

Using Ricoeur's mimetic process to examine the identities of struggling adolescent readers

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ABSTRACT: Building on the principles of philosophical hermeneutics, Ricoeur (1984) used the concept of narrative to explain how individuals interpret their experiences and make sense of seemingly disconnected elements of life by turning them into the stories. Narrative identities represent the coming together of the stories individuals tell, as well as those told about them by collectivities and by others (Bruner, 1986; Kearney, 2002). These ideas prove particularly relevant to literacy studies because identity influences how individuals make sense of their experiences, including their interactions with texts (McCarthy & Moje, 2000). Using the methodological framework of philosophical hermeneutics, this article discusses how examining elements that make up stories, what Ricoeur (1984) called pre-understandings, offered insights into the narrative identities of adolescent struggling readers. By examining stories shared by one student from a larger multiple-case study, the author demonstrates the way students emplot and interpret their narratives, ultimately acting as agents in the telling of their narratives and the authoring of their identities. Preliminary examinations of these narratives indicate extensive dialogues between adolescents and the pre-understandings they use to construct their narratives about themselves as readers. The significance of others – particularly teachers – becomes evident in the construction of students' narrative identities.

KEYWORDS: Hermeneutics; identity; literacy; narratives; struggling readers.

Sarah sat next to me, her dark curly hair bouncing as she spoke excitedly about her future. As a 22-year-old junior at Blue Ridge State College in the US Southeast, she anxiously shared how her successes from the previous semester brought her one step closer to achieving her dream of becoming an occupational therapist for children with special needs.

However, as Sarah and I talked about the difficulties she faces with reading, I realised academic success didn't come easily to her. She shared some of her struggles from her years in public school, one of the earliest of which occurred in third grade during a class visit to the library. The school carefully tracked each child's reading level through a computer-based program that required students to take quizzes after each book they read. Performance on the quizzes indicated the student's reading level, which in turn guided students' future reading choices. Sarah explained how the librarians would tell each student their reading level and then they would be allowed to go to the designated area in the library to choose books. However, this became painful for Sarah because, in her own words,

I would have to go pick [books] out in the kindergarten or first grade section when everyone else could go pick their books out in like the third, fourth or fifth grade section, the bigger books at the library. But I would have to go pick out in the little kids area. And I felt really dumb because it would be like "Okay, I have to go over

here." So I'd make sure all my classmates were picking out books before I would go pick out my book so they wouldn't see me picking out a book.

Although no one called Sarah dumb, moments like this one figured significantly in how she felt about herself as a reader. Already aware of her own struggles at this early age, Sarah interpreted the purposeful sequestering that took place as demonstrative of the academic divide between her and her classmates. More than likely, the librarian's intentions centred on ensuring student success by directing them towards books on reading levels where they would most likely be successful. However, Sarah's interpretation of this experience, heavily focused on the judgments of her classmates and the way this experience positioned her own reading struggles, negated the benefits of this librarian's good intentions.

This story from third grade served as one of many memories that significantly influenced the way Sarah interpreted her reading abilities years later. Although now, over 10 years after this moment, Sarah's grades reflected collegiate levels of academic success, these early memories remained part of Sarah's identity as a reader. Listening to this story and others Sarah shared caused me to wonder how students who had overcome significant challenges as readers continued to keep their learner identities tangled up with experiences from so long ago.

Current research focused on identity issues confirms the significant role of larger discourses and other individuals in the way struggling readers construct their identity (Moje & Lewis, 2007; Moore & Cunningham, 2006; O'Brian, 2006). However, in an effort to look specifically at how Sarah incorporated these elements into her identity, it became imperative to identify a methodological framework that allowed me to focus on these elements. Philosophical hermeneutics, specifically Paul Ricoeur's theories about narrative and his concept of three-fold mimesis, offered a methodology to examine issues of identity construction in the case-study narratives of struggling adolescent readers. Examining the elements that comprise stories, what Ricoeur (1984) called pre-understandings, offered insights into the way adolescent struggling readers made sense of their experiences with texts and their identities.

This article begins with a brief overview of the research on struggling adolescent reader identity issues and then transitions to a discussion of the theoretical and methodological frameworks that situate this particular study. Next, it examines the way these frameworks and methods pertain to specific data, in this case the selected narratives shared by Sarah about herself as a reader and learner. It concludes with a discussion of the implications gathered from the narratives shared by Sarah, as well as the implications of this particular approach in identity research.

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES OF STRUGGLING READER IDENTITY

Although the details of Sarah's struggles may be unique, her situation is not. Reports from 2005 indicated that only 35% of US 12th-graders qualified as "proficient" on national assessments, reflecting an urgent need to understand the challenges adolescent readers face (NCES, 2005). Although these kinds of statistics offer numeric representations of how many students struggle with reading, they do little to interrogate what it means to be a struggling reader or the array of reasons why these

students struggle. Understanding the complexities of both of these issues becomes key to helping these readers become successful students.

Struggling reader defined

Descriptors such as “reluctant” (Wilhelm, 1997), “ed” (Franzak, 2006; Moje, Peyton, Readence, & Moore, 2000), “at-risk” (O’Brien, 1998; Miller, 2000), “dependent” (Beers, 2003) and “striving” (USDE, 2010) refer to students who experience challenges with reading, but the term “struggling” (Allen, 1995; Alvermann, 2001; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Hall, 2009; Vacca & Vacca, 2002) appears most frequently in current literature. For this reason I use the term “struggling” throughout the rest of my discussion, with the understanding that my use of this term also includes students diagnosed with difficulties, those in need of remediation, and those unmotivated or disengaged.

