

Identity and Performance in Seventh Grade Students' Interpretations of  
Quality Literacy Learning in Class Discussions

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## Abstract

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to analyze seventh grade students' and teachers' perceptions of literacy learning in language arts and reading classes. This paper includes a report of a section of this study that focused on discussions about literature. The impact of this diverse school culture on teachers' literacy instruction and students' classroom experiences was also interpreted. Applying critical race theories, the researcher collected data in the form of interviews and classroom observations. Results seemed to indicate that, at least for this classroom, students interpreted small group discussions as problematic. Students preferred whole class discussions about literature because disagreements about meaning were monitored and negotiated by the teacher. Implications for teaching critical literacy skills through class and small group discussions are included.

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Middle school language arts teachers begin each new school year confronted with the task of helping students with diverse backgrounds and abilities further their literacy knowledge and experiences. This diverse student population complicates literacy education for middle school language arts teachers because they need to consider how to prepare students for the increasingly difficult texts they will encounter in high school. In middle schools with heterogeneous classrooms, teachers must grapple with decisions about how to best teach classes of students with diverse literacy abilities and backgrounds; at the same time, teachers are expected to prepare students for state mandates, standardized tests, and other accountability measures.

Peer group and whole class discussions provide students with opportunities to discuss opinions and evaluations while building on each other's analyses. On the other hand, some researchers have found that heterogeneous classes or literacy groups have not been completely successful, especially for poor readers who struggle to keep up with more skilled group members (Allen, Moller, and Stroup, 2003; Moller and Allen, 2000). Although literacy researchers have highlighted the voices of students in literacy

discussion research (see, for example, Alvermann, 1995), research on students' interpretations of the quality of these discussions, and the effectiveness of discussions for literacy learning, is infrequent in qualitative research.

### Purpose of Study

Assuming that class and group discussions are common activities for at least part of the language arts or reading classroom, research is needed on how teachers and students work and interpret this work in discussions. For this study, I focused on students' and teachers' perceptions of the literacy discussions that occurred in language arts and reading classes at Hartford Middle School. These questions guided my ethnographic research:

1. What are students' perceptions about how they experience literacy discussions?
2. How does the teacher interpret instructional purposes for literacy discussions?
3. How do students interpret their school culture, and what impact, if any, does this culture seem to have on identity and literacy experiences?

Before exploring these questions in depth, I analyze the connections between identity and place. I explain how I interpreted the school and community as a "place" that contributed to the teachers' and students' understandings of literacy learning and class discussions.

### Theoretical Framework: School culture, place and identity

I place my research analysis within critical theories, especially those that address place, race and identity. Although literacy discussions exist as private classroom experiences,

all classrooms, curricula and schools are constructions of culture and place (Coulter, 2002; Gruenewald, 2003; Lensmire, 1994; Moller and Allen, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995). For the purposes of this investigation, I define school culture as the social patterns and power struggles that occur in school, as they are informed by both local and theoretical constructions of “school” (Giroux, 2001). Culture is also the meanings that teachers and students give to these school patterns. Place is the physical and sociological background in which the school culture is situated (Cresswell, 2004). Research in literacy education often focuses on the private experiences of students and teachers in classrooms with the school culture mentioned briefly as part of the background or setting (For one exception, see Sheehy, 2002).

For teachers who want to encourage lifelong interest in literacy, open discussions about texts are important components of the language arts or reading classroom (Applebee et al, 2003; Moller and Allen, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995). However, school and community culture may affect teacher decision making about literacy discussions and activities. The effects of school culture on literacy discussions have yet to be investigated in depth. Further, schools do not exist in isolation from their communities—politics and values leak into classrooms and affect the teaching and learning of literacy, sometimes in unexpected ways (Apple, 2004; Finn, 1999; Giroux, 2002; Kincheloe, 2004).

*Place and the southern public.* In southern literature, place is central to the actions of the story (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Perez, 2004). Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) argued that southern writers have created their own literature of place that has “portrayed the belief that the present is continually instructed by a living past” (p.9). Southern

writers often represent the south realistically in their fiction. The southern US is situated in a place with a history of sociological and political conflict since the Civil War; these conflicts, which often focus on race and racism, reinforce the south as a symbolic place of historical unrest.

Perez (2004) made the case that the South has been forced to consider issues of multiculturalism, assimilationism, and identity much earlier than other areas of the US. This is evident in southern literature by both African American and Caucasian writers in which identities, history and place are explored through characters and themes. As characters in Southern literature are defined by place, so is education, according to Perez (2004). Theoretically, this means that the school is defined and “controlled” by the community (p.200). In small southern towns with socioeconomic and racial divisions, community and school control may be in the hands of upper class, Caucasian residents. How this theory of “place” and community play out in any school will not be apparent on the surface.

