"I'm The New Girl": The Meanings Positions Hold For Students

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ABSTRACT

This study offers ways to understand how a fifth-grade student and her teacher co-constructed academic and social positions within classroom writing practices and how these positions constrained and enabled literacy learning. Positioning is viewed as central rather than optional to learning. Classroom writing practices enabled the case-study participant of this study, Lucy, to explore the possibilities of who she was as she determined what types of learning were socially available to her. For 9 months, the teacher researcher collected and analyzed data from her students. Students' writing samples and conversations around their writing were used as primary evidence.

This article represents a case study of Lucy, who was determined to have used positional writing practices to position herself as she constructed identities. Results indicate that Lucy held meanings for certain positions. These meanings influenced her participation or lack thereof in various socially and culturally constructed communities and influenced her learning. Lucy engaged in positional writing practices to create spaces or possibilities for herself to influence and to examine her and others' positions. She attempted to connect, distinguish, protect, and enhance herself through writing practices. As Lucy's ways of using positional writing throughout the school year shifted, she explored opportunities for using writing in creative, academic, and personal ways. Lucy's case study provides insight for educators and researchers interested in learning about how relational identities influence students' literacy learning.

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> The first day of school in September, Lucy timidly entered my fifth-grade classroom. She stood just inside the doorway looking down at the floor. Her shoulder-length, brown hair veiled her face from the other students. While others were bustling around, greeting their friends and excitedly finding their seats, Lucy hesitated until I walked over to greet her. Recognizing that Lucy was entering a new environment, I suggested she sit with Jessica, another girl who was new to the school district. And so, Lucy began her first day in my fifth-grade classroom and at Valley Elementary School.

Early in the school year it became evident that Lucy held certain expectations and meanings for her role as a student who was acquainting herself with unfamiliar people and situations. In particular, she expected patience and assistance from others because of her position as the new girl. She cast herself as someone who should be allowed a degree of special consideration and understanding. Lucy's academic work was influenced by these developing social relations.

As a researcher and, at the time, her classroom teacher, I became interested in the ways Lucy's social and academic identities and positions influenced her literacy learning. I decided to document and analyze how Lucy, as a quietly confident fifth-grader new to this small-town rural school and community, constructed identities while positioning herself among others.

Writing became a tool that Lucy used to align herself among existing and evolving social and academic groups. Through classroom writing practices, Lucy analyzed, experimented with, and revealed her own positions and the positions of others. She used writing practices to decipher her positions among unfamiliar peers and her teacher. By examining the context of Lucy's participation in classroom writing practices, this study provides insight into how students and their teacher co-construct academic and social positions and how these positions constrain and enhance literacy learning.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon relevant research in the areas of positioning theory (Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999), writing practices (Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Cooper & Odell, 1998; Haneda & Wells, 2000), and identity and self theories (Dweck, 1999; Newkirk, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2001). Positioning issues are viewed as central rather than optional to social learning, to identity construction, and to writing. These issues influence how students determine who is considered a knower and who can participate in a particular domain.

This study anticipates that positions of power and of powerlessness influence participation and nonparticipation in classroom writing practices in

complex ways. Power relations are in a constant state of change as individuals interact with each other and define their own values in relation to each other (Ivanic, 1998). The nature of the power of positioning involves the duality of identification and negotiation (Wenger, 1998). Identification depicts a type of social selfhood. One might be identified as a happy person or as an American, for example. Identifying oneself in a particular way involves participation and membership in a community. Identities of nonparticipation signal the creation of boundaries. Negotiability allows the application of meanings to new situations in order to attempt to make sense of them. When sense is made of this new situatedness, it can be determined how selves are identified in this context, aligned with others, and selected or allowed to be aligned in powerful or powerless positions.

Positions influenced Lucy's academic and social identities as she used writing as a tool to explore and determine these identities. Odell (1999) offers a way to understand Lucy's uses of writing. He sees writing as a meaning-making process. Through reflection and intuition, writers use writing practices to activate prior knowledge and sort selected details into understandable components. Through this process Lucy used writing to decode and clarify her thoughts and understandings of who she was and where she fit among her peers. For Lucy, this clarification process was a key component in the ways she practiced positional writing.

Recognizable in Lucy's writing were occurrences of what I am calling positional writing practices. This term reflects the explicit ways writers use writing as a cultural tool to clarify or to influence who they are or who they want to become, what stances they seek to develop, what beliefs they hold, and in which communities they fit or choose not to fit socially and academically. This clarification is not only for themselves but for the sake of others as well, as the writer may be trying to present him or herself in a certain light or may be trying to position others (Ivanic, 1998). Not all writing practices are considered positional in that not all writing events provide opportunities to potentially clarify one's positions or the positions of others. The context of a writing event (e.g., under what circumstances the writing practice is performed, what the expectations for the piece are, and so on) largely determines whether a piece may be considered positional. Therefore, the perceived socially and culturally figured worlds (Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), which include the academic expectations and the social environment, such as the makeup of the writing group, must be examined when determining whether writing practices serve positioning purposes. Choosing to participate or not to participate in the social and academic acts of various figured worlds would inform Lucy's outlook, her positions, and ultimately her learning. Finally, this study is based on the theory that students' positions mutually determine or co-construct each other through the impact of the academic and social significance of certain acts.