In contrast to information processing, cognitivist, or psychological theories of literacy, sociocultural perspectives consider the way the larger environment shapes literacy practices (Langer, 2001). From this view, struggling readers' issues often stem from a range of “social class and culture disjunctions between home and school” (Dressman, Wilder & Connor, 2005, p. 11), making literacy education “less about skill development and more about access to cultural resources and to understandings” (Alvermann, 2001, p. 679). Defining literacy by historical, economic and environmental practices leads some to believe students don't fail in schools, but schools fail students by denying them opportunities to practise literacy in personally meaningful ways (Dressman et al., 2005). Echoing this notion, Alvermann (2006) posed the possibility that “school culture is *making* struggling readers out of some youth” (p. 95).

But, as David O'Brien (2006) explained in reference to his own use of the term “struggling”, I realise “messing with shades of meaning changes little about how labels affect the students” (p. 34). However, I consider this array of terms and definitions because each describes students who, like Sarah, exist on the margins of classroom and school literacy practices, and whose perceptions of their abilities directly influence the way they see themselves as readers.

Struggling reader identity

Rather than the unitary concept of identity described in humanist thought, postmodern ideas situate identity as influenced by context (Gee, 2008). These contexts include society (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as other individuals (Bakhtin, 1993; Hermans, 2001). Such theories describe identity as a co-construction with the other. In the context of literacy learning, these theories mean “learners' identities both shape and reflect the meanings they make from texts, their interactions with texts, and the ways they are positioned or position themselves” as the formation of these multi-dimensional parts takes place in constantly changing processes (Moje, Dillon & O'Brien, 2000, p.176).

From this perspective, identity exists as a central component of meaning-making, as well as a key element in understanding the self. But in the process of co-construction, other individuals and discourses also play powerful roles in how students construct

their identities. Significant others, namely peers and teachers, heavily influence the development of struggling readers' identities (Moje & Dillon, 2006; Tatum, 2008). Studies describe how middle-school readers often value peer perceptions as well as social and academic comparisons instead of the acquisition of reading skills (Hall, 2009; Triplett, 2004; Donaldson & Halsey, 2007). Similarly, the influence of teacher relationships and the power of teacher beliefs often played a central role reinforcing or negating struggling readers' identities (Dillon & Moje, 1998; Fairbanks, 1995; Triplett, 2007). In other cases, opening up multiple perspectives of adolescents and their reading abilities allow teachers to gain broader views of both, leading teachers to build on and strengthen student literacy practices (Hall, 2006; Rex, 2001; Wortham, 2004).

Beyond specific individuals, larger Discourses, such as that of the school community, often influence the way students view literacy by validating or rejecting those literacies students espouse (Gee, 2008). Through practices and values, academic experiences teach students what counts as acceptable, school-sanctioned literacy and what does not (Dillon & Moje, 1998; Lenters, 2006; O'Brian, 2006). In other words, the literacies schools validate and allow students to employ become factors in the ways students see themselves as learners.

Curriculum also plays a significant role in the construction of student identity, particularly in English and language arts courses where the content allows students to explore identity issues (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Fecho, 2000). Similarly, texts offer students new ways to think about life choices, reflect on who they are becoming and connect with characters, ultimately emphasising the power of content and ability development to re-shape identity (Barden, 2009; Miller, 2000; Neilsen, 1998; Tatum, 2008). These studies allude to curricular possibilities in helping struggling readers re-author the stories that comprise their identities.

Needed research

The link between self and identity, coupled with the notion of literacy as a socially constructed concept of the mind, means "identity matters because it, whatever *it* is, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with texts" (McCarthy & Moje, 2000, p. 228). Studies at both the elementary (McCarthy, 2001) and middle-school (Hall, 2006; Triplett, 2004; Moje, Dillon et al., 2000) levels point to a variety of influences on reader identity, but studies with older adolescents who struggle as readers, such as those in high school and college, are significantly absent. Additionally, little research explores how the remaking of struggling readers occurs (Hall, 2009; McCarthy 2001).

Needed research includes studies that go beyond identifying the influences on reader identity to examining ways to help students transform their identities. These include studies that consider the reader identities students assume and examine how reader identities transact with students' other identities. In addition, studies that listen to the stories and interpretations of adolescents themselves offer insight into how the remaking of struggling readers occurs (Franzak, 2006; Moje, 2002). These studies include research that explores how other factors influence struggling adolescent readers' narratives, particularly other individuals.

In order to understand the complexity of such interpretations, theories of the dialogical self become key. This framework, coupled with an examination of narratives through Ricoeur's mimetic process, opens up an avenue to explore students' narrative identities and to consider the elements that shape these identities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Russian literary critic and philosopher Bakhtin (1981), individuals live in constant dialogue with the world around them. The ideological becoming of the individual takes place through these dialogues in "the process of assimilating the words of others" into one's own discourse (p. 341). Only in dialogue with the other – whether real or imagined – can one truly understand the self.