### *Critical Theory, Identity and Performativity*

Understanding race, class and gender as intersections that contribute to identity is essential to viewing identity as a continuous process of construction and re-construction. Identities, schools and teachers work within politically contested spaces. Critical theorists, including critical race theorists, see individuals as shaped by a dominant, culture that exerts economic and social control (See, for example, Delgado and Stefanić, 2001; Johnson, 2003). This control affects the structure and culture of schools, including the ways teachers and students work together or against each other, or more likely, a combination of power and cooperation (Apple, 2004; Kincheloe, 2004;

Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Although critical theorists currently view schools and classrooms as products of politics and economics, Apple (2004) emphasized the potential for teachers and students to become agents of change.

For many critical race theorists and teachers of African American and/or working class children, changes are necessary in urban schools, where poverty and low expectations, among other problems, deter students from academic success. Although my research setting is not urban, a split along race and class lines is visible, and both teachers and students both reproduce and contest these boundaries. Since *Brown vs. Board of Education*, small southern cities, such as the one in my study, have faced challenges inherent in a split of this white/black student population. The racial and economic make-up of small city schools in southern communities may offer insight into identity negotiations experienced by adolescents and teachers in bi-racial schools. Critical pedagogy theorists suggest teaching methods and curricula that are “culturally responsive” (Gay, 2000) and teach students to question the ideologies that shape the texts they read, write and discuss. Some critical and place theorists recommend teaching students to improve the cultures and communities where they live and work (Delpit, 1995; Kincheloe, 2004; Lewis, 2000; Street, 1995). What this looks like in classrooms, and what students and teachers believe about such pedagogies has been documented in urban schools, but not as frequently in smaller city schools that contain a black/white racial split.

In Johnson’s (2003) critical analysis of the ways that race is played out in our culture, he argued that “blackness” is a performance determined by complex significations. Johnson writes, “Blackness’ does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather Individuals

or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude others, identity becomes political” (p.3). In a mixed-race school environment, racial relationships are complex and are not easily and visibly analyzed. Johnson’s descriptions of racial performances have implications for research on how African American and Caucasian students and teachers work together in classrooms. Literacy discussions offer opportunities for creating and deconstructing boundaries of race. Johnson (2003) also suggested that performance should be a part of teaching literature, recommending that students “experience” texts through oral reading and other artistic presentations of literature. Through these experiences, cultural critiques are possible during the experience of listening, discussing and interpreting literature through oral activities. Other researchers support this call for analyzing race through the lenses of performativity and critical theories (hooks, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McLaren, 1999).

Beyond theories of race performance, education and curriculum theorists have suggested the values of applying performativity to educational research. For example, Alexander, Anderson and Gallegos (2005) make a case for studying “repetitive actions plotted within grids of power relationships and social norms within the context of education and schooling” (p.2). By studying students and classrooms through the lens of performance, education researchers focus on everyday communication, and analyze schools as sites of practice and culture. Teaching is a performance and teaching and learning are performative events in that actions are repeated and values and beliefs about teaching are reproduced in everyday classroom activities (Alexander, Anderson and Gallegos, 2005; Butler, 1990; Denzin, 2003).

In one study of discussions, Lewis (2001) focused on oral literacies and performativity in her analyses of literacy discussions, reminding researchers that how students speak about texts can tell us about how they are reading and defining their own identities in relationship to other students and their cultures. Although literacy research conducted through the lens of performativity depends on the oral performances of texts in the form of discussions, there is little research on students who perform their own written texts orally. Research that analyzes final presentations, such as Lyle's (1999) study has not focused on the performativity of these presentations. In his analysis of oral reading and religious text, Elster (2003) reminded teachers and researchers that oral reading, performance and ritual work together to enhance meaning and build community when texts are read aloud together. This does not need to apply only to religious communities, but could also apply to classroom situations where students work together to listen and/or read texts aloud, then discuss meanings of texts.

Researchers that conducted studies in classrooms with adolescents should not ignore the oral processes involved in writing and interpreting texts. Further, literacy research with adolescents should include considerations of theories of identity and performativity as adolescents are observed in processes of identity (re)construction within classroom settings and communities outside of school.

### Methodology and Data Collection

In this section, I describe my ethnographic methodology. Critical ethnographic approaches allowed me to describe how individuals work in literacy discussions within the classroom, and how the school culture worked with or against the daily classroom

activities as experienced by both teachers and students (McLaren, 1999; Street, 1995; Wolcott, 1990, 1999).

With ethnographies, a descriptive, “cultural portrait” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61) is possible if the ethnographer is able to spend extensive time in the field interviewing and observing participants. In the case of school settings, researchers are limited by school structures such as class periods, standardized tests, and participants’ willingness to allow intensive observation and interviewing. To document a culture ethically and honestly, ethnography must contain detailed accounts of the researcher’s interactions with participants, context, and methods. An ethnographer should “faithfully report the multivocality (or cacophony)” of voices that emerge within a culture (Altheide & Johnson, 1998, p. 293).

