

UNSIGNED MANUSCRIPTS: THE AUTHORIZING OF STRUGGLING
ADOLESCENT READERS

by

DAWAN LYNN COOMBS

(Under the Direction of Bob Fecho)

ABSTRACT

This multiple-case qualitative study details seven-months of research conducted with five adolescent struggling readers, designed to examine their experiences in schools and the implications of these experiences on their learner identities. Specifically, the author examines the stories these readers tell about themselves, literacy, and learning; what these stories suggest about readers' perceptions and perspectives of the classroom, their abilities, and themselves; and how stories told by and about readers transact with literacy learning as well as the implications of these stories for literacy classrooms.

Chapter one begins by describing Bakhtin's (1981) theories of dialogue and Herman's (2001) notion of the dialogic self, which provide a theoretical framework for understanding struggling reader identity development. Chapter two includes a review of the literature on struggling readers, sociocultural perspectives of literacy, and struggling reader identity development. Next, chapter three examines the central role of philosophical hermeneutics in the methodology of this study, specifically the role Ricoeur's (1984) three-fold mimesis plays in the research questions and design of this study, including considerations concerning the participants, methods, and analysis.

Chapters four and five detail the stories of the student participants and the analysis of their stories. Chapter four focuses on the stories of Braydon and Sarah, two college students, both of whom clearly discuss the way their past experiences with reading inform the way they construct their identities today. In contrast, chapter five focuses on three high school students, Anna, Jack and Maurice, and the role reading and literacy play in their lives. These chapters wrap up with a discussion of potential understandings teachers, researchers, parents and policy makers might gain from these stories. Finally, chapter six concludes with a discussion of the implications and significance of this research.

Examinations of these narratives indicate extensive dialogues between these adolescents and the preunderstandings they use to construct their narratives about themselves as readers. The significance of others—particularly teachers, family members, and peers, as well as schools and traditional classroom practices—becomes evident in the construction of students' narrative identities.

INDEX WORDS: Reading, Literacy, Adolescent, Struggling readers, Identity, Bakhtin, Ricoeur, Dialogical self

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DEDICATION

To my parents, to whom I owe the credit for any of my life's successes and without whose encouragement, love, & support I would have packed up and left after my first few days in Georgia—and most definitely by the end of the first semester.

And for my brother Skyler, whose inner dialogues started this all.

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Bakhtin (1981) described our words as tasting of the words of others. Similarly, this dissertation tastes of countless dialogues with others throughout its development and my time in graduate school. Both in the form of audible and inner dialogues, certain conversations made the all difference and for these I owe many thanks.

These dialogues include those with my own former students and those students that shared their stories with me for this study. They also include many with my own mentor teacher from years ago, Karen Brown, who continues to exemplify the kind of teacher I want to be. For four years, almost without fail, my friend and colleague Kristin Pierce offered valuable perspectives that proved vital to my sanity during our 11:45 a.m. Wednesday morning phone calls. Also, a handful of inspired conversations with Dr. Deborah Dean, as well as those with various professors at the University of Georgia, helped me mediate my own identity construction through some turbulent times. And, of inestimable value are dialogues with my friend, graduate school colleague, running partner, and queen of Southern hospitality, Paige Cole, whose influence can be tasted throughout this dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of writing this dissertation, I read a quote by Jane Mersky Leder that explained, “Our brothers and sisters bring us face to face with our former selves and remind us how intricately bound up we are in each other’s lives” (as cited in Leventhal, 2004, p. 59). I couldn’t help but consider her statement and its applications to this particular project.

On its most literal level, I admit it’s true. Considering all the people I’ve encountered in my life, it’s my brothers, who have known me since their births, that can most readily recall the different versions of myself I’ve enacted throughout the years. It’s they who sit most ready to resurrect me as a bossy 10 year-old or as a tyrant teenage babysitter. Conversely, my memories offer opportunities for them to reminisce about their former selves as well. For example, I stand ready to remind them which one didn’t really grow out of his baby lisp until age of 15 and which other one sported husky jeans throughout elementary school.