Co-construction, as described by Mishler (1999), is the process of producing and shaping the content of discourse within situated contexts. In this study, the students and the teacher co-constructed the situated contexts and, therefore, the meanings various positions held.

METHODOLOGY

The site of this study was a public elementary school located in a rural area in upstate New York. The participants were the 20 students in my self-contained, heterogeneously grouped fifth-grade class. Lucy became my case study focus.

My position in this study was that of a teacher researcher. At the time data was being collected, I was the teacher of Lucy's class and a part-time doctoral student at a local university. Related issues such as the instructor's vulnerability, the translucency of students' discourse, and the contextual perspectives of the instructor were reflected upon and considered in the collection and interpretation of data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Merriam's (1998) view that the teacher researcher holds the power to select, analyze, and interpret raw data for the reader was also highly regarded. The model of collaborative reflection proposed by Woodcock, Lassonde, and Rutten (2004) lent reliability to the interpretation of data as two of my doctoral colleagues, Ilene Rutten and Christine Woodcock, took on supportive roles to facilitate the cross-checking analyses of the data.

The primary data sources for this study were students' writing samples, transcripts of selected videotapes of students discussing their writing with peers, and transcripts of selected audiotapes of teacher/student writing conferences along with interviews that grew out of these conferences. Data sources also included transcripts of selected audiotapes of teacher/family conferences held at the school, my teacher researcher journal, my teacher's plan book, and students' permanent school records.

Following Glesne's (1999) approach to finding the story, data analysis began and proceeded simultaneously with the collection of the data. Through this descriptive phase of data transformation, the data is allowed to speak for itself as the researcher examines what is happening (Wolcott, 1994). The second phase of analysis involved the identification of key factors in the study. To explore the relationships between key factors and to answer the research questions, data was carefully examined to determine how students and I were co-constructing positions. Signs of narrative self-construction through foregrounding, or experimenting with various identities (Wortham, 2001), and indications of academic and social positional writing were sought in my journal and in students' writing samples, conference responses, and conversations around writing. Data bits were interpreted as reflecting particular self-isms

(Fouad & Brown, 2000) that signaled positional writing. These data bits eventually were categorized into types of positional writing practices, and data charts were created to sort out occurrences of evidence of each category. Dates were noted, which led to conclusions about how Lucy's positional writing progressed over time. The final phase, data transformation (Wolcott, 1994), involved the ultimate interpretation of the data, which occurred in this study through the probing process of determining the answers to the guiding research questions.

THE RESULTS

Lucy was identified by herself and by others in situated ways (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Her social identification was intertwined with her ability to decipher her academic identities. Focusing on how Lucy was identified and how she negotiated new situations defined the connections that existed between her academic and social positions.

Due to space constraints in presenting the results of this study, it was necessary to condense the events, which were previously more detailed and contextualized. Although numerous data bits exist to support each of the categories discussed, the number of descriptions had to be limited. The reader should be aware that even though only a few events are shared in each category, there was a preponderance of data to support each.

Social Identities: Negotiating Positions

Socially, Lucy negotiated two identities that were dominant positions for her throughout most of the school year: Lucy was and continued to be "the new girl" as well as "the shy, sensitive girl" in the class. Power and agency (Bruner, 1990) played prominent roles in the negotiation of these identities as Lucy experienced positions of vulnerability and assertion.

The New Girl

Not only did Lucy use her position as the new girl as a way to distinguish and to protect herself, but others began using it as a way to relate to her. Lucy's identification as the new girl recurred prominently throughout the data. In one of our first language arts activities of the year, for example, students were to write a letter introducing themselves to their new pen pals in Georgia. The students and I planned the form of the letters together deciding that in one of the paragraphs we should tell something special about ourselves (e.g., an interest, a hobby). While Dustin described his interest in rabbits and Jill shared how she showed her prize-winning calf at the fair, Lucy wrote about being the new

girl. She presented herself to her readers—her pen pal, the classmate with whom she would be peer conferencing, and me—as someone who was struggling and attempting to cope with the experience of being among strangers.

> I'm a new student. It means I'm new to this school, classroom, and teacher. It also means I came from a different school. I had to leave all my friends behind. They couldn't move with me. But a lot of good things have happened since then. For one, I've made a lot of new friends.

Lucy was in a position that may be interpreted as typically lacking agency (Bruner, 1990). Commonly, new students do not know anyone and can be at the mercy of peers who already have friends. New students have not established communities that will support their positions. Therefore, they must develop communities in which they feel comfortable participating so they can learn and grow in a safe environment. Developing these communities was an ongoing process, in Lucy's case, of determining with which communities she wanted to and was able to make connections while maintaining her own integrity and agency. This process continued, as supported by evidence, throughout the school year as she attempted to broaden her base of trusted friends while gaining agency. In an interview during the last month of the school year, Lucy confirmed that she had maintained her self-identity as the new girl. She told me:

> I'm very confident in some circumstances but I don't like getting up in front of a bunch of people and saying something. I'm okay with a group of people. But I have a big problem being up there by myself. I'm new here and I might make a mistake.

