

## CHAPTER 20.

# A GRADUATE SCHOOL “DROP-OUT”—AFTER SCHOOL

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When Kim Rankin, whom you'll meet in this chapter, wryly described herself as a graduate school drop-out, her quip relied on our society's sense that dropping out signifies failure. Implicitly, she called up our nation's problematic sense that growth and change are methodical and linear, planned and predictable. In contrast to the stigma around dropping out, Pegeen Reichert Powell (2014) argues against retention as a measure of students' academic success. She urges us to honor the reasons why students do and frame both school and dropping out as part of a whole—as the “long run” of students' learning, a run “better envisioned as a series of short sprints in a variety of directions, interspersed with long slow rambles and even extended periods on the bench” when students drop out (p. 111). Powell's insights about academic lifespans and Kim's literacy life itself challenge the cultural measure of growth and success. Kim's path, like so many others', is characterized by starts, stops, and tangential explorations; enriched within multiple contexts; and influenced by all of life's vicissitudes, elements significant in studies of lifespan writing and literacy that many investigative methods miss by isolating small parts from the whole.

Much of this chapter focuses on the recent stages of Kim's long run through literacy—on literacies emplaced within the mid-life context of co-parenting an adopted child born with considerable impairments that constrain both his physical health and literacy life. Kim and her family's commitment to social justice through an evangelical Christian lens led them to adopt this particular baby. This part of Kim's literacy lifespan, as well as the whole, includes desperate sprints, agonizing rambles, changes in direction, and the fierce learning of new literacies that concerns for this child's health have led her towards, ones motivated in ways similar to Jonathan Alexander's (2018) learning how to be a gay man. Alexander writes that “[w]e seek out different kinds of literacies, different ways of being literate in the world. And that seeking out often arises out of deeply felt needs to connect with others, to nourish affinities and form alliances that can, in some cases, be life saving” (p. 531). Kim has, for many years of her life if not all of them, developed and used literacies out of “deeply felt needs to . . .

nourish affinities and form alliances.” Recent versions of it have been unmistakably “life-saving” as breathing emergencies have threatened her child’s life.

Both Powell’s insights and Kim’s lifespan itself offer perspectives different from steady, linear growth. In Kim’s case, dropping out is simultaneously dropping in because she dropped out of graduate school as her baby’s health required her to enter new literacy worlds around the complex medical issues he suffered from, the swath of medical specialties he required care from, and the community services (and absence of them) that the baby needed. Her dropping out and dropping in speaks to a lifespan *ecology* of changing, flourishing literacies linked with withdrawals from institutional settings, an ecology within which family, community, religion, and social justice circumstances circulate and play powerful roles. Kim did indeed drop out of graduate school, but her literacy lifespan is anything but the failure that the term “drop out” calls up. She may have left her formal graduate school life unfinished, but her writing and literacy lives multiplied, and through them, she developed new, expert literacies closely tied to her family and community needs.

Kim’s literacy life shows us the influence of one’s family and community life on literacy, a perspective we easily consider with young learners. But our scholarship needs to explore this perspective in relation to older learners as well. For this and other reasons, Kim’s literary lifespan makes it an especially important inclusion in this book. It speaks to the importance in lifespan methodologies this volume addresses and, especially, illustrates how any single episode in the lifespan of literacy might lead researchers to seriously misconstrue the whole, similar to the ways that Compton-Lilly (this volume) resists tidy conclusions about her participants’ literacy and remains tentative in her analysis subject to further experiences. While it is unrealistic to imagine that a full lifespan of literacy can be examined only at the end of one’s life, it is also clear that truncating a literacy’s lifespan risks missing important components of our writing lives. As the editors of the book explain, “The way [this chapter follows] the complex literate action of . . . [Kim] across lifeworlds, events, histories, and long swaths of time highlights . . . not just where various methodologies fall short, but the richly literate lives that focusing on particular parts of the lifespan (or particular segments of life-wide writing) may miss.” This chapter follows Kim’s complex literacy life after the adoption of a special needs baby, but it builds on some of her earliest childhood literacy practices in which patterns were laid that she replicates here, in mid-life.

