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ABSTRACT

This study examined the ways in which eighth grade girls in an urban middle school constructed social identities through their experiences with literary texts. It focused on what sociocultural representations about female identity and gendered expectations emerged in the transactions in the literacy events these girls experienced in English class. It also examined what meanings girls made from these gendered representations and how girls from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds took up and/or resisted the messages. Finally, the study investigated how the girls' transactions with literacy events in English class linked to their perceptions, insights, and understandings of the larger social order. Data were collected via observations, interviews with students and teachers, and collection of classroom artifacts. The seven study findings focused on ideologies of control, power, and cultural uniformity; new criticism and unexamined standpoints of social identity; constructing literature as removed from the lived social experience of girls' lives; silencing, sameness, and missed opportunities for dialogue; girls' lived experiences influencing their transactions with literature; literacy as a tool for socializing girls into culturally mainstream society; and fractured identities and colliding ideologies. Four implications for pedagogy and teacher education are listed. (SM)

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Missing Stories, Missing Lives: Urban Girls (Re)Constructing Race and Gender in the Literacy Classroom

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An individual's worldview is shaped by the social structures that exist within the particular society and culture in which she participates. Language and literacy are two such social structures. Transactions with literacy make possible representations of self and world. Individuals, responding to and shaped by experiences with language, knowledge, and patterns of interaction, construct subjectivities of gender, race, and class.

The ethnographic study I am reporting on, contributes to what we know about girls' classroom transactions with literacy by looking closely at the ways in which eighth grade girls in an urban middle school construct social identities through their experiences with literary texts. Specifically, I asked the following three questions:

1. What sociocultural representations about female identity and gendered expectations emerge in the transactions in the literacy events experienced by urban girls in a middle school English class?
2. What meanings do girls in this classroom make from these gendered representations? In what ways do girls from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds take up and/or resist these messages?
3. In what ways are these girls' transactions with literacy events in the English classroom linked to their perceptions, insights, and understandings of the larger social order?

The research site for this study was an urban middle school in a large district in Western New York. Ninety-seven percent of the students who attend this school fall at or below the poverty level. The eighth grade English class I observed represented a traditional mainstream class in both approaches to curriculum and to pedagogy. Data was gathered for this ethnography through extensive observation,

audiotaped interviews with selected focal students and the teacher, and the collection of classroom artifacts. Data analysis was conducted through a recursive process of analytic induction.

The eleven girls who participated in this study self-identified in the following way:

3 – African-American

1 – African-American/Puerto Rican

3 – European American

2 – Native American

1 – Native American/Puerto Rican

1 – Puerto Rican

Mary, the teacher in this study, was a white middle-class woman who has taught in urban schools for more than 20 years.

There are seven major findings of this study:

1. Ideologies of control, power, and cultural uniformity
2. New Criticism and unexamined standpoints of social identity
   - Reifying the literary text
   - Unexamined standpoints of social identity
3. Constructing literature as removed from the lived social experiences of girls' lives
   - Girls' understandings of social experience were devalued as a legitimate means of connecting to literature.
   - Girls' understandings of social experience, although affirmed, were not taken up as a tool for connecting literature to lived experience and social identity.

2. Silencing, sameness, and missed opportunities for dialogue
3. Girls' lived experience influenced their transactions with literature
4. Literacy as a tool for socializing girls into culturally mainstream society
5. Fractured identities and colliding ideologies

In consideration of the limited time we have, I am going to focus on 5 of these findings.

The first finding is an analysis of how the reifying of literary texts and the teacher's unexamined standpoint as a white middle-class woman significantly shaped what counted as knowledge and appropriate transactions with literacy .

New Criticism and unexamined standpoints of identity

Reifying the literary text. The teacher's pedagogy centered on providing students with access to academic literacy through close reading of literary texts. In the language of the literary theory known as New Criticism, the words in literary texts are reified as self-contained artifacts of cultural and objectively "true" knowledge, usually that of the dominant patriarchal white culture. As a consequence of teaching literature from this theoretical stance, awareness of the perspectives of women and people of color were not attended to by the teacher for the ways in which their voices could offer alternative views of the world.

Unexamined standpoints of identity. Significantly, teaching literary texts as artifacts of dominant culture allowed the teacher, a subject positioned as a member of this dominant culture, to insert her own unrecognized social standpoint into the teaching of literature. This unexamined standpoint, working in tandem with reified texts and New Criticism, contributed to the displacing of girls' lived experiences and worldviews as valuable tools for constructing knowledge through the reading of literature.