The Shy, Sensitive Girl

In many ways, Lucy positioned herself and was positioned by others as being timid, quiet, and shy. Frequently, she physically and socially distanced herself. Academically, she was not one to voice her opinion verbally in class. She fluctuated, however, in how she interpreted the contextual meaning of this trait. This seemed to be an identity with which she was not fully comfortable because she recognized the boundaries it created for her. Therefore, she used writing practices to foreground, or experiment with, various interpretive meanings. Lucy was unsure how she felt about being considered shy because it didn't seem to fit in with other ways she saw herself or wanted to be seen by others. To Lucy, being considered shy seemed to insinuate decreased agency or restricted engagement, and she didn't like feeling that way about herself. Lucy viewed and fought for her own agency and the power to participate in social and academic acts in particular situations (Bruner, 1990; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999).

She used writing to foreground positions of power for herself. A revealing example of this foregrounding occurred when Lucy wrote in her journal on a particularly infamous day.

School had only been in session for a week. One hour after school had begun on the morning of September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. I was the one to break the news about the attacks to my students. We discussed the tragedy at length and listened to each other's reactions. After about 30 minutes of discussion, I told the students to take out their notebooks and write about their thoughts, concerns, and feelings. I wanted them to experience writing as a tool to clarify their thinking on this issue. I also wanted to give the quieter students who were not participating in the discussion, such as Lucy, a chance to clarify their thoughts. Twenty minutes 1ater, we stopped writing. I gave them an opportunity to share their writing if they wanted to do so. Lucy chose not to share with anyone. She had written:

> Today at NYC [New York City] a plane...crashed into a very important building in NYC. Another plane crashed into another very important building. I do not think that we should fight back because of three things: #1- The Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you. #2-lf we did fight back, we wouldn't know which country to attack. #3-1f we fought back, what would that lead up to? A small war? If they fought back again, then we fought back again, they would probably join some friends and then attack us again. Then we would have to get together with some of our friends. Not only would the attacks get bigger and bigger, the fighting would almost definitely become a World War 3. I'm really scared because what if the President came to [our town] and the other country figured it out? They would most definitely bomb [our town] (if they were smart enough). I also feel really sad for the famil [ies] [who] had another related person killed. I hope God forgives them.

Not only did Lucy's writing include topics, such as the potentiality of World War III from our class discussion, which indicated she was connecting with and considering others' opinions, but Lucy admitted that she was scared. This vulnerability was not mentioned quite so blatantly in the conversation that preceded the writing of this entry. This was one of the first indications that Lucy was more willing to take risks in expressing herself in her writing than she was in expressing herself verbally to her peers, especially when issues of agency

and voicing opinions were involved. At that point in the school year, Lucy's agency was in many ways constrained by her shyness. However, she seemed very comfortable expressing herself through writing.

There is evidence in this entry of Lucy using positional writing practices. Positional writing involves the use of writing as a knowledge-building tool that allows the writer to clarify and reflect upon his or her identities and beliefs. Lucy examines her beliefs and feelings as she reflects on the meanings of the attacks. She considers her religious beliefs and how they fit in with what has happened. Reading the entry, one can understand how her thoughts flow from one meaning to another as she attempts to negotiate her stance in the matter.

As time went on, Lucy did not remain as hopeful for the terrorists' redemption as seen in her comment on June 3 that her writing was "babyish." She told me during this end-of-year conversation about her writing that

> …it's different and I used to think things because I was shy and now I'm more outgoing. And everything I wrote was kind of shy. Everyday you just think different thoughts and my thoughts have changed…probably because more stuff is going on now and we're getting older now. Just cause the things around me have changed and I have the feelings of different stuff now. And I didn't know how bad Osama Bin Laden was and now I think we should just kill him so he doesn't do any more bad stuff to us…You can't make decisions unless you know all the information...Now I think they did the right thing bombing Afghanistan because I know all of the information.

She attributes her change of heart to her becoming more outgoing, knowledgeable, and mature. At the beginning of the school year she could not fathom any situation in which killing should be considered a solution. During the school year, however, the evidence shows that she used writing to foreground, or experiment with, her positions based on the catastrophes that befell America at this time and the development of storylines (Mishler, 1999) surrounding current events.

Immediately and for months after the September attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, class time was provided for the students to discuss and write about their feelings and thoughts connected to these events. In one of these full-class discussions on October 4, students were clarifying their positions on war. I noted Lucy was writing something in a composition book. I walked around behind her, planning to redirect her attention. (Note this was still the beginning of the year. As time went on, I seldom questioned but always

checked Lucy when she was writing at inappropriate times. I had to redefine my definition of "inappropriate times" for writing because of Lucy's apparent desire and need to use writing for various purposes in the course of the day.) Lucy was generating three lists as the conversation progressed. She had written:

Against War	With War	Not Sure Yet
Lucy	Logan	Jill
Jessica	Kelly	Annie

Later that day, I asked her about her lists. She told me that she was writing down what people were saying about their positions on war. She was doing this so she could get a good idea of who was for war and who was not for war. Then she could express her feelings with the people who were against the war because they felt the same way she did. She knew she had something in common with those people who expressed the same ideas as she. Although she might still talk about the war to the people who were for the war, she would be more comfortable talking to those who had the same opinions. She said she understood that opinions change and she wouldn't "give up" on people who were for war. She had also considered perceived differences between the genders. She thought she would be more apt to talk to girls who were for war than to boys who were for war because she thought the boys thought "differently" about things. She said,

> I don't know if it's their brains. They're kind of into stuff. They're outgoing. I'm not. So how could I discuss my feelings with that person…if they're outgoing and think differently?