Dutch psychologist Hubert Hermans extended Bakhtin's ideas to explain the way individuals construct their identity with his theories of the dialogical self. Building on Bakhtin's notions of dialogue, Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained how individuals live "in a multiplicity of worlds" where each has an author "telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds and where the authors of these worlds enter into dialogue with one another" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 46-47; Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992). However, such dialogues extend beyond the literary and into a realm that touches "the very essence of personality", where the stories individuals author reinforce, contradict and work for or against the stories of others (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 28). This variety of perspectives represents the voices of both real and imaginal others in the individual's life, as well as the various parts of the individual. The influence of these positions points to the importance of the other in the construction of identity.

Hermans and Kempen (1993) also discuss the way individuals order and reorder the events throughout their lives as they try to make meaning out of experiences. They explain that life stories are never fixed because people are always working from an experienced past in a present state in anticipation of the future. Over time they tell and retell stories as situations change; in turn, their stories change as well. These stories gain meaning as the events come together in interconnected parts and are altered as new events are introduced to the narrative. As individuals organise and order experiences into stories, these stories reveal those features to which they attach meaning and significance (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Kearney, 2002; Ricoeur, 1984).

According to Ricoeur, "life has a pre-narrative structure, which is changed into a narrative structure by the plot of a story told about it" (as cited in Widdershoven, 1993, p. 5). The emplotment of narratives creates connections between events, occurrences and the whole story as each part comes together to form meaning (Ricoeur, 1984). Ricoeur drew on Augustine's ideas of time and created a threefold model of mimesis that reveals the complicated process of meaning making; that is, he developed a framework wherein time, as a series of events, might be interpreted and reinterpreted based on ever-present new events and meanings.

An understanding of this threefold mimetic process becomes central to comprehending Ricoeur's concept of narrative and the way individuals make meaning of their life experiences. By understanding the pre-understandings that make up the narratives struggling reader's form about themselves as readers and learners, we can better understand how they interpret and construct understandings of their encounters.

Mimesis₁

Ricoeur (1984) described plot as "grounded in pre-understandings of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (p. 54). Meanings and symbols exist as a part of the individual's interpretive framework even before he or she constructs narratives. Imbued with meaning but independent of the individual, these elements exist in the form of structures, symbols and temporal creations that lend themselves to the way individuals understand their experiences.

Meaningful structures, the first component of the pre-understandings individuals use to comprise their narratives, include actions, agents, goals, circumstances, motives, and experiences (Ricoeur, 1984). Agents include the individual, others, and the relationships between them. Goals include those ideas individuals commit to and work towards. Agents, goals, circumstances, and motives are all implicit in actions and the experiences that result of actions. Together these elements serve as the base for the narratives that structure action.

Symbolic resources, the second component of pre-understandings, entail the "signs, rules, and norms" that already exist in the world and allow human actions to be narrated (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 57). These features give public meaning to and establish rules for interpreting behaviours while providing a framework from which individuals interpret actions. The way these actions are judged varies with the individual's moral preferences and values; neutrality is impossible because these preferences direct the resolution of hypothetical situations in the mind of the individual and also direct the narrative (Ricoeur, 1984).

The final component, temporal character, recognises the temporal structures that help distinguish action in relation to the time. Ricoeur (1984) identified temporal structures as the elements that give dimension to linear time based on Care. Those things and moments that individuals attend to, they are preoccupied with, and they are present in are those that allow them to construct and reference time, thus constituting Care. Care gives significance to time; it serves as a reference looking forward to the future and also a reference back to the past (Ricoeur, 1984). It is "upon this pre-understanding" that the foundation is provided and "emplotment is constructed" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 64). In this way, temporal character, together with symbolic resources and meaningful structures, brings mimesis₁ into full effect.

Mimesis₂ and emplotment

In mimesis₂ the pre-understandings that make up mimesis₁ are put together into narratives. This second stage serves a "mediating role" as it bridges the pre-understandings from mimesis₁ with the post-understandings of mimesis₃ and gives

structure to the separate parts of mimesis₁ (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 53). It is in this stage that the emplotment of narratives takes place.

Emplotment mediates this process in three ways. First, it creates connections between pre-understandings, as seemingly separate events are linked in substantive ways and ultimately each part contributes to the central plot of a meaningful story (Ricoeur, 1984). Second, in emplotment, events are brought together in a series of successive occurrences that bring out the relation between seemingly disparate parts. Finally, over time, temporal characteristics come together from the "manifold of events" into a unity that becomes "one temporal whole" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66). In this way emplotment occurs both chronologically and non-chronologically at the same time. Ricoeur (1984) also pointed to the role of the "productive imagination" in generating narratives, as understandings and occurrences are synthesised into a connected whole (p. 68).

Mimesis₃

In this final phase of mimesis, meaning is imbued into the narrative. Ricoeur (1984) described mimesis₃ as the intersection of the individual's preconceptions with the events, actions, symbols and parts of the narrative. As the individual's preconceptions are applied to the elements, a larger meaning is drawn out from the whole. At this stage a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1975/1989) occurs as the world of the other and the world of the individual are brought into dialogue with one another. Although emplotment has occurred, meaning comes to the story as the individual actualises it in the process of understanding. Therefore, the experiences and the world of the individual are central to the whole process of mimesis.