## **METHODS AND METHODOLOGY: HOW I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT KIM’S LITERACY ACROSS HER LIFESPAN**

Because no single method or methodology nor a combination of empirical investigative techniques would have uncovered all that we learn about Kim’s literacy

life, this section suggests and the book editors acknowledge what might be lost by an overemphasis on methodology as a guarantor of scholarly excellence. To understand Kim’s lifespan of literacy is impossible without understanding how deeply and complexly it is embedded within family, community, religious, and social justice contexts; institutional acceptance and rejection of non-traditional literate practices; and accepted methods of credentializing professionals. Through Kim’s literacy life, she has become expert at improvisation—the heart of scholarly methodologies that Phillips and Dippre identify in their introduction—and in this way she herself *embodies* another central research methodology *in her lived experience*, another hint of what might be lost with exclusive emphasis on methodological purity.

At stake for lifespan writing research and its reciprocal impact on all literacy research is what writing studies has been learning for decades—that community, family, and socio-cultural lives and their diversity impact student learning and literacy behavior.

This chapter thus engages narrative to explain how I’ve encountered the range of Kim’s lifespan literacy, but I should note a bit of background on this method. Storying and/or scholarly advice from one individual’s perspective had prominent roles in mid- and late twentieth century scholarship. Then, the discipline called for something else, for evidence, empirical and often measurable evidence. Currently, *storying* and *counterstorying* are again becoming accepted methodological tools (Burrows, 2020; Maraj, 2020; Martinez, 2020) and for good reason. They counteract western epistemological dichotomies (logic/emotion, mind/body); they enable relationality as a principle of scholarship, a principle that feminist, Indigenous, and minority scholarship value; and they build on the intimacy that Jessica Restaino (2019) has identified as a component missing from much of our literacy scholarship. *Storying* and its power need to be better understood, as Amy E. Robillard and D. Shane Combs called for in *How Stories Teach Us: Composition, Life Writing, and Blended Scholarship* (2019).

For my *storying* here, I’ve garnered information from nine different sources: 1) Kim’s writing in graduate classes she took from me and 2) our participation in a three-year long informal writing/study/focus group that arose out of those classes. I convened the group when it became clear that several students wanted more time to explore their literacy and the writing of their literacy histories. Toward the end of that group’s meetings, 3) four of us created a panel for the Conference on College Composition and Communication about our literacy learning, and so we were collaborators if not co-authors.

After three years, 4) the group continued to meet socially now and then, and Kim and I kept in touch, especially when 5) either of us was involved in

a writing project that required the other's eyes. For me, that was when 6) Kim wrote a mini-chapter for my book on place and literacy. For Kim, it was when 7) she was creating a keynote address for a conference on augmentative and alternative communication (about which you'll soon read more) and when 8) she was creating a family cookbook as a special gift. 9) Informal coffee klatches and Easter dinners have also figured into our "data-gathering," but of course that phraseology mischaracterizes the nature of those meetings.

To some extent, our work for this project uses writer-informed methods, but the inquiry we followed here is more free-flowing than even that method articulates (Naftzinger, 2020). Our interaction over these years has moved recursively and non-linearly, something that characterizes certain kinds of lifespan writing research, as Collie Fulford & Lauren Rosenberg and Catherine Compton-Lilly discuss elsewhere in this volume. When an initial project finishes, the participants stay in touch as a result of the relationships established, and other projects emerge. Serendipity also plays a major role in this kind of scholarly inquiry.

## **STORYING: DROPPING OUT**

When I first met Kim, she had completed her undergrad degree and begun graduate studies. At this point, it would appear she was erasing her first drop-out status since she had returned to college after long years away—that she was now first-string instead of on the bench. Her public reason for returning was that it was "her turn" now that most of her children were out of the house. She also imagined that she would teach in a community college and thus needed the credential, a goal that changed considerably when overwhelming family needs caused her to drop out of graduate school.

Kim explains her first dropping out in a literacy history entitled "The Road to Reinvention." Her school life, from second grade through her young adult attempt at college, is where the traumas of her childhood focused their impact. For example, she changed schools and encountered drastically different curricula and methods that saw her as deficient and mislabeled her literacy abilities (as Mike Rose's [1989] were), but other trauma accosted her later, as well. After eleven years of public school and a bit of college, she dropped out at age twenty. To explain it, she writes "I needed something college courses couldn't provide. Healing." And what provided that healing was in part a very specific kind of literacy learning embedded in the heat of deep, rich, multifaceted, interpersonal connections that she had experienced before second grade, as I'll explain below. Her early literacy scenes are the kind of experience she reinvented in her adult life through evangelical spirituality and the homeschooling she invented for five of her own children as well as those in a homeschool writing cooperative.