Relational Social Identification

Lucy's identification as the new girl and as a shy, sensitive person existed simultaneously. Viewing identification as relational or relative to others (Holland et al., 1998) and an experiential process that shapes who people become based on the meanings they choose to value (Wenger, 1998), Lucy's chosen and assigned social identifications may be perceived as potentially constraining.

Unless others in the class shared and valued the particular meanings for the social identities, such as "the new girl," that Lucy did, they would not share membership in the same communities of practice, which implies participation based on shared understandings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, Lucy's expectations of special consideration because of her position shaped her social acts and relations with others. When others accepted her expectations and shared her meanings, there was potential for bonding. This bonding opened the door for possible participatory social and academic acts to take place, leading to situations that promoted personal engagement through participation (Wenger,

1998). However, because Lucy took the stance of being shy and sensitive, which she perceived as discomfort in sharing her ideas with people with whom she did not feel a connection or with whom she was not bonded, engagement was assigned boundaries. Recognizing this, I provided opportunities for students to develop their own voices. Students were encouraged to bond with each other and to understand each others' meanings, even if they didn't completely share them.

One of the ways I tried to help Lucy negotiate her positions as a new student and as a shy, sensitive person was through her participation in writing practices. Writing events in the classroom provided opportunities for Lucy to interact with her peers and with me as classroom communities formed. Since the first day of school, Lucy and Jessica developed a close friendship. Knowing this, I assigned Lucy to writing groups that included Jessica and other girls with whom she felt comfortable. Later I began to group Lucy with a combination of familiar and unfamiliar students. As the year progressed, I encouraged or assigned her to work with boys and girls who had perspectives that were different from her own. The social positions that she negotiated strongly influenced her academic progress.

Academic Identities: Negotiating Positions

Lucy had acquired particular academic identities based on past and present performances. A review of her permanent records revealed that she achieved a Level 4 (728 out of a possible 800) on the fourth-grade New York State English Language Arts test. She exhibited consistent strength in all three referenced standards in which students read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding; for literary response and expression; and for critical analysis and evaluation. Lucy scored 96, 96, and 93, respectively, on the Standards Performance Index (SPI), which indicates that out of 100 items in each standard, she could be expected to respond correctly to 96 items in Standards 1 and 2 and 93 items in Standard 3. In fifth grade Lucy earned the highest score possible, a Level 4 on a scale of 1 to 4, on the New York State Social Studies test, with a 4.0 on the document-based essay, which required the writing of a fully developed five-paragraph essay.

In fifth grade, Lucy's report card average slipped slightly over the year from straight As the first quarter to one or two Bs each of the following quarters. My comment on her report card was "Lucy is an exceptional student who shows extra effort in her work. Self-motivated and genuinely engaged, Lucy's literacy skills are strong avenues for her to express herself." Academically, other teachers saw Lucy as a very smart student and a skilled writer. On her fourth-grade report card her teacher commented that Lucy was "such a creative writer!" and hoped Lucy would "always have a love for writing" as "there's real talent and

creativeness there!" The year of data collection, her fifth-grade science teacher wrote on her report card that she "was attentive and pleasant."

At the beginning of the school year in September, there was an incident in which Lucy returned to my class from science crying because she had been required to read her mealworm story aloud to the entire class. Her social identification clearly influenced her academic and social performances when she was expected to speak in front of others. When I talked to her about it, she revealed that she hated speaking in front of the class and became nervous when she discovered a mistake in her story. The event rendered Lucy confused and embarrassed. The science teacher understood her feelings and reassured Lucy that they would work together to prepare for future presentations. In this case, Lucy was allowed special academic consideration because she was socially identified as being uncomfortable speaking in front of the class. Lucy was viewed as a sensitive, conscientious student who needed extra support at times to compensate for her social inhibitions. Lucy's rationalization for her behavior was, "because I'm new I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes in front of people. I don't know what they'll think of me."

The other students positioned Lucy as a sensitive peer. They witnessed how nervous she was when she did class presentations, and they offered suggestions and support. Sometimes other students would even offer to do the presentation for her; however, I did not allow this when everyone was required to do individual presentations. My stance was that she needed to learn how to negotiate her feelings about public speaking and could only do so with supportive practice. I began to scaffold opportunities to develop her self-efficacy, or how she judged her own abilities in relation to successful participation (Dweck, 1999; Scott, 1996).

When Lucy presented as part of a group, others in the group would commonly take responsibility for the bulk of the speaking, attempting to relieve Lucy of some of her stress about reporting orally. As she became more confident through the support of adults and peers, the students cheered her accomplishments. At the end of a presentation in December, Jill commented, "Boy, Lucy that was really good. You went right through it all with no mistakes." Lucy's confidence in her academic abilities was voiced in her comments about her progress in multiple instances. For example, reflecting on her progress the first five weeks of school she wrote:

> I see myself as a good learner and student. I follow the rules….When a teacher tells me to do something, I do it unless I'm uncomfortable with it and I don't complain.