Ricoeur's theories of emplotment and mimesis play a significant role in understanding the hermeneutic process of meaning making through stories. Laitinen (2002) wrote that this "rendering of unity to one's life, with all of its fortunes and misfortunes, is something that only narratives can accomplish." (p. 13). Organising separate events into complete wholes helps individuals make meaning of their lives by constructing narratives about themselves and about the individuals with whom they interact.

Hermans' connection

Hermans' later work (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007) compliments Ricoeur's process of mimesis. The events and moments in life that Hermans describes as ordered and re-ordered are like the pre-understandings of mimesis₁. Then, as time is added in, these elements are emplotted as interconnected parts. Finally, in mimesis₃ the individual reconciles his or her own personal understandings of the world with the narratives of their experience.

However, Hermans and Kempen (1993) explain that "new experiences may influence not only the account of one's present situation, but also of one's past and future" (p. 15). For example, failures may disrupt a person's sense of self and not only cause the person to reconstruct their current narrative, but also include memories of other negative experiences that were not a part of their self-narratives before. In Ricoeur's terms, this would mean taking parts of mimesis₁ into account in ways that change the emplotment in mimesis₂. As Hermans and Kempen (1993) explain, these "changes in

the situation may have direct repercussions to the story involved, and therefore both telling and retelling are essential to personal narratives" (p. 15). It seems that to Hermans, as mimesis₃ changes, it has the potential to alter the pre-understandings deemed significant in mimesis₁ and the way they are brought together in mimesis₂. All parts are connected. As such, this constant telling and retelling become key to understanding and making sense of narratives.

From a methodological standpoint, these ideas speak to similar processes and possess interesting possibilities. If narratives are the way individuals make sense of their temporal experience, and if those narratives change over time, the narratives they tell about themselves encapsulate layers of meaning.

METHODOLOGY

Ricoeur's philosophies about the mimetic construction of narratives not only provide a frame through which to view stories, but also serve a valuable methodological function by offering a rich framework from which to analyse the narratives of the readers in this study. In traditional narrative frameworks, narrative identities represent the coming together of the stories individuals tell, as well as those told about them by collectivities and by others (Bruner, 1986; Gee, 2008; McCarthey, 2001). These approaches make clear the significance of larger Discourses or narratives, but they examine how individuals interpret and incorporate these narratives into their sense of identity only in general ways. In other words, in an effort to look at the specific Discourses students incorporated into their narrative identities, as well as the influence of particular individuals and events, I needed a methodology that offered a way to look at how students constructed their narratives as well as the way they interpreted the pre-understandings used to construct them.

In an effort to fill this need, I turned to the field of hermeneutics. Examining narratives through the concepts of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis offers understandings of how the narratives students told about themselves as readers and learners unfolded as complex combinations of moments, individuals, ideas and memories brought together by students as they've tried to make sense of their lives and their identities. In addition, by identifying these elements, this theory offers possibilities for considering how the remaking of these identity narratives might occur.

Overview: Philosophical hermeneutics

The study of hermeneutics refers to "the science or art of interpretation" (Grondin, 1994, p. 1). Although many different hermeneutic traditions exist, philosophical hermeneutics focuses specifically on the interpretation of the other, where the other is as another person, text, or culture (Freeman, 2008). Within the field of philosophical hermeneutics the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur provides a lens through which to view narrative inquiries, informing the way narrative researchers "talk about data collection, analysis, and representation...as part of a dialogic, dynamic, holistic, and self-reflective process" continuously taking place (Freeman, 2008, p. 388). Hermeneutic ideas permeated my research process and exited as part of a continual spiral of observation, analysis and reflection.

In this sense, philosophical hermeneutics provides a methodological framework for interpreting transactions between individuals, texts and the larger world. It also offers a lens through which to view the methodology of narrative inquiry as researchers conduct research, analyse data, and interpret understandings gathered from stories. This becomes particularly relevant when, as in this case, the data exists in the form of stories. As a researcher interpreting the narratives struggling readers constructed from their interpretations of literacy experiences, the theories of philosophical hermeneutics became essential to the way I examined their stories.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Using Ricoeur's ideas about narrative construction as my methodological framework, I conducted a multiple case study (Geering, 2007; Yin, 2004) with seven adolescents who self-identified as struggling readers. All of the participants volunteered to be a part of this research in response to classroom teachers and community members who told them I was looking for individuals willing to talk about their experiences as readers. These students represented a range of age and grade levels, from freshman in high school to sophomores in college. The four male and three female participants also represented a diversity of races, social classes and past academic achievements. Most had either been retained at some point in their educational career or tested for learning challenges. However, they all shared one characteristic in common: each of them self-identified as a struggling reader. Although I did not solicit the participation of only struggling readers, ultimately these were the students who turned in their consent documents and showed up to the interviews.

Each case study included three to five audio recorded, in-depth, semi-structured, interviews (Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993) and five to ten observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interview questions were open-ended, designed to elicit detailed responses from the participants, and allowed them to share specific experiences in the form of narratives (deMarrais, 2004). The first interview focused primarily on the participant's general background and educational history; the second on their current educational and reading experiences; the third on their perceptions of education, themselves and teachers. In most cases the interviews proceeded in this order, although in some instances interviews took place in two sessions. Also, although I began with interview protocols, the dialogues that occurred often proceeded more like hermeneutic conversations, taking their "own twists," and reaching their own conclusions as a co-construction of ideas between me and the participants (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 383).