However, beyond the typical scars of growing up, it was within the context of my dissertation that this quote proved particularly applicable. As a teacher and a researcher, the issues I care most about center on the needs of adolescents who struggle with reading and the ways these struggles influence their identities. But I can’t honestly say this issue would concern me like it has, nor that I would not have dialogued with it as extensively, if I hadn’t spent so much time watching my brother Skyler deal with these issues for the past 20 years. As he grew up and now as an adult, these literacy struggles play a central

part in the way he has constructed each of his past and current selves.

An analogy might best illustrate this idea. As our brother Hayden put it, to understand Skyler you first have to understand glow sticks. Glow sticks seem to radiate energy. You can toss a glow stick in the corner of a dark room, but by its very nature it's still going to attract attention. And, no matter what the event, people always seem more entertained when glow sticks are around. In a sense, each of these ideas aptly applied to Skyler.

But, it's also hard to really understand glow sticks because few people really know how all those pieces inside come together to make them work. Skyler was like that too. All the pieces inside of him—specifically his past, current, and future selves, came together in ways that amazed me, but also seemed disjointed, conflicting and sometimes hard to understand. I struggled to make sense of how he conceptualized his own abilities and potential, particularly when it came to reading and academic success. The numbers and letters on his college transcripts didn't suggest anything less than academic excellence and the titles that lined the shelves of his personal library contained books I, a former English teacher, considered out of my league. He also spent more time in the library studying than anyone else I knew.

But for him, his current abilities as a student still included his childhood struggles and former selves he constructed throughout his life. At the beginning of each semester I'd receive a phone call from him from half way across the country. We talked often anyway, but this call was different from the others because it focused specifically on how he would make it through the upcoming semester. "I can't help it. When my professors discuss course requirements and all the reading and writing that's required, I just keep

remembering how incompetent I felt—I couldn’t read or write or spell, and I hear the voice of that dumb third grader in my head all over again.”

As he talked, one part of my mind knew he sounded absurd. But another part of me knew the legitimacy of his concerns as my mind would rewind back to his elementary school days and I’d picture him at eight years-old, struggling with cursive writing. There he’d sit in Miss Larson’s third grade class, squirming, undoubtedly off task and embarrassed, not only because he couldn’t remember how to form the letters, but also because he still didn’t really know his letters. He wouldn’t ask for help because he was already regularly pulled out to go to the learning resource center (LRC), “where dumb kids go,” he said. So instead he’d make up squiggles for letters on his paper and then hide his assignment in his desk. The rest of his day would proceed forward in much the same way. After school he’d come home to sit with our mom who, in a desperate attempt to do something about his reading skills, helped him work through a phonics program she purchased from TV. Skyler was mostly compliant, but didn’t really like this either because no matter how many times they’d go through those catchy song and flashcards, the letters and sounds didn’t seem to stick in his head.

The tenets of this scene remained mostly the same through his time in elementary and middle school as he struggled to read and gain a sense of identity, despite repeatedly failing at everything school rewarded. Teachers seemed the only variable, united by our mother’s constant efforts to help him learn to read. By his sophomore year of high school he was still a terrible speller, but at least his handwriting was legible. Tests labeled him “ADD” and “learning disabled,” and these diagnoses afforded him the accommodations he needed to get on course academically. Although he still struggled

reading some texts for school, by his senior year he earned a 3.75 GPA and finished reading Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1965), by choice, in between fill ups as he worked as an attendant at the local gas station. These successes kept him open to the idea of attending college and now here he was, three years into it, on an academic scholarship.

But despite these successes, he still sounded panicked every time we talked. We'd eventually come to a place where our point-counter-point discussion would always begin. "You got into college," I'd say; "The majority of the kids in my classes are smarter than me," he'd reply. "You're on academic scholarship," I'd offer; "I'm not smart; it's just the university's way of rewarding hard work," he'd explain. We'd continue to go back and forth until I would finally convince him he wouldn't lose his scholarship and agree to help him edit his papers if he needed it.