Lucy considered compliance part of what it meant to be a good learner and student. However, note that she added "unless I'm uncomfortable with it," indicat-

ing that she ultimately valued her own beliefs and intuitions. Her self-perceived successes in negotiating meanings within unfamiliar academic figured worlds led Lucy to identify herself as a competent student, writer, and learner at Valley Elementary.

Relational Academic Identification

Lucy was experiencing the process of forming bonds based on the social and academic stances she was simultaneously whittling. Community participation potentially established possibilities for self-hood based on whether she chose to contest or to conform to the values and practices of the various communities that were evolving (Ivanic, 1998). Because students' learning from each other was valued in the classroom, community interactions were encouraged through collaborative and cooperative group writing and inquiry, as well as participation in peer conferences. Over time, Lucy gradually began to develop skilled academic forms of interaction in which she learned to resolve cognitive conflicts in productive ways (Rogoff, 1990). By solving problems collaboratively with others, she began to develop partnerships in a consensus of ideas. These partnerships promoted bonding and community building, as well as opportunities for Lucy to position her views among others (Ivanic, 1998).

Lucy's social identification strongly influenced her ability to negotiate her academic identification. Even though Lucy was identified by adults and peers as a skilled writer and an engaged learner, she experienced dissonance in negotiating her academic positions within the classroom community. Feelings of social discomfort and uncertainty, which were portrayed as authentic rather than purposeful presentations of a specific persona (Newkirk, 1997), especially when speaking in front of others, limited her agency. As Wenger (1998) explains, when identification exists without negotiability a powerless position is assumed and one becomes marginalized and vulnerable.

This is the situation Lucy was experiencing, particularly at the beginning of the school year. The following section, however, describes how Lucy worked at negotiating positions of power for herself through the use of positional writing practices.

Using Writing as a Positional Tool

I grew to appreciate Lucy's position as a fifth-grader who really enjoyed writing for the sake of it and used it in ways to help her grow, seek knowledge, and clarify her ideas and feelings. Lucy possessed a strong desire to write, and it seemed only natural that she used this medium to decipher her place among the other students in the classroom. Dominant and seemingly progressive patterns of positional writing emerged in Lucy's data. Looking at these positional writing practices provides insight as to how Lucy learned to maneuver and renegotiate her way through and within her worlds.

Data charts indicated that from September through November, Lucy was using writing in ways to protect herself, to connect herself to others, and to distinguish herself from others. Feeling vulnerable and unsure of her relations with others, she sought ways to preserve and safeguard her existing selves. Data in which Lucy made statements to maintain or to preserve her current existence or to recapture a claimed or threatened existence were grouped as self-protecting positional writing practices. Statements from the data that showed Lucy recognized or analyzed similarities among her and others were identified as self-connecting positional writing practices. Finally, statements from the data in which Lucy recognized or analyzed differences between herself and others were noted and categorized as self-distinguishing positional writing practices.

During the middle of the school year from December through February, dominant patterns in self-enhancement emerged to accompany Lucy's continued attempts to connect and distinguish herself. Through self-enhancing positional writing practices, Lucy sought positive recognition to upgrade herself to a perceived position valued more than her current existence. To some degree this category involved taking risks.

Lucy's writing during May and June reflected more frequent risk-taking approaches than her writing had at earlier times in the school year. In these self-enhancing positional writing practices, Lucy incorporated humor and congeniality into her writing. Not only the language that she used, but the positions she wrote for herself, reflected Lucy's desire to foreground particular positions among others (Wortham, 2001).

Self-Protecting Positional Writing Practices

Lucy exercised and tested her agency in positioning herself and others particularly when she engaged in discourse that I have categorized as self-protecting positional writing practices. Lucy used writing practices to maintain or to preserve her current existence and to recapture a claimed or threatened existence. Even though she viewed herself as the new girl, which she perceived as a powerless position, she remained committed to her values and to her morals (Bruner, 1990). These conflicting positions may have caused anxiety for Lucy. She liked who she was and used her personal agency to guard herself from perceived threats that she would be expected to change to fit into this new environment. Lucy's presentation of agency was often subtle, to the degree that one might not even realize the magnitude of it at times. As the year progressed, however, Lucy became more confident in taking a stand and overtly exerting her agency. Lucy exhibited the ability to pursue the negotiation of meanings that she valued, forming her identities through the positions for which she fought and was awarded.

In mid September, our class decided to perform a presentation for our families. Based on the theme "What America Means to Me," students chose a genre

and topic that would represent their patriotic feelings about our country. Students selected their writing partners. Lucy and Jessica decided right away to work together. Shortly after, Kristen asked Lucy and Jessica if they wanted to work with her group of four other girls. The girls progressed in an organized manner over the course of the week to produce a thoughtful and informative presentation. However, a confrontation emerged within the group when two girls tried to change the group's plan just before the dress rehearsal. The disagreement led to a conflict in front of the class. Lucy did not say anything, but later she cried about it.

The girls and I talked about this conflict during a private luncheon in our classroom that day. With my encouragement, Lucy spoke up as well. She made numerous comments supporting the fact that she didn't want to change who she was or what she valued to fit in with these new peers. In an effort to protect herself, Lucy spoke directly to me rather than facing her peers when she stated:

> I felt like just walking down the aisle saying, "... Count me out because I don't want to work with a bunch of people that are bossing each other around and [don't] seem to care what people think."...I don't mean to hurt other people's feelings, but I think it was kind of stupid because it was just a dress rehearsal… I felt like just walking down the aisle, ripping up the index cards and saying forget it!