Students also participated in five to ten observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The documented constructions of events, individuals and occurrences through field notes taken during these observations represented an additional data source about the participants' literacy experiences in their daily lives. My records of these observations included narratives I wrote about these observations and often resulted in questions discussed in our interviews. Data collection formally took place over a five-month period from the beginning of January through the end of May.

Once the data was transcribed, I used the mimetic structure outlined in Ricoeur's concept of the threefold mimesis to analyse the stories my participants told,

particularly focusing on the way they interpreted their experiences as readers and the elements that comprised the narratives that made up their reader identities. The analysis of this data resulted in my own reweaving and retelling of these stories as I identified those elements that contributed to the construction of the narratives told by these struggling adolescent readers.

Data sources

The narratives examined in this article represent a slice of data from this larger study. Specifically, the focus of this discussion explores narratives Sarah, a 23-year old college sophomore, told about herself as a reader and learner.

At the time of our interviews, Sarah was enrolled at a nearby state college, working towards earning her associates degree in science. After she received her associates, she planned to transfer to a university and ultimately attend school to become an occupational therapist. She told me she felt a connection to the little kids she wanted to help, because they worked so hard to overcome their challenges like she had done in her own life and she spent countless hours working towards this goal.

The challenges Sarah was referring to centred on her struggles as a reader. She loved kindergarten, but began struggling the next year. Ultimately this led to her being retained and she repeated first grade. Sarah felt things improved in second grade because of her teacher, who asked Sarah's mom if she would be interested in getting Sarah tested for learning disabilities. Sarah's mom agreed, not only because of the teacher's urging, but because, as Sarah explained it, her mom had felt something was wrong all along.

The tests came back and Sarah was diagnosed with ADHD. She qualified for special education support and started taking Ritalin. However, she didn't feel like the medicine made any difference. Sarah attended summer school that year to receive extra help. In third grade she quit taking her medication because she still didn't feel like it was helping her concentrate on what she needed to and because she didn't feel any positive effects from it. A few years later, they would discover Sarah actually had dyslexia, making it clear why the Ritalin didn't do her any good.

The next few years Sarah endured school and homework, supplemented by summer support and special education classes. She enjoyed this help throughout elementary school, but noted detrimental social consequences that came with the label "special ed" in middle school. During her junior year of high school she finally found a book she enjoyed reading, which led her to others and influenced the way she conceptualised herself as a reader. After multiple failed attempts at passing the graduation test, she finally succeeded and graduated the summer after her senior year. Now, three years into college, she reflected on many of these experiences as we met and talked in our interviews.

Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, analysis of the narratives shared by all of my participants revolved around principles of hermeneutic interpretation, principally repeated re-reading and re-interpreting of texts (Kvale, 2007, p.109). Ricoeur (1984) had

suggested that the events, individuals and ideologies used to emplot narratives provide the basis for understanding the stories, so I first began by identifying these elements in my data set. Throughout the process of transcribing, coding, analysing and writing the narratives for each case, I considered the pre-understandings Ricoeur described and noted those that contributed to the foundation for the narratives each participant shared. Although this process proceeded forward in a similar manner as I examined the narratives told by each participant, different students emphasised different stories and pre-understandings as they talked.

For example, Sarah put particular emphasis on what Ricoeur (1984) called the agents, or individuals, in her narratives. These included not only her, but also the other people who played a role in her stories, including teachers, parents, friends and peers. The goals, or ideas the agents worked towards most often included academic or reading success, whether in a formal school setting or in social settings. Motives were closely connected to the goals she shared. Finally, the circumstances of her experiences most often became clear in the contexts of the stories she shared. In this case, schools, homes and church seemed to exist as reoccurring locations of meaningful moments in her narratives.

In addition, symbolic resources existed as part of the world where the narratives occurred (Ricoeur, 1984). The sign and symbols she intuited from her contexts gave meaning to her experiences and revealed the basis for her interpretations of her own behaviours and those of others. Because these meanings provided a framework from which Sarah interpreted her actions, these most often were identified as a result of comments she made about her experiences and life philosophies. These frameworks varied among all the participants based on their beliefs, moral preferences and values; however, even among the spectrum of beliefs, certain categories reoccurred. These included ideas about the nature of education, the role of schools, what it meant to be a good reader, what students expected from their educational opportunities, and the ways they managed to get through or even find success in school, despite their struggles. For Sarah this element existed as key to her narratives as well.

Temporal characteristics also served as central features in the narratives Sarah shared. In particular, past experiences with reading often influenced the notion of Care. For example, stories often hinged on moments that marked her as different from her peers, or turning points in her experiences as a reader, such as the first book she enjoyed reading or the teacher who helped her see her abilities in a new light.

Identifying the meaningful structures, symbolic resources, and temporal characteristics of the stories of my participants represented a key part of data analysis. However, it didn't stop there; it then became essential to go back and consider the ways Sarah emplotted these elements into her stories as I continuously examined the "relationship between the part and the whole, at a whole series of levels" as I compiled my case records (Smith, 2007, p. 5). As I identified new structures in the analysis of subsequent interviews, I revisited previously coded data to compare and contrast the way her various stories worked with and against one another.