As I spent time in the field for this study, I attempted to recognize the ways cultural assumptions seemed to act on participants and settings (Altheide & Johnson, 1998), inviting the study participants to interpret their school and classroom cultures.

### *Hartford Middle School*

I chose Hartford Middle School (pseudonym) because it is located in a racially and economically divided town in Virginia. Hartford Middle School has a population of about 750 students in grades four through seven. The socioeconomic makeup of the school is diverse: About 50 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches whereas the rest of the students are from middle- to upper-middle-class families. In terms of ethnicity, approximately 47 percent of the middle school students are African American, 51 percent are Caucasian, 1 percent are Hispanic American and 1 percent are Asian American, Middle Eastern, or American Indian. Hartford Middle School recently received notice from the state of Virginia that they will maintain their accreditation because enough

students scored high enough on the Virginia SOL tests (interview, Mr. Hoffman, principal, October 10, 2004)

Located in the small tourist city of Hartford (pop. approximately 21,000), Hartford Middle School is the only middle school within the town's boundaries. Although there are small private religious schools in the town and surrounding counties, most city residents send their children to the public schools. There is a small state liberal arts college located near the center of town, offering an array of cultural activities. Within the downtown area, musicians, artists, and antique dealers run their shops and studios. About 50 percent of African Americans live in segregated neighborhoods. The African American people in Hartford have a history of high profile involvement in city politics and church-related activities. One of the political and economic priorities of Hartford residents has been to control development and sprawl directly outside of the city; at the same time, residents have been working to increase economic opportunities for city residents while maintaining the historical integrity of the city.

When I first began my study, I looked for problems that emerged in the small-group discussions. As I observed the classes, I took notes on the behaviors and language of students and teachers as they discussed literature in small groups and in whole-class discussions. I also took notes on literacy activities in class. After about three months of observations and teacher interviews (by March 2004), I chose to refine my questions to those stated at the beginning of this chapter. Discussions with the teachers and principal indicated that one main challenge to student success in this school seemed to be the extreme differences in socioeconomic classes among students. As mentioned in the research-setting description, this school comprises mostly upper-middle-class and lower-

middle-class students. Most of the lower-middle-class students are African American and most of the upper-middle-class students are Caucasian.

I spent two to three days a week in Mrs. Lake's reading and language arts classes. By March 2004, I had observed that Mrs. Lake followed an instructional pattern according to days of the week. One exception was Friday—Fridays were often spent catching up on previous material or on “open mike” poetry performances. Students could choose to read poetry they had written. I chose to observe regularly on Mondays and Wednesdays from March 2004 through May 2005.

There are a number of data sources I collected in this study: teacher handouts, state curriculum materials, and interviews and classroom observations. Table 1 includes my research questions and the data sources I gathered to answer each question.

*Table 1.* Research Questions and Sources of Data

Research Question	Data Source
1. What are students' perceptions about how they experience literacy discussions?	Student interviews; Class observations
2. How does the teacher interpret instructional purposes for literacy discussions?	Teacher interviews; class observations; teacher-created handouts; state curriculum guides.
3. How do students interpret their school culture, and what impact,	Student interviews; Classroom observations

if any, does this school culture seem to have on identity and literacy experiences?	
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*Interviews* I conducted interviews with the learning disability teacher, the GT teacher (Mrs. Campbell), Mrs. Lake (language arts and low-level reading teacher), the school principal and two assistant principals. I interviewed a minimum of four students to represent each focus group. Table 2 includes an explanation of the three focus groups. I include the pseudonyms of each student and his or her focus group in Appendix B.

*Table 2.* Student Groups

Group 1	Students in Mrs. Lake's low-level reading AND language arts classes (2003–04 only)
Group 2	Students in GT class AND in Mrs. Lake's language arts classes
Group 3	Students in Mrs. Lake's language arts classes but NOT in GT class or in Mrs. Lake's low-level reading class.

*Note.* GT = Gifted and Talented.

These focus groups include students that represent the various literacy levels that are defined by Hartford Middle School. Similar to Applebee's (2003) research on ability and heterogeneously grouped literature discussions, including participants from these three

groups helped me to compare and analyze students' responses with literature in different classroom conditions.

I encouraged open conversation during interviews, and interviews were audiotape-recorded when the students felt comfortable with this. There were three students who were willing to be interviewed, but they did not want to be audiotape-recorded, so I took handwritten notes during these interviews. I began each conversation with opening questions (see Appendix A). To conduct in-depth interviews with students and teachers for the purpose of understanding student and teacher interpretations of literacy and school culture, I allowed students, teachers, and administrators to choose the direction of the conversation once I asked initial questions (Johnson, 2002). Sample opening questions are listed in Appendix A.