Lucy clearly expressed her displeasure with the way the group was working together. She said if the other girls didn't find a way to stop bickering and get the job done, she would not support them. In her journal that day, she found a way to speak to the girls through her writing; the girls never saw this entry.

> Look, you guys actually switched the orders of the people in line and a lot of other stuff WITHOUT SEEMING TO CARE once what Jessica and I thought. I'm NOT going to change my attitude toward you people without an apology!

A few days later when I found this in Lucy's journal, I asked her about it. She said she had written it to express her feelings. She told me that writing helped her feel as if she was talking to someone, and it helped her figure out why she was feeling the way she was. She said she didn't usually share her feelings when she was angry; she kept them to herself and forgot about them. However, talking about the situation had made her feel better. She told me, "I found out other people had the same opinion that I did about it." Because she did not feel safe verbally expressing her feelings, her writing provided a medium for clarifying and understanding the situation. Embedded within the social context of the situation, writing had provided a way for Lucy to develop a positional voice

among her peers (Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Dyson, 1992). Writing had provided her with the opportunity to resist the values of these girls and to refine her own stance.

After listening to the group's comments, I realized the girls were concerned about the social structure of the group and possibly of the whole class. Kristen told me that sometimes she felt that the group was not including Jessica and Lucy much because the other girls knew each other before this school year. Kristen was trying to be protective of the new girls. Lucy said that her friends at her previous school all understood her likes and dislikes, but these girls didn't. She felt she was being misunderstood.

Self-Connecting Positional Writing Practices

Lucy sought the "power to belong" (Wenger, 1998, p. 207). She struggled with feelings of vulnerability as she claimed a place in our class's community. Lucy used her writing to connect herself to others, thereby claiming legitimate memberships in certain groups. The idea of membership here reflects mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). So, when Lucy was working in an assigned group with John and they were performing the task but not sharing information, engagement had not been enabled.

Yet, when Lucy chose to work with Jessica on a play during the writing workshop time and they co-wrote and performed a play in which they had both invested themselves, there was mutual engagement. For the purpose of this paper, self-connection goes beyond just working together in a group. Self-connection involves dedicated involvement on either a social or academic level, but, at the highest degree, dedication at both levels.

Lucy's first connection was with Jessica. I feel I strongly influenced this connection from the very first day when I suggested they sit together because neither of them knew anyone else. At the time I thought I was helping out, but in retrospect I wonder if perhaps I should have let them choose their own seats as I allowed the others to do. I'll never know how my interference affected this school year.

At our December 3 conference, Lucy's mother told me that Lucy had become more outgoing since changing schools. She was making friends more easily here. Before Lucy didn't go to friends' houses or invite friends over to her house, but Lucy's mother reported that Lucy did that now. Her mother commented that Lucy's "old self is still in there" but she can see how Lucy is more outgoing than she was at her previous school.

As the school year passed, Lucy used writing practices to connect with others. She became quite daring in doing so when at the end of the year she wrote a play that included Sarah. Sarah was thought of as one of the socially popular or "cool" students in my class. She was outgoing, funny, had multiple

boyfriends, and was very fashion conscious. Sarah usually was not in Lucy's social or academic circles as they did not share similar values.

As Lucy explained in one of her reading responses at the end of February, "I'm not teased but I'm not totally popular, either. I have a lot of friends, too." Sarah wasn't really one of those friends, yet Lucy wrote a part for Sarah in the play. Sarah was thrilled because she got to dress up in a fancy costume. Lucy had taken Sarah's fashion taste into consideration to win her over. Ivanic (1998) helps explain this interaction when she describes literacy practices:

> The activities and behavior associated with the written text(s) reflect the values, patterns of privileging, and purposes in the social context. Literacy practices are the culturally shaped ways in which literacy serves social ends. (p. 65)

Lucy used literacy (namely, writing) practices to reflect her desire to connect with Sarah as well as the other girls whom she chose to cast in her play. Literacy was serving Lucy's social purpose of making friends.

Evidence suggests Lucy's confidence and sense of agency grew as the year progressed. In a June essay on fifth-grade remembrances, Lucy shared that "I made lots of friends, and only a few turned away from me. This year was a plain BLAST!"

Self-connecting and self-distinguishing positional writing practices often occurred simultaneously. For example, when Lucy was connecting herself with Sarah, she was choosing to distinguish herself from others, such as Jill, who was not cast in the play. The class dynamics changed almost daily based on who worked with whom.

Self-Distinguishing Positional Writing Practices

Lucy not only connected herself with others through writing events, she also distinguished herself. In the middle of October, Lucy, Jessica, Jeremiah, and John worked together on a social studies timeline project. I assigned group members for this project because I had noticed that when students chose their own groups, the girls and boys separated. To give the students a chance to experience and learn from varied opinions and working styles, I grouped girls and boys together.

In this unit, students were to report on events in American history they wanted to include on a group timeline. Each student in the group was responsible for reporting on two events, situating their events on a wall-sized timeline, and then presenting it. One morning Lucy's group was planning how to put the timeline together.

> John: Lucy, you find the dates for the timeline. Jeremiah and me are gonna do the poster.