For instance, one day in class, Sharina, who self-identifies as African-American, read aloud her semi-autobiographical story. Her story, following the teacher's assignment, was based on a Greek myth they had just finished discussing. Here's a very condensed version of Sharina's story and the conversation that occurred between her and her teacher:

Sharina: There was a girl named Sirena and a boy named Eros. They started going together... [Eros] got a message that [Sirena] was going with this other dude...So he started going with this other girl... So the girl [Sirena] busted the [other girl] in the mouth. But [Sirena and Eros] got back together... So they did it.

Teacher: It has to be appropriate. I'm telling you right now, I'm going to stop you if it's not appropriate!

Sharina: There ain't nothing nasty in it! [She continues with her story.] So [Eros] went home with [Sirena]... And Sirena called and told him she was pregnant... And he lived with [Sirena and her mother]... Happily ever after.

When the language in Sharina's narrative began to focus on adolescent sexuality and pregnancy, the teacher interrupted her and warned Sharina that she needed to be "appropriate" or she would have to stop reading. When I interviewed Mary, she told me that she thought it was important that she determine *for* students notions of what was and what was not appropriate because, as she told me:

> Junior high is a very important time for establishing values. If students can see how people act in the world, not only within their families, they can see the correct way. If we don't let kids know what's not appropriate, how will they know?

Mary saw the teaching of literature as a way for students to learn "appropriate" ways of being in the world, but she did not recognize that what she taught as appropriate was embedded within an unconscious, unproblematized ideology that operated in the classroom as the social norm. As a result, the stories and voices of the girls in this class were situated as not relevant or even "inappropriate" by virtue of not only gender, but also their race, ethnicity, and class.

The enacted social languages of New Criticism and the teacher's own social standpoint enacted around the teaching of literary texts contributed to the next major finding:

(3) Constructing literature as removed from the lived social experiences of girls' lives.

The teacher's goals for academic literacy did not take up how girls' transactions with classroom literacy were linked to their own subjectivities and their related perceptions and understandings of the larger social order and their lives outside of school. In classroom literacy events, this negation of the girls as active meaning makers of texts occurred in two ways:

1) First, girls' understandings of social experiences were devalued as a legitimate means of connecting to literature.
2) Girls' understandings of social experience, although affirmed, were not taken up as a tool for connecting literature to lived experience and social identity.

Today, I'm only going to share an example of the first way:

It was three days before Valentine's Day and Mary brought in love poems for the class to read. The narrator in one of these poems laments that when her absent lover left, he took with him the rent money. At

this point in the reading of the poem, Alexis, a student who self-identified as African-American and Puerto Rican, exclaimed aloud, "He took the rent money!" Mary responded to Alexis's exclamation by telling her that this was an example of the poet's ability to express meaning without having to come right out and say how much she is going to miss her absent lover. In this example, Mary took up Alexis's response – not from her felt reaction to the poem – but rather as a poetic technique– and she then directed the class back to the text in order to continue to analyze themes that could be supported with textual evidence. As a result, Alexis did not have the opportunity to talk about why she found that line in the poem significant. The potential for the teacher and her students to engage with literature in more meaningful and transformative ways was lost.

I believe that in order to understand the significance of these lost opportunities, it's worth taking a minute to explore what an alternative pedagogy might have uncovered. While it is not possible to know what the conversation might have been had Mary asked Alexis to talk about how she felt about the fact that the rent money was gone, based on my interviews with Alexis, I'd like to offer one possibility. Alexis told me that she was raised with no money and that in her neighborhood people sell drugs in order to stay alive and put food on the table. She also told me:

> I would like to finish school...and get my mother out of the ghetto. Now, I don't want to sell drugs. But if I don't make it through school...it makes me have to [sell drugs]. ... My dream is to become a fashion designer... I'm going to college at New York Institute for Fashion. ... Sometime I think about being a stripper, but sometimes I don't.

Like most adolescents. Alexis has dreams and goals for her future. Yet her goals are tempered by the lack of economic and social empowerment she sees for those whose lives most closely connect to her own. Unfortunately, the opportunities to assist her toward a more critical literacy which could open space in her life to move the ambiguity present in her comments from the center to the margins was missing in this classroom.

5). Girls' lived experience influenced their transactions with literature

Although the discourse around literature dismissed girls' social roles outside of school as not relevant to classroom literacy, girls' perceptions and understandings of the larger social order were always

present in their transactions with literacy events in ways that were not overt or obvious. Nevertheless, their understandings directly impacted meanings they made from gendered and raced representations in the literature and the ways in which they took up and/or resisted these messages.