## FAMILY LITERACY LEARNING

Before Kim’s second grade, her father taught at a historically black college in the South. During the very early 1970s, when “our country was . . . boiling with racial issues,” whites in the town “ostracized the new professors” and the “Ku Klux Klan was wreaking havoc in my parents’ lives” (Kim, p. 1). Kim’s father and one particular colleague often “would discuss school dynamics and strategize where to apply for work when the federal grant money dried up” (Kim, p. 2). She writes that she felt “a particular liking” for this colleague who “would pull me into his lap for a story” (p. 2) before the adult conversation began. “My father’s co-workers seemed as permanent a fixture in the household as the wide oak baseboard. Many accepted me onto their lap when I arrived with book in hand. Books meant adults, who never played, would stop and spend time with me. I felt loved through books” (p. 2). This scene, I believe, becomes the prototype for much if not all of the literacy learning that Kim values and creates, for herself and others.

When Kim was six, her father worked another job that also engaged her in his teaching and learning community. As soon as the school bus dropped her off at home, she

would head straight to my Dad’s math classroom. . . . I entered without knocking. Crayons and a thick, hardback, blank book sat on the corner of my father’s desk. Mine for the taking. Sprawled on the floor, I would draw and listen to him teach (Kim, p. 2).

Kim was not only part of her father’s classroom, but also integrated in other of the school’s activities and communities, especially the drama performances. As the much older students finished math class and headed for the dorms, Kim went with them to pick up Shakespeare scripts, and then they all headed to play practice. Besides rehearsing and performing Shakespeare, she experienced “immense freedom” (Kim, p. 3) to, for example, compare the campus’s rattlesnake population to field guides,

write notes to other faculty children on classroom chalkboards, . . . sit with students in the boarding school cafeteria doodling on their homework, . . . be loud in the school library, and . . . be ignorant that most first graders experienced reading and writing very differently. I was immersed in an academic community of high school students, staff, faculty, headmaster and families pursuing excellence together. There was no line of separation between my abilities and what we experienced collectively (Kim, p. 3-4).

Although Kim doesn't note it, I see these moments as ones in which her parents' trust gave her much freedom from their direct control and, concurrently, significant levels of independence and self-sponsored and communal literacy activities.

During this time and later on a summer vacation or two, Kim was again an independent learner and the literacies she learned were often and significantly developed with her father. During her first-grade year, Kim and her father "would spend hours flying about the Arizona mesas in a red and white rented Cessna 150. As co-pilot, my job was to read the laborious pre-flight checklist from his silver clipboard" (Kim, 3). She would announce "each maneuver importantly" and her father would respond with "check," the collaborative signal between pilots that the task was accomplished (Kim, p. 3). At age six, Kim couldn't fully decode all the technical, pre-flight language, but that didn't matter. Her father had the list memorized and helped her. In these ways, her father created a collaborative role for his daughter, one as important to the task at hand as his was.

He created a similar collaborative role for her years later, when they surveyed property in the Colorado mountains for local contractors who were developing an outdoor classroom. "The literacy practices I had loved as a small child, reading and writing alongside adults, would come alive again in the mountains" (Kim, p. 7) where she "was positioned at the survey pole end of the chain" and together they "recorded numbers and words in thick, black, hardbound books" (Kim, p. 7). Kim saw the two of them as "collaborating authors" (Kim, p. 7) as her father declared: "Couldn't write this without you at the other end of the chain" (Kim, p. 7). These practices of and contexts for literate behavior parallel those of the Old Order Amish family that Andrea Fishman (1990) records in "Becoming Literate: A Lesson from the Amish." In the Amish family, we see imperfect literacy accepted as full literacy with the support of family members who fill in the lacunae in younger member's literacy. We see collaboration across literacy tasks among family members rather than competition in family games, letter writing, singing, and more.