*Observations.* Although I originally began by observing Mrs. Campbell, the GT teacher, and Mrs. Lake, I soon focused my time on Mrs. Lake, who taught 7th-grade language arts and low-level reading. Similar to Allen et al. (2003), who observed four students in a variety of discussion situations, I spent time in two language arts classes and one reading class on each observation day to observe some of the same students in a variety of literacy activities. I took handwritten field notes during my class observations. *Written products from teachers.* Materials such as teacher-provided handouts, assignment explanations, discussion rules, or any other documents that the teacher felt comfortable allowing me to examine were collected as data sources to provide information about school and classroom cultures.

*State curriculum materials.* State-mandated curricula and tests are part of the current culture of the school. The Virginia SOL curricula and tests have affected the sense of

“place” in my research setting in a variety of ways. Both historically and currently, the Virginia SOL as a form of accountability have been open to public debate and controversy. I read the SOL language arts curriculum objectives as they were stated on the Virginia Department of Education web site to become familiar with the 7th-grade language arts curriculum.

### Data Analysis

Before drafting the research report, I analyzed observation and classroom artifact data by memo writing and writing interpretive comments on observation notes. I reviewed my observation notes once a week, and wrote a memo analyzing any patterns I observed. I also noted any changes in the ways I participated in the class or school, and I documented any revisions to my research processes.

To manage and analyze interview and memo transcripts, I used NVIVO (ver. 2.0), a computer software program for qualitative data analysis. I transcribed each interview, then I entered the documents into NVIVO to code. I also entered my memos into the program. . I used words or “codes” that I thought captured the issues that were present in classroom literacy discussions and in students and teachers’ beliefs about literacy discussions (Lareau & Schultz, 1996; Lather, 1991

After refining my codes in NVivo, I recoded my observation notes accordingly. As I recoded my observation notes, issues of identity, place, and performativity in writing and literacy discussions became the central focus of my analysis for chapters 4, 5, and 6. I began thinking about how school culture, place and identity are performed and reconstructed by teachers and students in discussions of literature and writing.

### *Research Validity*

First, I acknowledge that “there is no perfectly transparent” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, p. 123) method of portraying any culture, and no account or interpretation or “truth” is superior to any other. Altheide and Johnson (1998) suggested a perspective of validity they refer to as “validity-as-reflexive-accounting” (p. 291). The basic idea is that the research process is opened up through a process of memo writing. The interpretations of participants, relationships between researcher and participants, and relationships between local culture and larger community are all considered as part of the research process and analyses. Other ethnographic researchers have used words such as *trustworthiness* and *understanding*, which I also reference to define validity. Triangulation of multiple data sources (see Table 1) enhanced the trustworthiness of my interpretations and analyses.

### Results

Considering my research questions, I discuss three themes that capture the essence of my data sources:

Theme 1. The students viewed literacy discussions about text and their own writing as important to literacy learning and identity.

Theme 2. The teacher in my study, Mrs. Lake, viewed whole class and small group literacy discussions as important for reading comprehension and reading enjoyment.

Theme 3. discussions of *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002) allowed students to confront race and identity—at the same time, these discussions allowed students to reconstruct “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991; Perez, 2004).

Mrs. Lake used both whole class and small group discussions in her class. Students seemed to view the small group discussions as more problematic than Mrs. Lake.

Perceptions of whole class discussions differed among student groups. In this section, I present three themes and analyze my data according to these themes. *Theme 1. The students viewed literacy discussions about text and their own writing as important to literacy learning and identity.*

Students' perceptions of literacy conversations in small groups differed from Mrs. Lake in that their primary focus was to get along with everyone and complete assigned literacy tasks with a minimum of explorative discussions. Whole class discussions were less constrained, perhaps because students' behaviors were monitored by Mrs. Lake.

Some students believed small group discussions hurt their ability to learn and improve literacy skills if group members were not actively participating. One student, Henry, commented, "Well, I like working in small groups, but some groups can be aggravating because some people might not want to work or pay attention or help with team activities" (interview, April 4, 2005). Students realized that Mrs. Lake would be checking on their progress and would intervene in problems; however, the students generally wanted to solve their own problems. For example, Monica talked about how they worked out disagreements in one of her groups:

Monica. Sometimes there are answers we like but other people don't like, so we have to discuss it. We ask—"should we do this or not?" And people raise their hands to show whether they want it or don't want it. (interview, May 9, 2004)

Monica acknowledged that conflict was a natural part of group discussions, and disagreements about interpretations can occur. Literacy research supports the idea that conflict negotiation through discussion can enhance literacy comprehension. When thinking is verbalized and reinterpreted with others' responses, comprehension and literary understanding by all group members is enhanced (Almasi, 1995, 1997; Almasi et al., 2001; Blum et al., 2002; Kasten, 1997; Gilles, 1998; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Raphael, 2001; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

For students who seemed insecure about their literacy skills, small group discussions helped them audition interpretations of literature before being called on in class. For example, Carlos, a struggling reader, said, "I like groups because you get to say how you feel and hear other people say how they feel, too" (interview, April 6, 2005). Another student, Mark, also believed that groups were helpful "because if a person doesn't really understand what's going on in the book, we can figure it out all in a group" (interview, April 4, 2005). Mark and Carlos viewed small group discussions as opportunities to check understanding and monitor their reading and writing processes by listening to and talking with their peers.