Finally, the stories Sarah told about her past experiences existed in dialogue with her current and changing understandings about herself. Therefore, another key part of the

analysis included identifying the stories where these dialogues became clear. These dialogical moments represented shifts in the framing of narratives as new events, individuals and experiences altered some of her pre-understandings and consequently, changed the way she interpreted her narratives.

Validity and trustworthiness

Philosophical hermeneutics posits understanding as the result of a "fusion of horizons." As Freeman (2007) explained, "the fusion of horizons is not about people working through their differences and coming to an agreement, it is about people participating in an event of understanding in which both are transformed" (p. 942). Therefore, hermeneutic frameworks provide for issues of validity because they inherently account for researchers' prejudgments and prejudices.

For example, the unique stories of all my participants and my interpretations of their stories cannot help but be influenced by my experiences as a teacher, researcher and associate of struggling readers. But the multiple lenses through which I viewed these stories offered different perspectives. My experience and education in the field of teaching provided me with potential understandings of possible motives for the actions and conduct of the educators discussed in these narratives. Although I cannot always offer a definitive explanation of the teachers' motives, my own understandings can help me consider why the teachers described made the choices they made.

At the same time, my discussions with the struggling readers in this study offered perspectives on the way these moments might be interpreted by struggling readers. Viewing their narratives as reconstructions of the events, instead of factual recordings of objective realities, helped me recognise my own influence in the narratives I wrote, while also remaining true to the influences on the narratives students discussed (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

In case study research, issues of validity centre on issues of consistency and the ability to generalise results (Yin, 2009). Throughout my research I relied on multiple sources of evidence, including interview and observation data, and provided opportunities for the participants themselves to review the narratives I constructed based on the stories they shared. In addition, when possible, I modelled elements of my study after similar studies seeking to understand identity as it is connected to reading ability and perceptions of the self as a reader (Hall, 2009; Moje & Dillion, 2006; Reeves, 2004). This included using other interview protocols to guide the design of my interview questions.

Although the results of this research are limited in their generalisation to the whole population, studies such as this can reflect issues significant in the larger world. Although I might not be able to statistically extend the results of the study to a larger population, similar research on struggling readers suggests characteristics of students in this study are typical of struggling adolescent readers. Thus, the results of this study might be logically generalised to larger populations of students (Luker, 2008). This doesn't mean that the stories and interpretations offered are the same for struggling readers beyond the context of this study, but it does suggest that the stories shared by my participants are not unlike those of other struggling adolescent readers. For this reason, the understandings offered in this study prove valuable.

DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

Although her narratives represent just a slice of the larger multiple case study, those shared by Sarah demonstrate the way examining the pre-understandings of her stories influenced the way she constructed her identity. Through an examination of the pre-understandings around which she constructed her narratives, as well as the way she emplotted them, the significance of specific agents becomes clear. This section will be followed by an examination of the understandings and implications of this data and methodological approach.

“I’m going to college on a Third Grade education”

The voices of teachers, both past and present, figured significantly in Sarah's narrative identity. She explained,

I've had a college professor tell me one time, “You're not going to make it. You're flat out not going to make it.” I'm going to college on a third grade education – or a third grade reading level. I pushed all the boundaries I can.

This experience Sarah shared vividly demonstrated the way her ideas about herself as a learner transacted with those she heard from her teachers, inferred from tests and categorisations of the school system, and ultimately influenced her future goals. The characterisation of her abilities, attributed to remarks by some of her teachers and professors, played a significant role in the way Sarah viewed her abilities as a student. These words found reinforcement in Sarah's inner dialogues as she considered her memories of past assessments and experiences from elementary school. Viewed in terms of Ricoeur's pre-understandings, her professors served as significant agents who perpetuated particular ideas that Sarah eventually took up into her narratives, in part because they echoed notions she had already internalised about herself as a learner years ago, and in part because they came from the professor, an agent with significant power.

The label of “third grade reader” Sarah mentioned also marked an interesting moment in her dialogues. As an outside observer and educator, I considered this label. Theoretically, was it possible for a student to succeed in a college-level anatomy and physiology course with only a third-grade reading level? I didn't ask Sarah to take a reading diagnostics test as a part of her participation in this study, but if she did, I doubt she would have scored at a third-grade level. However, this categorisation imposed by a school or test long ago, defined the supposed limits of her abilities and still weighed heavy on her identity. As an authoritative voice, the validity of this discourse remained unquestioned as Sarah made sense of her abilities. Reading had been difficult for Sarah, but believing her inherent abilities limited her to a third-grade reading level did not make dealing with this challenge any easier.

“You're a kid who's going to make it”

The influence of past teachers and assessments on the dialogues that comprised Sarah's reader identity appeared less than encouraging. However, she also explained the significant role one of her current teachers played as she negotiated her self-narrative. She described this teacher in the following manner:

I took anatomy and physiology last semester and I had a teacher who... knew I could do it, but wasn't really sure about me, then figured out, "No, you are going to do it. You are going to make it because you're determined. You're a kid who's going to make it." So I go to her when I'm having a down day or whatnot. She wants to know about my day and I tell her and she's like "Sarah, you're going to make it. You're going to make it and you're going to be what you want to be but it may take you longer. It may take you an extra year or two, but you're going to make it."