Because of family circumstances, Kim's schooling became traditionally institutional in the second grade and continued through the next many years. For much of the time, she complied with school patterns of learning, but in her adolescence, the man who had held the four-year old on his lap reconnected through letters in which he "wrote of the energy and enthusiasm for life he saw in me, of my deep love of books, and the cherished time we shared reading" (Kim, p. 8). Kim says this man's "brief reentry into my life empowered me to defy the people and situations that were holding me back" (Kim, p. 9) even though the road to defiance was long.

## A TURNING POINT: DROPPING OUT AND STEPPING IN

One clear marker of this defiance as well as Kim’s independence and self-sponsored literate practices is when she dropped out of college to tour the British Isles for six months alone, using money she had earned from summer jobs. When she left this country, she took a backpack, a journal, and a Bible, which she read from nightly—“a new habit for me,” (p. 10), she says. It was in an Anglican church where “Jesus found me,” (p. 10), and on this trip her life as an evangelical Christian began. Kim also wrote regularly in her composition book and kept meticulous records of where she visited, the money she spent, and the exchange rates for each transaction—the kind of recording she had learned with her father and will use again with her son’s medical conditions.

She calls her solo trip to the British Isles a “turning point” and with it, “the role of literacy changed” (p. 11) as “reading and writing [became] an extension of daily living” (p. 10) instead of unrewarding, school-enforced chores. She

searched . . . books for snippets of history connected to what I had seen each day. I filled the blank pages [of composition books] with reading notes. I was history teacher—assigning pages of reading and planning daily field trips. I was student—collecting facts. . . . Reading and writing helped me sort out my life (p. 10).

Her behavior then is a prototype of hers later as a homeschool teacher.

Evangelical Christianity became especially threaded through her life as she soon married and “assimilated [into] the church culture of my husband’s youth” (p. 12), a culture in which “[p]arishioners lived out their convictions of biblical patriarchy through homeschooling” (Kim, p. 12) and which gave her an institutional, familial, and self-supported motive for homeschooling. Although she and her husband would eventually leave this church and its constraints, early on it gave Kim a way to “ignore the [serious] wounds of my past” (Kim, p. 12).

## HOMESCHOOLING

In addition to the literacies of evangelical Christianity and the healing it offered, Kim developed new and different ones as her children arrived, and she began homeschooling them in 1993. Then, she says, homeschooling was not common practice, and so she felt compelled to secrecy about it in public settings. For example, in grocery store check-out lines with a child who *should* have been in school, she took efforts to disguise her homeschooling gig. Nonetheless, she was determined to school her own children, and during the following years,



she taught five of them. As homeschool teacher, her literacy life included deep research into state standards and homeschooling curricula—a big business I was unaware of—but she had developed enough agency not to succumb to its totalizing. “When I couldn’t find science and history materials that met my expectation for excellence, accuracy, and hands-on learning activities, I created my own” (Kim, p. 12). An example of her curricular innovation appeared in an offhand class comment she once made. On the way to her main point, she casually referred to a day when, to study carbon, she and her youngest child were roasting a marshmallow over the kitchen stove. This homey science seemed as normal to Kim as any high school laboratory would to most teenagers and science teachers. Through this phase of her literacy lifespan, Kim also wrote along with her children, partly as a way to test the value of what she was assigning and to keep her writing skills not only sharp, but also to improve them.

In this first, long phase of homeschooling, Kim delivered modified versions of each grade, K-12, five separate times, once for each child she schooled. By one calculation (13 years of instruction X 5 children), she had designed and delivered sixty-five year-long language learning classes before she completed her undergraduate degree. She had also delivered writing instruction for many more than her own children through the homeschool collective I mentioned above, one of the means homeschooling parents design to offer their children the benefit of expertise they themselves may not have.

By any measure, she was an experienced writing instructor, but experience does not necessarily mean expertise. One of the things she has said about entering graduate school is that she wanted to learn if, as a writing teacher, she’d “done it right.” What I know about her now suggests that she developed a well-honed sense of what we would call best practices. As much as I have been frustrated in my career when a philosophy and/or a history Ph.D. has been hired to teach college writing—hired without any training in composition pedagogy—I see flaws not only in our field’s hiring practices but also our credentializing ones.