According to the students, the most effective whole class discussions occurred when students talked about writing processes or critiqued drafts. From the students' perspectives, being mindful of processes was necessary because they knew they would discuss their drafts with each other in groups, and then read their final papers aloud for the class. This process of presenting writing to the class was important to the students. They seemed to recognize that although the writing was about them, their texts needed to

speak to other people, especially their classmates. Henry, explained, “In my poems and stories, I’m showing them who I am” (interview, April 4, 2005). Henry and other students, constructed and performed identities, through the process of writing and presenting writing to the class.

Some of the better writers seemed to believe that reading aloud motivated them to produce even better work. For example, Bryan told me he liked reading his writing to the class. He explained his reasons this way:

Well, it really makes you put your heart into it because you don’t want to stand up there and look like a fool. All the other classes—this is the first one that we read out loud. We would write, but we would never read out loud. We would write, turn it in, get a grade, then it was over. I never used to be proud of my work—I got bored of it (interview, April 18, 2005).

Bryan was aware that he was speaking to a social community beyond the teacher. In reading his work aloud, Bryan re-envisioned himself as a writer and speaker, reaching out to a classroom community,

In the case of Mrs. Lake and her students, presentations and whole class discussions worked effectively because Mrs. Lake created a class community that supported talking about writing in the early stages. At first glance, Mrs. Lake’s close monitoring of peer workshop and whole class process discussions seemed to limit student creativity.

However, by modeling criticism and comments during students’ writing processes, Mrs. Lake taught students that they are writing for readers and listeners.

*Theme 2. The teacher in my study, Mrs. Lake, viewed whole class and small group literacy discussions as important for quality instruction in reading comprehension and for promoting lifelong interest in learning*

The meanings that Mrs. Lake gave to the value of literacy in her own academic and personal life affected her beliefs about how literacy should be taught. Her beliefs about how students improve literacy learning were also shaped by her knowledge of the diversity of her students in terms of their families' educational background, race, and socioeconomic status (Lewis, 2001; Street, 1995). In this section, I argue that Mrs. Lake believed that literacy should be a shared, cultural experience, and small group and whole class discussion contributed to this experience by enhancing students' enjoyment and improvement in comprehension. Performances and presentations of texts were important means of sharing literacy enjoyment and enhancing literacy comprehension for Mrs. Lake.

The primary purpose of using small group discussions, according to Mrs. Lake, was to ensure that students worked to the best of their abilities while receiving support from team members. Mrs. Lake said, "They need to make sure each group member does not get behind so the whole group gets behind—that's why I make sure each group has some success or they'll get behind and give up." (interview, October 22, 2004). Mrs. Lake ensured group success through the thoughtful structuring of mixed ability groups, and she believed that she constructed groups so that students would work well together academically and personally. "I think very carefully about which students will work well together. It's difficult at the beginning of the year when I don't know them well" (interview, November 25, 2004). Mrs. Lake explained that her small groups in language

arts were heterogeneously grouped by ability: “I try not to put too many low kids in one group or too many high kids in one group—they’ll end up doing all of the work” (interview, November 25, 2004). Mrs. Lake believed that it was her responsibility as a language arts teacher to monitor students’ individual learning; however, she understood that allowing her students to talk about texts with peers was a necessary step in improving reading engagement and comprehension (Almasi, 1997; Alvermann, 2003; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002).

Literacy presentations or performances were regular activities in Mrs. Lake’s language arts and reading classes; discussions about text occurred before and after these presentations. For example, students presented their own writing and research projects, and then Mrs. Lake opened up the class for feedback and critique on the content of the texts and style of presentation. According to Mrs. Lake, these activities were designed to teach students that texts could be meaningful to their own lives:

Some kids are very dramatic in their reading; this allows them to showcase their talents. It creates a close classroom atmosphere and opens the way to the poetry unit when they are really baring their souls to each other. (interview, October 10, 2004)

Performances and presentations were important components of teaching literacy for Mrs. Lake, and literacy discussions about these performances were ways for Mrs. Lake to teach students how sharing interpretations in discussions about texts can build community and increase knowledge about self and others.