For example, Brandy, a Mohawk Native American girl, was deeply involved with her Native way of life outside of school. She had attended a protest rally in Albany where she learned that Abraham Lincoln, someone she used to admire, was responsible for killing Native peoples. She told me that her experiences had led her to believe that the Native American stories she read in English class were "kind of fake and sometimes real. They're just talking stuff to make us look bad. And I feel angry because they don't know anything about it." Yet, because there was no space for diverse voices and alternative perspectives, she had little to say during class about the Native literature that she and other students read. Her knowledge and experience as a Native American were not taken up in classroom discussions of Native American literature. When I asked the teacher to describe Brandy for me, is it any wonder that this is what she saw?

> She is very poor. She has a learning disability. She's just a typical
> Native American girl. Very reticent. But I thought she wrote really
> Good papers. She really would not articulate verbally. Brandy isn't very bright.

The sixth finding is the use of

6) Literacy as a tool for socializing girls into culturally mainstream society.

Transactions with literacy were socializing girls into white, middle-class points of view at the expense of their own ethnic and racial identities. Lisa, for example, who self-identified as African-American, was an honor roll student. She was the least resistant of all the girls to the teacher's thematic analyses of the literature and she never questioned images of gender or race in the literature or in the class discussions. Lisa sat silently at her desk and took notes on the literature based on the normalized definitions of femaleness – white, middle-class womanhood – that took center stage in transactions with literacy. In my interview with her, Lisa told me

> [I don't think] that anyone should be named a color because I'm not really black.
> You're not really white. So why should we be named black and white?
> I don't think that labels are really too good. I don't think there'd be racism

Without them.

Lisa's insistence that color is not a factor in identity allowed her to maintain a sense of cultural universality and a belief that individual histories are not differentiated by social constructions of race. In her transactions with literacy in this class, it allowed her to work through the teacher's purposes for reading texts, namely to identify "universal" literary themes that she could write about on her final exam. Importantly, however, it also required that she leave herself out of the text and not attend to her experiences as an African-American woman.

7) Fractured identities and colliding ideologies

When the multiple narratives that arise from difference were not affirmed in classroom literacy events, girls were not able to use their perspectives as a place where they could begin to interpret, construct, and interrogate their own social standpoints or positions. As a result, it was not possible for girls to begin to learn how texts produce and reproduce particular meanings and necessarily omit others. Rather, the disjunctures created among classroom texts and girls' lived experiences were a significant contributor to fractured social identities – a sense of individual self that was split between public and private identities.

For example, Nicole, who is a Seneca Native American, most admired those female characters in the literature she read for English class who she saw as courageous and who stood up for what they believed in. However, she saw no connection between these characters and her own life. She also denounced those female characters who she believed were more concerned with their relationships with men then with their own independence. Significantly, though, she thought that the characters she most readily identified with as having experiences similar to her own were those same female characters that she denounced. So, although she preferred and actively sought out stories about courageous women such as Harriet Tubman and women who had survived the Holocaust, she made no connection between their lives and her own. Nicole, who at some level resists the patriarchal ideologies embedded in texts, could not move her somewhat resistant feminist reading of stories outside of the text itself.

What became evident in my interviews with Nicole and the other girls was the ways in which stories of women who exhibit courage and self-determination are interrupted by culturally dominant stories which continue to cast female characters in a narrowly constructed patriarchal manner with males and romance at the center of female attention.

Implications for Pedagogy and Teacher Education

Based on the findings of this study, I want to conclude by briefly listing four implications for pedagogy and teacher education that presents a more constructive version of girls' classroom transactions with literacy.

1. Critical Inquiry and Narrative Voices – Girls need to be able to critically inquire into the interconnectedness of social conditions and social identities and the literary texts which represent different and competing cultural perspectives.
2. Creating Dialogic Spaces for Gender and Race – Literature needs to be presented in a way that validates students' prior lived experiences and knowledge. Girls also need to become aware of the social determinants of their voices so that they are able to develop and interrogate their own voices and experiences.
3. Classroom Literacy as a Language of Critique, Transformation, and Hope – Envisioning democratic classrooms means reading critically in order to perceive the interconnectedness of social conditions and practices, to be able to analyze those conditions and practices, and to possess the critical and political awareness to take action within and against them.
4. Teacher Education
    - We need to prepare teachers who are capable of addressing the intertextuality found among the diverse voices of texts, students, and larger social structures.
    - Teachers need to be prepared to come to classrooms with an understanding of how they actively produce, sustain, and legitimate particular meanings and experiences.
    - Teachers need to have a deep and critical sense of how their own values and experiences modify, shape, and (re)produce dominant institutionalized relationships of gender, race, class and power.

Transactions with literacy play a primary role in the creation of gender, race, and class because they shape our identities and provide us with a way of being in the world. Continuing to deepen our understanding of literacy as a social practice is essential work toward a more just and democratic society.

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