Jeremiah: (to Lucy) Why aren't you doing anything?
Lucy: Well, I don't know what you want. Mrs. Lassonde wants us to do our own events.
Jeremiah: So what are you doing?
Lucy: The Revolutionary War and Vietnam. I have to find something on the Vietnam War.
John: Yeah, but we need those dates. You have to get those for us.
Jeremiah: Yeah. We're doing everything here.
John: Yeah, we're doing the poster plus our reports. You're getting the dates.

(Lucy got up and walked away. She went to the shelf of encyclopedias and looked up Vietnam. The whole time Jessica continued writing and didn't even look up.)

John and Lucy had opposite personalities in many ways. Lucy was quiet; John was loud. Lucy was conscientious and meticulous; John was impulsive and had a let's-get-it-done attitude.

From their conversation and Lucy's reaction when John told her she was getting the dates, it might appear that Lucy was not being totally supportive of her group. She ignored John's directive to find the dates and went about getting the information she needed for her part of the report on Vietnam. Jessica showed little support, not even acknowledging the interaction that was taking place right next to her. John and Jeremiah took credit for doing everything. In reality their paragraphs reflected minimal effort, while Lucy's and Jessica's reports were each two pages long and contained extended details on their topics. Since the boys had devoted little time to their reports, they were ready to finalize the timeline while the girls were still writing their reports. The boys credited the girls with doing nothing. That same day I scheduled a writing conference with Lucy. This is what she told me when I asked how the group was working together.

> It's going pretty well, but John and Jeremiah are bossing us around. Then they say how come you're not doing anything? And we say how can we do anything when you're doing it? When I couldn't find the dates I didn't know what I was supposed to do and I had my other stuff to do. I had my dates. He wanted me to find his dates.

When I inquired how she dealt with the boys' bossiness, she replied:

> I either ignore them or just do what you told us to do. If they were just doing what they wanted to do and not what they were supposed to do, I'd just do what I knew was right. I'd know I was right and wouldn't have to prove it….Let's say I

> was a Christian and some people were using bad language and blaming everything on God. Sometimes I'm insulted. If I was just insulted I'd say like leave me alone. If I was in a really bad mood, I might say why the heck are you talking like that? In different circumstances, I'd stand up for something I cared about; otherwise I respect the person's opinion.

This passage reflects the quiet confidence that is evidence of Lucy's subtle agency. She was sure that she was right and was going to do what she needed to do to complete the assignment the way she wanted to do it and perceived I wanted it done. If John and Jeremiah didn't do it right, it wouldn't affect her as the projects were being graded individually. So, she was willing to put up with John's bossiness without saying anything confrontational to him.

According to Dweck's (1999) study of competition among peers, confidence plays a large part in whether students pursue learning challenges. When students were asked when they felt smart, they responded that they felt smart when they did better on tests than their peers. In Lucy's group, she was competing with John. Her quiet confidence that she was right made her feel she could compete with John, not in a verbal battle but by performing better on her report than she thought he would. Confidence, according to Dweck, is the belief that you will achieve something if you put effort into it over a period of time. Lucy was confident that if she worked on her report and did what she thought she was supposed to do, she would succeed. She wasn't interested in helping John succeed because she didn't recognize him as someone with whom she particularly wanted to connect. Therefore, this subtle confrontation allowed her to determine whether to connect or distinguish herself from John. The fact that she picked up the V volume and continued her own report rather than helping him find the dates for his report, no matter how authoritative he was, implies that she decided to distinguish herself from him. Lucy continued to position herself by making connections and distinguishing herself among others. Data charts indicate, however, that her frequency of using these approaches in writing practices dropped off dramatically by the end of the school year. It seemed that once she had spent time whittling her own identities and positions, she felt comfortable pursuing other types of positioning, one of which was self-enhancement.

Self-Enhancing Positional Writing Practices

By December, Lucy had etched out a trusted support group of friends and appeared confident that she knew what my expectations were of her. She began to demonstrate attempts at self-enhancement. At the beginning of the school year, the only times I noted Lucy using self-enhancement tactics were when I

required that she respond to a list of reflective questions for the 5-week progress reports and for the first quarter report card marking period. In response to such questions as *How do you see yourself as a learner?* and *What is your goal for next marking period?* Lucy responded:

> I do my school work and homework regularly. My goal for next marking period is to join in more on class discussions.

I see these answers as responses she thought her parents and I probably wanted to hear, but I did not note insightful instances of self-enhancement outside of these somewhat forced statements of reflection and goal setting. In a 1994 study, Sadker and Sadker found that girls often value being popular more than they value academic success. They refer to this as the "looking-glass girl." This theory helps me understand how Lucy's attempts at self-enhancement focused on improving her social identities rather than her academic identities. She appeared already to be confident as a student. She had expressed pride in receiving As on her report card and was frequently praised by the adults in her life. There was less confidence in the social realm, however, as evidenced by her attempts at connecting to others through personal writing practices. When I explored how Lucy made attempts at self-enhancement in the data, I noted she did it regularly through the use of humor in her writing. She saw humor as a way to improve her social standing.

At lunch one day in our classroom at the beginning of December, Lucy and I had a private conversation about how she was getting along with others. She told me:

> I like to make people laugh. It usually works to make people think I'm a really funny person. Everything I do makes Jill laugh. She thinks I'm very funny for some reason. I'm better friends with Jessica so I don't have to try to make her laugh so much. Besides she laughs enough already.