Discussions about presentations and performances occurred in both language arts and reading classes; however, Mrs. Lake encouraged more unstructured conversations in

reading classes. Mrs. Lake believed open, unstructured conversations were especially beneficial during low-level reading class literacy discussions, and she seemed to encourage more explorative talk in low-level reading classes than she did in language arts. To Mrs. Lake, reading and writing were activities that were essential to her own intellectual self-fulfillment, and she believed that students could also be taught to connect with literature personally. As Mrs. Lake explained,

I try to do that [open conversation] more in reading especially with that low group because I really want them to love the books, and people don't really love books unless they get a chance to talk ... especially beginning readers ... which is really what these guys are, I mean they are ... basically, they're just really learning what reading can do for them, and I want them to be able to talk about the books.

They're thinking more in reading. Reading allows for more discussion. The way I try to do it is ... we talk about things (interview, March 10, 2004).

Providing a comfortable environment for students to talk about personal reactions to texts was requisite to nurturing students' further interest in literacy, and Mrs. Lake believed that her low-level reading students would not improve comprehension and critical understanding unless they practiced reading—and they would not have the desire to practice reading unless they could talk about their personal connections and emotional involvement with texts.

Mrs. Lake valued whole class open discussions, believing that students needed at least some guidance to reach higher levels of analysis. Applebee et al. (2003) found that the encouragement of “exploration and multiple perspectives” in discussions contributed

significantly to student achievement in literacy (p. 722). According to Mrs. Lake, explorative, open discussions were especially beneficial for low-level reading students:

In reading, when it's grouped, you allow those kids who never shine anywhere else—to shine—because they're with their intellectual peers rather than with a group of kids who always have everything right, so you may as well not even say anything. I'm sure it is different in reading—I'm sure they are more confident or verbal or they say things ... maybe ... that they wouldn't in language arts.

(interview, March 10, 2004)

Perhaps because students felt more comfortable in reading, they attempted to try out interpretations in this class. Mrs. Lake believed that low-level readers risked incorrect responses or misinterpretations in heterogeneous language arts classes, losing authority in a class with mixed literacy abilities. However, the students felt more comfortable sharing opinions with peers of similar literacy knowledge and abilities.

From what I observed, Mrs. Lake was able to plan literacy activities and discussion that engaged her students, moving smoothly between the homogeneous reading classes and heterogeneous language arts classes. She maintained high expectations for each class. Although Mrs. Lake allowed more socioemotional discussions in reading classes, she did not lower her standards for comprehension and analysis. Although Mrs. Lake believed that both small group and whole class discussion contributed to students' literacy learning, most higher level analysis took place in whole class discussions. In the following section, I examine the students' perceptions of literacy discussions. Although Mrs. Lake was aware of students' interests and concerns about how they related to their peers, Mrs. Lake's goals for her students were more academic than social. However,

most of the students were more concerned about appearances and getting along with their peers. This was especially visible in the way the students talked about their work in small groups.

### *Theme 3. Place and Identity in Discussions of Bronx Masquerade*

In Mrs. Lake's classes, students of color seemed comfortable voicing their opinions in class especially during discussions of literature by and about African Americans.

Discussions about race in novels with African American and Hispanic characters allowed the 7th graders to explore thinking about racial identities (Iser, 1978 ; Jones, 2004). This was especially evident in class discussions about the novel, *Bronx Masquerade*. In *Bronx Masquerade*, most of the characters are African American or Hispanic. Although *Bronx Masquerade* obviously does not take place in a small city school in the southern United States, I observed that the students at Hartford were able to connect with most of the characters' experiences in literacy discussions. In analyzing students' responses and identity constructions, I apply theories of southern literature and place because southern literature often addresses critical race issues (Jones, 2004; Perez, 2004). Critical race theories also contribute to my analyses of literacy discussions.

Discussions that centered on African American characters seemed to provide opportunities for African American students to establish authority, especially if they identified with the characters' feelings and experiences (McGinley et al., 1997; Moller and Allen, 2000). Skin color, along with adolescent response to color and other physical appearances was one underlying theme in *Bronx Masquerade*. This theme set the stage for students to talk about issues of race and physical appearance through open discussions

about characters' experiences in the novel. In one reading class, for example, students discussed a character in the book *Bronx Masquerade* who described herself as a "light-skinned" African American female with "good hair" (Grimes, 2002, p. 74–77):

Mrs. Lake: Who can summarize what Taneisha is like?

Jeff. No one likes her because of the way she looks.

Andy: She's pretty and popular.

Laura: She thinks she's better than everyone else because she's pretty, so she's not that popular.

Michael. Guys try to talk to her and call her "caramel cutie," but she doesn't like it. She wants to be darker.

Mrs. Lake. Yes, that's right, Michael. Why did she describe her ancestors who were "at the trunk of the tree"?

Laura. One of her relatives had a white master, and her mother is white, so she has white blood but is still African American.

Mrs. Lake. Yes, and remember she mentions that a white master raped her great-grandmother.

Andy. Its also like she's saying that everyone has different physical characteristics. She has white blood in her as well as black ancestors (observation, March 3, 2004).

