy practice through which children shaped texts and the conditions of participation. Through pronoun shifts ("we need," "we can"), fluid roles ("Can I be a coach?"), and collective claims ("kings and queens of kindergarten"), children positioned themselves as designers of classroom norms and intellectual work. Unlike storying (Finding 1) or embodied listening (Finding 2), co-authoring amplified practices of shared governance. Children revised agreements, redefined genres, initiated repair, and shaped learning conditions. Within the grounded theory, belonging operated as collective authorship, and as an ongoing practice of designing literacy and community together.

5 | Discussion

In early elementary contexts, dominant discourses often privilege singular ways of knowing, rigid literacy norms, and standardized discipline. Although scholars have long challenged such reductive frameworks (e.g., Dyson 2013, 2018; Osorio 2018; Souto-Manning and Yoon 2018), this grounded theory study contributes an empirical account of how children themselves enact, negotiate, and sustain belonging through everyday literacy practices. When we listen with theoretical attentiveness (Charmaz 2014), and analyze discourse as situated social action, we uncover how children use talk, text, gesture, silence, and embodied movement to articulate dreams,

build belonging, and actively reorganize community life. Where existing literacy scholarship often conceptualizes belonging as classroom climate, identity affirmation, or affective outcome, this grounded theory reconceptualizes belonging as a patterned discourse practice enacted through storying, embodied listening, and co-authoring. It demonstrates how young children collectively produce recognition and membership through literate action.

This study extends sociocultural models of literacy by theorizing belonging as a *literate accomplishment*, as something *done* through patterned interaction. It advances discourse theory by demonstrating how young children collectively author a Discourse, shared ways of speaking, acting, and being, that positions themselves and others as members of a community (Gee 2015; Scollon and Scollon 2003). In doing so, early childhood literacy is repositioned as a site of relational and restorative justice rather than individual skill acquisition alone.

Analysis revealed that children's agency in authoring belonging was enacted within, not apart from, adult authority and institutional structures. The *Discourse of Belonging*, as a grounded theory, accounts for how children navigate power even as they exercise intellectually literate work. Children's racial, linguistic, and cultural identities shaped these practices in powerful ways, and understanding how requires attending to both children's epistemic strength and the structural conditions they navigated.

Children's literate work unfolded within adult-structured participation frameworks that enabled and constrained belonging. Keyla initiated the circle that supported Ms. Ryan's emotional repair, demonstrating sophisticated relational literacy. Yet this circle existed as an adult-designed restorative structure, and Keyla's leadership, although real, also performed emotional labor that research documents Black girls are disproportionately expected to provide in educational settings (Morris 2019). Jordan exercised pedagogical authority by establishing participation norms in the group interview, positioning himself as a knowledge-holder and community architect. He did this as a Black child in a predominantly white classroom, navigating institutional norms that often position children of Color as needing to conform rather than lead (Dyson 2018; Souto-Manning 2021). His leadership required relational sophistication and cultural navigation simultaneously. Ms. Kelly's differential uptake during the heroes circle, strategic silence when Javi disclosed his father's deportation, and verbal facilitation when Christopher expressed uncertainty demonstrated pedagogical discernment that created space for peer-led witnessing while also shaping what children could take up. Adult authority operated through pedagogical design and strategic engagement.

These patterns illustrate how belonging operated within the classrooms. Noelle drew on African American communicative traditions through call-and-response to organize collective writing, exercising cultural and pedagogical leadership. This leadership was recognized and ratified within the classroom, yet such recognition is not guaranteed across educational contexts where Black children's cultural practices are often pathologized rather than honored as epistemic resources (Adjapong and Emdin 2015). Darnell theorized that the circle "protects us," claiming membership and safety within a classroom structure. This claim gains additional meaning when understood against the reality that he was frequently excluded through punitive discipline in other school contexts; protection was needed because harm existed elsewhere. Too often, race is invoked in literacy research only to document harm. This study suggests that racial identity must also be theorized as a site of epistemic strength, relational insight, and leadership, while simultaneously recognizing the institutional conditions that make such strength necessary.

Across the corpus, not all children's contributions received uptake. In several circle discussions, children initiated ideas that were briefly affirmed, then redirected to align with instructional goals. Some stories were acknowledged but not extended. Silence sometimes marked hesitation or constraint rather than choice. These disconfirming cases illuminate a *Discourse of Belonging's* negotiated nature. Belonging was an ongoing and evolving interactional achievement, which required continual uptake, alignment, and repair. Repair was sometimes interpersonal, and other times was about repair for external factors, such as structural harm or injustices. Attending to these tensions strengthens the grounded theory by foregrounding how children's agency emerged within and sometimes against the social histories and power relations of classroom life. Understanding belonging as contingent, negotiated, and enacted within power relations positions children as theorists navigating real constraints while actively authoring alternatives. This empirical reality calls for educators and researchers to design instruction and systems that recognize children's discursive work and reduce the conditions that make such navigation necessary.