## **A NEW HOME LIFE—AND THE LITERACIES IT CALLED FOR**

Kim’s self-named images—Kim the drop-out and Kim-who-is-not-a-writer (as she self-consciously claimed)—are images I want to connect with Kim the informal learner, Kim the self-taught instructor, Kim the mother, and several other images of Kim, some of which we’ve not yet met, images from myriad coalescing ecologies of talent and skill; from need, advocacy, and self-instruction; from immersion in medical communities, institutions, and insurance agencies; and from medical treatments and the intricacies of untreatable impairments.



Kim’s immersion in all of these intersecting ecologies relates to the medically-complex, voiceless infant she and her husband adopted nine years ago as the last of their biological children was leaving home. On the first night the baby stayed with them, he nearly died when he stopped breathing. The home-duty nurse, enlisted as a safeguard for the parents and child, did not know how to treat him. Neither did the first responders who were called to the home. The household was in a crisis, and life-saving means were called for. Kim and her husband, who had had the *preliminary but minimal* training required by the foster child placement agencies, became the experts in handling the baby’s external breathing apparatus (by unplugging a tracheotomy tube). The nurse was unable to help, and the EMS technicians had to rely on the newly educated parents to keep the baby alive as they ambulated him to the hospital. He has lived nine years since then. Kim, as a literacy learner, has been crucial in his longevity.<sup>1</sup>

This dire emergency was only one in a very long string of life-threatening events in the family’s life. But the story I want to tell is not one of harrowing human crises—even though Kim can tell too many of them. Instead, it is one that leads away from crises into teaching and learning and advocacy and community involvement and so much more I can’t even say all the components: literacy learning that many in our country undergo when a loved one is quite ill.<sup>2</sup> It is a kind of learning and care that forced Kim to drop out of graduate school. Did this dropping out again signal she had failed, as this chapter’s introduction might suggest? Clearly not.

## A NON-CREDENTIALIZED TEACHER, AGAIN

In this learning scene, we see Kim once again evolve from a novice to an expert outside of institutionalized means of credentialing. Within the very first years of the baby’s life, Kim transformed into a teacher for the local EMS squads. She and her husband had been the experts in the baby’s first crisis in their family, and because she knew more than the squad about how to address a trach crisis, she saw a need and responded to it, both that night and for months and years

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1 Kim and her husband are a deeply interdependent team in parenting the child, but because he works outside the home, Kim has necessarily taken the primary role in inquiry and literacy learning. We glimpse her in this role when she conducts a swallow study on their son to help identify in meticulous detail the exact source of one of his problems. Because his physiological problems are so complex and rare, physicians, medical teams, and therapists often have little if any experience working with the exact physiological profile they confront in the child.

2 Jessica Restaino’s (2019) book *Surrender: Feminist rhetoric and ethics in love and illness* details the medical literacies she had to learn as her friend suffered through and died from cancer. Her need to learn is embedded in her very close friendship, the many languages (besides medical) that she and her friend needed, and the value that intimacy brings to scholarly endeavors.

afterward, as she and the family joined a pilot program that taught the local EMS squad to equip responders with the skills they needed to serve the community better. For example, every Sunday evening, when the baby's routine trach exchange happened, the EMS folks were at the baby's crib to watch and then eventually to assist in order to acquire the expertise themselves. She and the baby, who soon became a toddler, eventually visited local fire stations to further enhance the community interactions with the family, and photos of the baby and fire trucks dot the family photo albums.

Kim and her family developed other close ties with the emergency responders. For example, serious floods have, in the years of the boy's life, threatened the escape routes her family could take from home, and even though flood waters did not threaten their house, the boy frequently and unexpectedly needs emergency hospitalization, and for the family to be stranded in their hilltop home could threaten his life. In such cases, Kim has been in direct telephone contact with the EMS squads for detailed information on how fast floodwater was rising, how long it was safe to remain on their hilltop, and when an escape route would be blocked.

But as we've seen, the EMS people also depended on her, and this interdependency creates a web in which the lines of agency and expertise overlap and integrate recursively. As this interaction evolved, both Kim and the EMS people engaged in lifespan literacy expansion that affected one boy's life, one family's medical security, and the wider sociocultural spaces they all operated within.