This conversation may not have been as comfortable if the students were asked to talk about their own physical characteristics; however, both black and white students discussed characters' interpretations of color and physical appearances. Mrs. Lake critiqued white slaveholder oppression by reminding students about the character's ancestor who had been raped by a white master. Although Mrs. Lake did not call into question the symbolism of light and dark in the novel, she focused on history, physical appearance, and race. Color and physical characteristics are part of identity negotiations for students in Hartford. The character in *Bronx Masquerade* wanted to be dark skinned, and not defined by her physical appearances. Although this was not discussed in class, this character's poem called into question the literature on "passing" and the desire for black people to be lighter (Jones, 2004; Morrison, 1990). Although it isn't clear exactly how the students connected to these ideas about appearances and color individually in this discussion, the students seemed comfortable with critiques of physical appearances and race that occurred during this open discussion.

Perez (2004) asserts that contemporary southern literature is a reflection of a society that has changed dramatically since the Civil War. Southern literature written since the civil rights years speaks to all of the United States in the ways the narratives critique issues of race and class. In comparing southern literature with school curriculum and race, Perez (2004) claims that U.S. schools today are not dealing effectively with racial inequality (p. 201). Although racial identity was not publicly addressed in Hartford Middle School, issues of race and racial identities were discussed within the privacy of Mrs. Lake's classroom. Of course, administrators and teachers did not ignore any problems that

emerged; however, I did not directly observe open discussions about race and identity except in Mrs. Lake's classroom.

Perez (2004), in his critical analysis of southern literature, suggests that "1960's ethnicity and individual identity has replaced community and regionalism" because the media has caused "regional boundaries to disappear" (p. 199). Thus, visible racism in southern history and in southern literature allows African Americans of all regions to connect to the feelings of those characters and people of the South. The possibilities exist for readers of literature to build new identities by thinking about what Perez (2004), citing Anderson (1991), refers to as "imagined communities" (p. 199). For example, African American literary characters struggling with identity negotiations can be analyzed as symbols for African American people in similar circumstances across the United States. Dimitriadis (2005) also referenced Anderson (1991) in his ethnography of African American adolescents in a small Midwest city. Two of the boys were originally from the southern United States, and "created a kind of traditionalized discourse about the South ... and "recreated the sense of a caring, stable community" (p. 51). In Mrs. Lake's and her students' discussions of the novel *Bronx Masquerade*, the students were able to make connections between the school in the novel and their own experiences in Hartford city. In the novel, *Bronx Masquerade*, the "imagined community" comprised mostly African American and Hispanic students, who learned to respect each other's individualities through poetry. Near the end of *Bronx Masquerade*, a chorus of characters (black and white) performed a poem in hip-hop style, called *News at Five*. The poem was a "freestyle" poem in which one person starts to rap, then another person joins in, and so forth. One of the characters that joined in the rap was white. One character, Tyrone, did

not want Steve, the white character to join in on the rap and said, “Boy, sit your white butt back down before you hurt yo’self” (Grimes, 2002, p. 129). The white character insisted that he could rap, so three boys performed their rap. The theme of racial and cultural acceptance emerged in this line from the rap performance: “Its time we knocked the wall down between black and white” (p. 131). In Mrs. Lake’s class, the students read this rap aloud. Class ended before the students had a chance to discuss this rap, and I wondered what they would have talked about if provided the opportunity. Although this “imagined community” in *Bronx Masquerade* was somewhat romanticized, the 7th graders in Mrs. Lake’s class seemed to accept the possibilities of identity reconstruction through poetry, along with the potential for people of all races and personalities to coexist peacefully and respectfully. How Mrs. Lake and her students created community through poetry presentations and the seventh grade poetry slam will be analyzed further in chapter 6.

Another issue brought out in the novel *Bronx Masquerade* was the way in which the media perpetuates the construction of African American neighborhoods—and African Americans—as violent criminals. Apple (2004) points to the media as one way marginalized groups become further marginalized in the ways they are “routinely stereotyped or maligned in public representations in the media ...” (p. 165). *Bronx Masquerade* also reminds readers that “negative press” about inner-city schools or about African American neighborhoods, plays to Caucasian fears of African Americans. In *Bronx Masquerade*, the students at the fictional school participated in a poetry workshop presented by a professional poet. Then the students presented their own poetry. This event was publicized in a *Bronx* newspaper, and one of the characters mentioned that he

was happy that for once their school wasn't receiving negative press—that someone was interested in the “good stuff going on” (Grimes, 2002, p. 122). After reading this section of the novel, Mrs. Lake asked the class, “What does this mean? What do reporters usually cover?”

Jeff: Bad stuff.

Michael. At least they're interested in good stuff because reporters are usually talking about bad things that schools do.

Matthew. Normally, they would dig up dirt.

Mrs. Lake. The newspaper in our town covered the poetry slam this year, but bad things sell papers (observation, April 26, 2004).