Based on Sarah's comments, it became obvious that having a teacher who believed in Sarah's ability to achieve made a significant difference. In particular, the way this teacher helped Sarah -e herself as a successful learner proved key. Sarah explained the way she would go to this teacher to talk through moments of difficulty. At these times this teacher offered Sarah a powerful counter narrative to those she had internalised. In a very literal way, Sarah's dialogues with this teacher helped Sarah re-empot her narratives about herself as a reader and learner.

For example, this professor's willingness to both acknowledge Sarah's current dialogue about herself – that Sarah was a student that struggled – but also challenge the predominant discourse of failure – that Sarah could make it because of her determination, even if it meant taking longer to get through her program – allowed Sarah to work through her challenges, particularly in this class. This professor helped Sarah craft a counter-narrative to the one she had developed from teacher's comments before. When Sarah needed an audible reminder of how she could be successful, she instinctively entered into dialogue with this professor.

"I can...be above average"

The significant role of this professor's voice in Sarah's inner dialogues became evident as well. At the encouragement of this professor, Sarah prepared to take the national exam in anatomy and physiology. When Sarah discovered she not only passed the test, but passed with an above average score, she was thrilled. She described the way this accomplishment helped her see herself in a different perspective. She explained,

I am not an above average student, I'm not. I'm usually the below average student...So, seeing that I can pass tests and be above average has been a huge accomplishment...going on a third-grade reading level to college is difficult and seeing where I started four years ago to where I am now is huge because I have progressed so much. Finding out I'm an above average student is awesome.

This magnificent success forced Sarah to examine the way her past experiences as a learner conflicted with her current abilities. The ideas Sarah assimilated about education and achievement throughout years in school defined what it meant to be smart through test results and reading levels. High grades on tests symbolised achievement and served as indicators of intelligence. Her past failures on these tests and the diagnoses she received represented powerful forces in the narratives she told about herself as a reader.

Although she still held on to the notion that tests defined success, she also allowed her past perceptions of herself to be challenged based her current successes. For Sarah, the scores from this national exam served as a major indicator of her abilities.

Unquestioning of the test's authority, the label it awarded helped her see herself as an above-average student. Although this test served to label her in a similar way to that of the reading diagnostic test from so long ago, she had begun to re-envision her potential as a learner.

In addition, the contradictory evidence provided by her above-average score on this anatomy and physiology test allowed her to question her own narrative. Although she still described herself as someone who read on a third-grade level, she also opened up her narrative to the possibility that she might be more than a below-average student. She used similar language when she described sharing her scores with her mother. Sarah shared her numeric scores, but ultimately translated them to mean, "I am not a below-average student, I'm an above-average student." Again, this discourse of testing offered her a label that altered her narratives. Later, when I directly posed his possibility to her as she read my interpretations of the stories she shared, she told me, "I really never really thought about [the fact that I might not really be reading on a third grade level still] before."

"You can do it...You're going to figure it out"

Sarah described the way her achievement on this test helped her alter her inner dialogues and the way she approached her work:

Seeing that I can do this has shown me my huge progression from where I started and where I am now...It's made me push myself a lot harder. It's made me realise "Okay, you can do it. Even though you've got people who said you can't do it, you can do it. You can sit here and you can do it. If it takes you a little longer, you'll figure it out. You're going to figure it out.

This comment reflected her inner dialogues and contained echoes of comments attributed earlier to her professor. This served as another example of how Sarah incorporated the words of other agents into her own inner dialogues as she conceptualised herself as a learner. She acknowledged it was okay if succeeding took her longer than others. In a very Bakhtinian way, Sarah's utterance tastes of sentiments expressed earlier by her professor. In a sense, the words of Sarah's professor became Sarah's words, as well as a part of the inner dialogues that helped her see herself as someone who could achieve.

It's important to note that this change in Sarah's dialogues and perceptions required more than just empty talk on the part of Sarah's professor. The encouragement this professor offered went beyond empty praise. Rather, she allowed Sarah to exercise control over her own success by attributing success to working hard instead of inherited ability over which Sarah had no control. Also, her professor offered Sarah alternative maps to success by making it okay for Sarah to take longer in school.

In addition, this professor challenged Sarah in very dialogic ways. Rather than watering down the curriculum for students that struggled, this professor provided extra scaffolding to help students be successful. Sarah described how this professor often asked students to teach one another concepts they had read about, then pushed the discussion further with additional information. She also created a classroom environment that suggested all students could be successful, but then let students decide whether or not they wanted to work in order to do so. In Sarah's case, when

she made that decision, the professor readily supplied the extra support Sarah needed. Because of the professor's willingness to work with Sarah and Sarah's willingness to go beyond her own perceived abilities, the end result was success.

UNDERSTANDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In his book *Teaching Stories: An Anthology on the Power of Learning and Literature*, psychologist Robert Coles (2004) writes, "I have met school children whose destinies have been decisively affected, if not determined, by particular encounters, experiences, events – accidents and incidents that have figured importantly in the way they have lived their lives in and out of the classroom." (p. 265). In this statement, Coles alludes to the central role of encounters, experiences, and events in the way students make sense of their lives within the classroom, as well as the influence of these factors beyond their lives at school. Methodological approaches based on Ricoeur's mimetic theories offer insights into the lasting significance of such encounters and incidents in the reader identities of students who struggle. Further, a better understanding of these encounters will help teachers and policy makers better understand the power of the moments that transpire in the classroom.