## **RECURSIVE LITERACY LEARNING: KIM'S CO-PILOT AND SURVEY SKILLS, REPURPOSED**

What comes next is an expansion of Kim's self-sponsored learning as the parent of a child with complex medical issues, as an informed literacy-educator, and as a mother invested in linguistic justice for her child. Even before the boy joined her home, Kim had begun to educate herself on how to treat the child's needs, and she has never stopped learning and researching. For example, for one long stretch of time, she kept meticulous logs (using approved methods of medical research) on his feeding schedules and the results of swallowing to identify the exact source of a leak in his breathing and swallowing apparatus. She colored his food intake with playdough, just as medical technicians would use other kinds of substances in a laboratory test, and through them, she pinpointed where the leak had to have been happening.

She has a notebook full of records (like her earlier co-pilot and survey record books) that could have complemented the medical and therapy communities' diagnoses and treatment plans. Her logs and their data, however, were ignored

by therapists because they didn't fit into prescribed protocols for patient treatment, even though they provided evidence that documented exactly the eventual diagnosis and treatment the experts arrived at. Their new diagnosis and plan validated the accuracy of Kim's findings, but because she worked outside the accepted disciplinary parameters, her records were ignored and the child suffered months longer than he needed to.

## MORE CHOICES

Even in the child's very early years, Kim's extensive interaction with physical, speech, and occupational therapists and her significant observational skills gave her repeated and irrefutable evidence that what a child can do in a natural setting is very different from how his performance stacks up against benchmark protocols that professionals use—to determine eligibility for continued therapy, for example. The stakes are high and yet valuable information is ignored. Again and again, the family's lived experiences have demonstrated that the goal of an independent life for the child would require constant advocacy for him and, especially, dedication to extending her son's capabilities far beyond what professional protocols imagine.

St. Louis, our home location, is rich in medical resources, and Kim's family availed itself of much that our location offers—a battery of physicians, therapies, social services, and more. Kim's research, self-instruction, and advocacy interwove repeatedly and continually as the baby became a child and his multiple, recurring ailments needed new assessments and treatment. After a few years, Kim, in consultation with the medical teams here, developed a nagging feeling that the boy's future health might be beyond the care that St. Louis offered.

The family was facing a crucial decision in the child's life about needed surgery. The available options to correct his throat's physiological design offered two choices: one would enable him to swallow and eat normally; the other might allow him to speak. But no surgery would allow him to do both. As the life-altering choice lingered in the offing, Kim did extensive research to uncover medical centers that might offer experience with the kind of care her son needed. She found a sliver of hope in Cincinnati, and after lengthy consideration, she contacted a Cincinnati physician, explained the boy's complex medical conditions and needs, and received an immediate email answer even though the physician's automatic response had indicated he was on leave—such was his interest in the child's case and his desire to help.

This immediate response, the expression of interest in and experience with related problems, and in-depth conferencing between the two cities sent the family to Ohio, where the surgery was ultimately performed and where the boy

now makes regular visits. The surgery has reduced his frequent ailments and hospitalizations that resulted from how his complicated airways and limited immune system interacted with viruses in life-threatening ways. Kim had had to educate herself on the exact conditions of her son's airways and the terminologies multiple disciplines used as their practitioners treated him. Not a medical professional herself but an intelligent woman schooled in research methods and fiercely devoted to family advocacy, she necessarily worked outside disciplinary boundaries as she schooled herself and her husband in a route toward the best care for their son.

## THE CHILD'S SCHOOLING AND LITERACY ADVOCACY

When the baby was a toddler and it would have been time for him to start speaking, Kim set herself to another kind of learning—how best to teach literacy to a voiceless child—and in the process she herself had to learn more new literacies. Through trial-and-error practices, informed by all Kim knows about language instruction, some learned in the university and much learned on her own, she investigated several electronic tools and training systems and settled on one that comes out of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and its Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

AAC is an electronic “speech generating device capable of holding 14,000 words,” one she gave her child when he was twenty months old, much younger than when received wisdom begins this kind of training. The device is programmable so she can align its language with both the literacy learning the child needs and the literacies that her family and religious communities are immersed in. Since the child is voiceless, he has to use it whenever he wants to speak, whenever signing won't suffice, and whenever a child's patience and drive push him to take the time to punch out electronic words. Imagine a young, rambunctious toddler now nine-year old who must always carry a computer in order to communicate—to his family when he's excited about a truck he sees, to indicate pain when he's fallen, or to pray in church. That image might hint at the myriad efforts Kim and her husband have undertaken to teach the tools of communicative literacy to him—including the addition of a shoulder strap (created by one of their older sons) that attaches the device to his body so it is always nearby while his hands are free.