In this conversation, Mrs. Lake reminded students that public criticism of schools and students should be questioned. However, at least in Hartford, moving into public arenas could also produce positive results. Perez (2004) suggested that in southern African American literature “action, through speech, was a way out of oppression” (p.198). Likewise, the public performances of poetry in *Bronx Masquerade* empowered students of all races to express identities and publicize their talents. In Mrs. Lake's class, most students seemed to recognize the potential of their own and classmates' creativities, along with possibilities of identity renegotiations through performances of poetry and other writing.

Open discussions about *Bronx Masquerade* appeared to engage students of all races in recognizing their own problems and experiences by reading the characters' fictional lives.

After students finished reading *Bronx Masquerade*, Mrs. Lake asked the students what they liked about the book.

Gloria. It explains us and how we feel and how we experience what we're going through.

Andy. It teaches us that the next time we read a poem we'll look deeper into it to see meanings.

Mrs. Lake. I was thinking that there was someone in this book that everyone can relate to.

Gloria. Every person in this book has a problem that one of us can relate to.

Matthew. She put a lot of races together to see how they get along.

Mrs. Lake. What made the kids get along?

Anthony. They knew each other from the poems.

Michael. This story remind me of the life I live because the characters in the book act like people I know.

Mrs. Lake. For example?

Michael. Different groups of different races act like that. I know a girl who is pregnant and does not want the baby like Diondra in the book.

Anthony. The author always gives a character a problem, then she has them resolve the problem by the end.

Mrs. Lake. Why do you think she does that?

Anthony. Because she wants you to see that problems can be fixed. (observation, May 18, 2004).

In the above conversation, all of the students explained their connections to the characters in some way. They saw teens in the novel struggling with identities; they also saw these characters faced with complex problems—pregnancy, abuse, family problems, and so forth. By the end of the class discussions on *Bronx Masquerade*, the students seemed to understand that identity does not exist on the surface—it is forever changing and reconstructed. As Anthony mentioned above, “problems can be fixed.” Perhaps the students recognized that identities can be reconstructed by talking about literary characters and how they live in places where similar conflicts occurred. The fictional student community in *Bronx Masquerade* offered possibilities for students to imagine healthier communities of their own. Class literacy discussions offer students opportunities to come to these conclusions through analyses of characters and talking through their understanding of the characters’ experiences.

Mrs. Lake appeared to create a safe place in her classroom for students to talk about their own segregated neighborhoods; at the same time, students could envision communities that were less segregated and more culturally diverse by discussing the characters’ experiences in *Bronx Masquerade*. Discussions of history and culture offered chance for open critique, although open criticism was not a central part of class discussions about historical texts. Students appeared to be more comfortable discussing issues of race and identity during discussions of the novel *Bronx Masquerade* because critiques about race and community could be analyzed through literary characters. As I observed in class

discussions of *Bronx Masquerade*, discussions about place, community, and race were possible even when a novel's setting was distinctly different from the students' own community and school. In the next chapter, I continue my analysis of students' discussions of poetry in *Bronx Masquerade*. I also discuss the students' responses to writing their own poetry and presenting or "performing" their poetry for audiences.

Underlying cultural critiques of school, community and society emerged in students' poetry writing, performances and discussions. Poetry writing and oral presentations of poetry also provided students with opportunities to audition individual identities and become visible in the community, especially during the poetry slam event. At the same time, some students chose to remain "invisible," or to not participate in the public presentation of the seventh grade "poetry slam." I argue that when students performed their writing publicly (and even when they chose not to perform), this provided students with a sense of agency (McLaren, 1999).

Whether invisible or visible, students experienced agency in their writing choices and in their levels of participation in literacy discussions and other class activities. Students' presentations in class and in the poetry slam were the catalysts for literacy discussions as students talked about poetry and writing processes before and after their presentations.

These pre- and post-presentation literacy discussions, along with processes of writing and presenting poetry, were important means of literacy learning for the students.

#### Implications for education

Generally, students perceived small group discussions as problematic. Although students realized that they needed to learn how to cooperate, they did not view conflict or disagreements as conducive to literacy learning. An exception was group discussions

about writing processes and products, which students believed were helpful for improving their writing. Whole class discussions about texts and presentations of original writing were most valuable to the students. Students explored personal identities through creative writing, and shared their identities with the class. Performing texts for the class, and listening to feedback from Mrs. Lake and other students helped them to think about rhetorical purposes for writing beyond exploring the self.

In this study, Mrs. Lake was able to encourage student engagement in whole class literacy discussions and in some instances, small group discussions. Other research needs to address problems that occur in discussions. Also, what conflicts and issues concern students in terms of literacy learning and discussions? Perhaps students need to be taught that negotiating conflict is part of learning, and discussions. Disagreement and discussion can ultimately enhance critical literacy understanding for students who choose to keep an open mind to learning.

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