This theory offers a lens for examining how children's situated literacies interact with institutional systems of standardization (Brandt and Clinton 2002). The practices documented here enact a restorative vision of schooling that resonates with international calls to reimagine early literacy as relational, plural, and participatory (Comber and Woods 2018).

5.1 | What Is a Theory of Children's Discourse of Belonging?

Storytelling, embodied listening, and co-authorship gain analytic meaning when understood as interdependent discourse practices rather than isolated skills or behaviors. Viewed through a restorative justice lens, these strands constitute a Discourse, a patterned way of being literate that is dialogic, relational, and justice-oriented. Children's literacies function as collective acts of worldmaking through which social relations, identities, and responsibilities are continuously negotiated.

Layla's illustration (Figure 1) of "22 hearts into one" captures this theory visually and theoretically. Her image refuses the binary of individual versus collective: each of the 22 hearts remains distinct in shape and position, yet all move toward unity. This is not assimilation, where difference is erased for the sake of oneness, nor fragmentation, where individuals exist separately. Instead, Layla theorizes belonging as simultaneity, individual and collective; always both. This representation exemplifies heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1986) not as abstract plurality but as a lived classroom practice in which difference is sustained within unity. Children

do not lose themselves to belong; they author belonging through the cultural, linguistic, and relational practices that make them particular. The classroom becomes a site of co-authorship rather than assimilation, where belonging is enacted through literacies that honor individuality while cultivating collectivity.

This orientation toward both individuality and collective relation reframes education not as the construction of belonging, but as the cultivation of conditions in which belonging can emerge. Layla's 22 hearts do not need to be engineered into sameness; they are drawn together through relational practice while remaining distinct. The implication is not that teachers build belonging into children, but that they design structures in which children's existing capacities for connection, difference, and co-authorship can surface, circulate, and flourish. In this sense, literacy classrooms become spaces where relational brilliance is recognized rather than imposed.

6 | Implications

Taking a belonging lens requires and offers new possibilities for literacy research, pedagogy, and educational design. For research, it calls for reframing literacy inquiry to take children's interactional practices seriously as sites of theory-building. Too often, literacy is defined through decontextualized skills, obscuring the sophisticated meaning-making children already engage in. Attending to children's discourse, what is said, unsaid, taken up, resisted, or repaired, reveals them as active designers of social life, not passive recipients of instruction. This includes attending to power, recognizing children's cultural practices as epistemic resources, and examining how children theorize within constraints. Methodologically, it means centering discourse analysis, honoring children as competent informants, and building theory from their literate action.

For instruction and practice, belonging is shaped through acts of connection, authorship, and intersectional identity work. Race, language, gender, and culture influence how children are positioned and how they position themselves through literacy. Supporting a Discourse of Belonging requires pedagogies that make space for children's multimodal, relational ways of knowing, rather than demanding conformity to narrow norms of participation. Pedagogically, this means designing structures that redistribute authority, honor children's cultural literacies as organizing practices, and create conditions where belonging does not require disproportionate labor from children of Color. It means recognizing that restorative justice is not a program to implement but a relational orientation that permeates literacy instruction.

For educational systems and policy, this research reestablishes literacy as a collective pursuit. Belonging is built through shared acts of reading, writing, listening, and storying that cultivate connection and co-authorship. As Dylan said, "It's everyone's powerful words." When children speak, the pedagogical task is not merely to evaluate or manage talk, but to listen analytically and respond relationally. Systemically, a *Discourse of Belonging* challenges standardization and compliance-based accountability, calling instead for literacy frameworks centered on relational participation, cultural pluralism, and justice. A *Discourse of Belonging* is not only about reading and writing, but about learning how to live together through empathy, responsibility, and shared authorship.

This grounded theory conceptualizes belonging as a patterned literacy practice enacted through storying, listening, and co-authoring. Across classrooms, these practices organized participation, redistributed authority, and made space for recognition within everyday literacy events. By tracing how children used language, embodiment, and text-making to negotiate membership and repair, this study reframes early literacy classrooms as sites where relational worlds are actively authored. Belonging, in this account, is not cultivated through programs or declarations; it is accomplished through interaction.

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Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent in accordance with institutional and ethical guidelines.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

[1] Throughout the paper, each transcription is written in play-script format for ease of readability. Participant pseudonyms are bolded as they communicate verbally or non-verbally. Nonverbal and gestural communication are included in parenthesis (), and pauses are noted (.) with a period marking each second. I add punctuation as aligned to the speech patterns of the children, and I use alternate spelling of words to honor the specifics in how the young children talked and emphasized their speech.

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