Through her knowledge as a parent, an informed literacy-educator, and a mother invested in linguistic justice for her child, Kim soon knew experientially much more about how and why to use AAC than professionals whose interaction with their clients was severely circumscribed by time, insurance company protocols, institutional school settings, and widely held beliefs about the limits

on literacy learning for children like Kim’s son. What he needs also often differs from the primary communities AAC serves, and so Kim has been on her own to invent what works for the child and their family. She keeps records, arranges her family’s days and activities to model words and concepts in the boy’s curriculum, and keeps in touch with the AAC community in ways that again signal her self-sponsored learning and credentialing.

When she first explored best practices and tools for teaching literacy to her son and, more robustly, as she settled on an AAC device, she used social media postings that led her to create a blog, one that soon developed a considerable number of followers—parents whose children need augmented communication practices and devices, AAC professionals themselves, and others. As a result, her researched practice, well documented and described in her blog, has made professionals eager to learn from her, and so she has been invited to speak as an authority on AAC communication in regional conferences. University speech pathology programs now also use her work in their academic courses.

Kim, as a self-sponsored learner and independent scholar and teacher, occupies a somewhat unique position in community and professional life. In some ways, she offers much more robust and targeted instruction for her son than schools are able to offer in special education programs. She has acquired a degree of professionalization that makes her a sought-after resource in the AAC community, but she has done so without the sanctioned credentials that academia and the health communities require. She and her family, dependent on community resources, have become resources to a number of different communities.

## **KIM BECOMES A KEYNOTE SPEAKER AND WRITES A SPEECH**

Kim, self-styled as a meager homeschool mom, has earned the respect of significant figures in the speech pathology arena that gives testimony to her extraordinary talents, intelligence, perseverance, and literacy learning proficiencies. How Kim rose to national attention as an AAC expert is a story with many chapters, one I can tell only in brief. The tension between institutionally sanctioned expertise and informally acquired expertise is poignantly and hauntingly evident in the following example of her writing process. Called to keynote for the first time, at an AAC regional conference, she began writing in early spring for a (pre-pandemic) October delivery date. How she prepared is the final topic of this chapter.

The conference, aimed at an audience of speech and language pathology practitioners, routinely designed the program to include a parent’s view as

evidence of what using AAC looks like in context—in the home and in a child's and family's life. That parent was Kim, who saw her charge as delivering the real-life, parent's view of using AAC. Following her sense of mission, she aimed to inspire the audience to attend follow-up break-out sessions on how to use the device and its affordances. Her process merits our attention.

Beginning in early spring, she set August first as the deadline for completing the presentation. Describing the process, she explained that she conceived of the speech as a story, so that's what she composed first—a story or composite of stories. Then she chose and inserted pictures. Her guiding principle for images was "What is the audience going to look at as I'm saying this?"

Then, she began memorizing the speech. She practiced and practiced delivering the written speech. She walked around her home, reading the speech silently and laying it down in her memory. By mid-September, she had fully memorized her keynote address and sought an audience, her adult, social worker daughter, who asked, as I did much later, why Kim had written it all out, why she hadn't created a PowerPoint. Kim says that it never occurred to her not to write it all out. She struggled with feeling stupid and took every measure to prevent that appearance.

She also was guided by 1) her desire to meet the organization's expectations; 2) a felt responsibility to bridge a homeschool/public school divide (given an audience with many public-school teachers and other professionals); 3) a desire to advocate for non-speaking people (to counter their unemployability); and 4) her fear of getting nervous (during the presentation) and making mistakes. Kim took extensive measures to meet the standards she set, ones that combined her own with external ones established by the context in which she would speak. Kim had two more test audiences, a friend to whom she delivered the address once and her husband, who listened twice.