The following week, I noted an attempt at humor in Lucy's writing. It was 2 weeks before Christmas, and we were rewriting Christmas songs. Lucy chose to rewrite "Jingle Bells." Here is the first part of her song:

Dashing through the holes
Trying to catch the moles.
They stole our Christmas tree
And are going "hee-hee-hee."
I can see them now
Holding our Christmas cow.
They took our presents, too.
They're going to the National Zoo.

The song continues for three more verses as Santa ends up getting rescued from a tiger and finally catching the moles. Lucy decided to sing it not only for our class but for a class of third graders as well. I saw this as evidence of increased confidence in speaking in front of others.

Evidence of Lucy's use of humor flourished at the end of the year. For example, one day Lucy and a group of girls decided they wanted to do another play together. The next day, Lucy came in with a play already written. She had cast parts for not only the two girls who originally were involved in the conversation the day before, but she had included several other girls. When she showed the play to the group, they put their heads together and read their parts. Lucy had cast herself, Jessica, and Sarah as witches; Allison as a little girl; and Kristen as the cat. The girls were all pleased with the play and their parts. From the script, it is obvious that Lucy gave her character all of the punch lines. At one point, she refers to someone as an "old bag," which brought chuckles from the class when they performed it. Further along in the play she suggests to her fellow witches, "Look! A pretty kitty! (in a sweet voice) Let's eat the little varmint. (in a raspy growl)."

As Lucy became more and more comfortable among her peers and with me, she began to take more chances at foregrounding possible selves not only for her but for others. Wortham (2001) would support this generalization by saying that students tell their stories every day. When they do so, they are taking part in interactional positioning because they are not only transforming or constructing themselves but the selves of others through narration. When students habitually represent a self, they may take on that self as part of their identity. Habitual positioning in everyday life eventually chisels out a particular identity in one's self.

So, if Lucy repeatedly pursues humor in her writing and makes people laugh, will others presumably come to see her as a likeable, humorous person? This appeared to be her goal: to improve her social status with others by making them laugh. And, as evident in the data, Lucy used self-enhancing positional writing practices to foreground particular identities and positions for herself.

CONCLUSIONS

The positions Lucy co-constructed with her peers and with me during the school year influenced her academic and social identities and, thereby, her literacy learning. Students learn by actively searching for understandings and by making connections to their experiences and to what they know. These connections and understandings make sense to them, so they use them to negotiate meanings in new situations (Ivanic, 1998). This active search for understandings and connections, for Lucy, took place through her writing. Discourse

around writing practices helped Lucy internalize concepts and beliefs that she could elaborate upon in her writing. Relationships shaped who she was, what she wrote and what she learned. Lucy's positions as a new student and as a timid, confident girl influenced her agency and her willingness and comfort in taking risks, thereby constricting as well as enhancing learning. Her perceived positions of power and powerlessness also influenced how she took risks. For example, feeling more at ease in her writing than in verbal interactions may have constricted her learning as well as opportunities for her to share her knowledge and experiences with others. The boundaries Lucy constructed through her nonparticipation blocked her from learning from her peers' experiences and knowledge to her full potential.

On the other hand, Lucy's perceived social positions also enhanced her learning. People with whom she connected offered her support that encouraged her confidence. Valuing validation, Lucy was highly motivated to perform and to achieve high grades and recognition. As data was collected and analyzed throughout the school year, dominant patterns emerged displaying how Lucy participated in writing practices in positional capacities. The patterns changed over time as the class dynamics evolved and the ways Lucy cast herself among her new peers were re-negotiated.

Consider Lucy's positions of power and how she enacted her agency. She wanted to bond with her peers and to become a participant in certain social and academic communities (Wenger, 1998), yet when she identified herself as the new girl it became difficult for her to negotiate positions of power. She became frustrated by the duality of identification vs. negotiation. She could not meaningfully negotiate what it meant to be a new girl, which she viewed as a powerless position, when she valued standing up for certain beliefs. Eventually, she became more comfortable with the social connections she had made and her identity as the new girl was no longer a dominant one. Through her attempts to negotiate her positions, partially through foregrounding (Wortham, 2001), Lucy's confidence and willingness to take risks increased.

In Lucy's case study, we are able to look at how a student who loved to write and depended upon writing practices to clarify her positions negotiated new situations and places for herself. Lucy used writing as a cultural tool to position herself and others. She made meaning out of new situations through her writing. Writing practices helped her make sense of her situated positions and how they influenced her academic identities, her learning, and her ability to participate or not to participate in certain classroom communities. Lucy's case study indicates that literacy learning is influenced by the ways students academically and socially position themselves and each other in the classroom.

Classroom writing practices are a critical issue in English language arts as writing functions to help students clarify personal and academic information, to build knowledge, and to reflect on their learning. National and state educa-

tion standards set expectations for students to be able to express themselves in reflective, analytic, and critical ways through their written responses. This study supports the perspective that when we provide opportunities for students to use positional writing practices, we give them spaces to learn through their development of their social and academic identities and their understandings of what position or place they hold in their world. These practices allow participants—primarily, the students and the teacher—to co-construct voices within the situatedness of the classroom writing context.

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