Methodological possibilities

In terms of research and analysis, coding and analysing data based on the pre-understandings described by Ricoeur offer a way to examine struggling reader identity construction, as well as the way these identities change and are re-structured over time and in light of new interpretations. For example, stories told by struggling adolescent readers like Sarah offer glimpses into the experiences of these students in schools and into their daily encounters with reading. These stories matter because the encounters, experiences and events that comprise their stories carry significant power in the construction of their identities years afterwards.

In the context of understanding struggling reader identity, looking at the individuals, events and ideologies students use to emplot their narrative identities also offers teachers and researchers insights into how to help these students re-construct their narratives. Although skill development is key, viewing oneself as an active participant in a literacy community is also essential to success. Focusing on the moments and individuals who help struggling students make these transitions can help teachers and bring about these changes in the lives of struggling learners. Ultimately, all of these interpretations and re-interpretations of stories matter, because they offer alternative perspectives on what happens in schools that influence the way teachers and students interact with and value one another.

Considerations for practice

Although Sarah's successes as a student and as a reader have set her on a very hopeful trajectory, in a sense she is still at the beginning of her journey. Her recently developed love of reading and ability to work through the academic challenges she faces helped her alter her perceptions of herself. She now sees herself as participant in a community of readers, as well as one who can tackle academic challenges. But these

are just two elements of Sarah's reader identity she will continue to dialogue with throughout the years.

Sarah's narratives point to the significant influence of other individuals in the way struggling adolescent readers make sense of their identity. Bakhtin (1993) described "myself and the other" as two different but correlated centres around which life and experiences are arranged (p. 74). It's around these centres of self and other that teachers and students develop and weigh their opinions, ideas and beliefs as they transact in the classroom.

For example, the opinions of her peers at school often led her to construct negative interpretations of herself as a reader and learner. Even when these judgments went unspoken, Sarah often compared herself and her abilities to her classmates. Although research points to the idea of peers playing a role in the way struggling readers enact their identities (Finders, 1997; Hall, 2009), the stories Sarah shared suggest this influence may be even greater than initially thought. For this reason, it becomes essential to better understand how to create classrooms where students value a diversity of ability levels.

Sarah's dialogues also raise some major questions about the power of teachers to transform identities. How Sarah's teachers treated her, spoke to her and positioned her in the classroom challenged and reinforced narratives Sarah had developed about herself as a reader and learner. This influence was felt both through the actions of these teachers as well as through their literal dialogues. Their actions included those that led to the creation of a classroom community where all learners, especially struggling readers, felt safe to take risks without fear of being mocked. Their language constructed students as agents of their own learning who could work through challenges. Encounters like those Sarah described offer an invitation to explore the ways teachers intentionally and unintentionally co-author student narratives.

Finally, Sarah's dialogues also raise questions about the lasting power of labels. Dweck (2006) explains that when individuals are associated with negative labels and stereotypes, they expend great amounts of mental energy worrying about whether or not their actions or performance confirm those stereotypes, energy that could be directed towards learning and performance. I continue to think about the label of "third-grade reader" Sarah repeated so often in our discussions. Regardless of where the label started, its longevity in Sarah's stories proved a powerful force in the way she understood herself as a learner. Although I don't question the legitimacy of Sarah's struggles, I wonder how much more difficult they may have been because of the ideas assumed by her and others about her abilities because of the influence of these labels. For example, what assumptions about Sarah did teachers make as a result of these labels Sarah assumed and had associated with her learner identity? Did these assumptions limit how her teachers interpreted Sarah at school?

Call for research

A consideration of identity issues as viewed through this methodology and Sarah's stories offer significant insights into understanding identity issues, but also raise additional questions that might be considered in future research.

Sarah and the other students who participated in this study each framed themselves as a struggling reader. Experiences from their past, coupled with the discourses of testing and the academic environment, provided reinforcement for these labels, even in the midst of subsequent academic successes. The consequences of such labels prove long-lasting. But what of students who do not experience such challenges early on as learners? Do their early successes prove as influential in the way they emplot their narratives about themselves and hold the same lasting influence on their reader identities? Literacy research would benefit from a similar analysis of these stories.

Similarly, reading and writing do not exist independently, but reinforce and build on one another. Therefore, identity issues that matter in reading development would theoretically also matter in writing development as well. Further, many students in classrooms across the grades make statements such as "I'm just a bad writer." However, writing exists as another skill central to success in school and life. Although few of the participants in this study spoke specifically to their experiences as writers, do labels and negative experiences with writing influence students in a similar manner? It becomes imperative to explore the extent to which the implications of this research apply to struggling writers as well.

Ultimately, each of these studies possesses the potential to help teachers and researchers better understand the complexities of identity issues, specifically as they influence literacy development. As Elkins and Luke (1999) stated, "adolescent literacy education is the very forum where we shape identities and citizens, cultures and communities" and "is not something we can do by default or as an afterthought" (p. 215). A continued exploration of the way teachers, parents, peers and discourses influence struggling reader identity construction will allow educators and researchers to access literacy education as a tool to help struggling readers.

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