Kim's official audience was speech and language pathology practitioners at an AAC regional conference sponsored by a consortium of school districts in Michigan. The program routinely includes a parent's view as evidence of AAC in context. Kim delivered her entire speech, going "off script" only twice—she made a point of telling me—once when she'd forgotten an important item and had to go back to retrieve it and once when the audience lovingly exclaimed at a sweet image of the child. Since then, she has delivered twelve talks on literacy and been paired as keynoter with Master Educator Karen Erickson, who does ground-breaking work as the Yoder Distinguished Professor in Allied Health Sciences and director of the Center for Literacy and Disability Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (<https://www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/directory/karen-erickson/>). Kim's work is also used in academic programs that prepare speech and language pathologists.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A Facebook post<sup>3</sup> about Kim’s current and past schooling hints at the ways in which lifespan writing research explores and illuminates the serendipity and weave of schooled literacy, literacy after school, and spiritual life. Kim posted an image of materials she had used in her second venture into college life (Figure 20.1)—her portfolio from the class in which she wrote the literacy history, Glenn and Ratcliffe’s (2011) book on silence and listening, and articles from a disability studies class on teaching writing. Her comment on the image follows the figure.

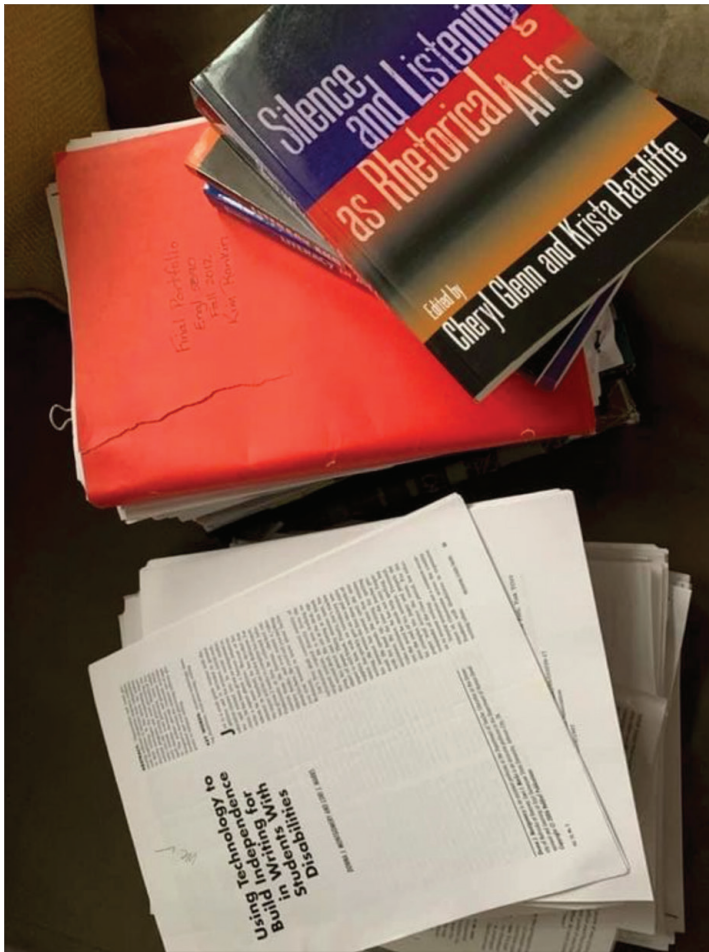


Figure 20.1. Kim’s Facebook Image

3 I share this Facebook post with Kim’s permission.



[S]ort[ing] through boxes this winter break, [and] this one contained things I read and wrote when I returned to college to finish my undergraduate degree and take some master level courses. If there was any doubt that brief piece of my life was deeply connected to what was before and what was to come, this should clear it up. Of course the mom of a non-speaking child read essays on silence and listening the year he was born and [still] with a foster family. You might see a stack of papers and books. I see God's hand in this box. (Facebook, 12/30/20).

Kim's brief interpretation of the materials she collected in this image emphasizes the ecologies within which Kim's lifespan of literacy has circulated. Her literacy cannot be understood separate from its existence both in school and outside of institutional schooling, in "deeply felt needs to connect with others, to nourish affinities and form alliances" (Alexander, 2018, p. 531), in her spiritual and religious life, and in her family, community, and professional circles. Jonathan Scott's (2022) recent *CCC* article, tying the newest neuroscience research to classroom curricula via transactional reading theory, is pertinent here. He argues and Kim's long lifespan writing demonstrates the significant role that lived experience plays in analytic literacy tasks—a simple point that Kim's writing and literacy life show us the complexity of, complexity that lifespan writing research enables us to learn about and that enriches our knowledge of writing itself. Kim and this volume offer us riches to be thankful for.

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