I'd take note of his call and notice how the latest call seemed a little less anxiety-ridden than the one before. Although I'd witnessed his progress as a student and seen him come so far, I still couldn't help but wonder: how could a kid who overcame so much academically and who now did so well, keep his learner identity tangled up with reading experiences from so long ago?

Statement of the Problem

Although the details of Skyler's struggles might be specific to him, his situation is not unique. The statistics are easy to come by and although they vary, most illustrate similar patterns: between a third and one half of high school students struggle with basic reading skills and only one third of ninth graders will graduate with the skills necessary to enter the work force or go on to postsecondary education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). The College Board announced just over half of students who took the

ACT in 2005 demonstrated the reading skills necessary for the demands of college-level reading (ACT, 2006). *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* quoted National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) statistics that stated up to 70% of secondary students struggle with reading (as cited in Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Although it's difficult to attach precise meaning to vague statistics, these numbers point to a common issue: large groups of adolescents struggle with literacy skills. Further, the academic implications of such an overwhelming percentage of students with insufficient literacy skills represent a major cause for concern for teachers, parents, and policy makers alike.

However, addressing adolescent reading issues requires more than just the increased teaching of reading skills. Besides the ability to comprehend texts, students must also be able to develop the stamina to negotiate difficult texts, as well as develop the social and emotional confidence to participate in a community of readers (Beers, 2003). As a part of developing these confidences, students need to assume the identity of a reader. But this requirement cannot be taught like a skill; rather, it exists as an element students incorporate into their conceptions of themselves as readers and learners.

Peter Johnston (2004) explained, "Children in our classroom are *becoming* literate. They are not simply learning the skills of literacy. They are developing personal and social identities—uniqueness and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming" (p. 22). Although students need to be taught literacy skills, learning skills alone will not be enough; addressing issues of identity exists as a central factor when combating literacy struggles and triumphs.

The Significance of Identity

In her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2004), Azar Nafisi, a literature teacher in Iran, shared her experiences as she and a small group of her female students met secretly to discuss the works of authors such as Austin, Fitzgerald and James. She described the way these stories became lenses for her students to view their own lives. As I read her memoir, I found myself considering the way her story informed the experiences of the struggling readers I knew: my brother and many of the students I encountered in my classroom as a high school teacher. One passage in particular struck me. It read:

What do people who are made irrelevant do? They will sometimes escape, I mean physically, and if that is not possible, they will try to make a comeback, to become a part of the game by assimilating the characteristics of their conquerors. Or they will escape inwardly and...turn their small corner into a sanctuary: the essential part of their life goes underground. (p. 169)

Although in many ways my students' lives were vastly different from those of Nafisi's students, I couldn't help thinking how this question reminded me of an image described by Kylee Beers I had seen in my own high school classroom. Beers (2003) described the escaping, assimilating, and turning inward that occurs 186 days a year as struggling readers show up at schools and sit in class for seven hours lacking the skill most important to their academic success. Students who, in a final attempt to hold on to their self-esteem, often act disinterested in reading and distance themselves from the people and places that reminded them of their struggle.

Like the women in Nafisi's memoir whose identities were forced into dialogue with those stories told about them by the regime's rules and restrictions, the identities of struggling readers result, in large part, from the ideas, attitudes, and practices perpetuated through the stories society, schools, and teachers tell about readers. Past research demonstrates reading struggles significantly influence identity development, causing students to "generate identities that interfere with future literacy learning" and later require "special conditions to shape new and productive identities" (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000, p. 3). These difficulties affect the ways students view learning as well as the way they view themselves. In addition, such perspectives, although developed now, will continue to influence the way students view themselves in the years that follow, ultimately affecting the readers and the people they will become.

Focus of My Research

Considering Skyler and other struggling readers I've encountered, I wonder about the specific implications of such struggles on their sense of identity. As individuals existing in a world of signs, symbols, and events, we make sense of seemingly disconnected elements by turning them into the stories that make up our lives. Our identities represent the coming together of the stories as we embody, those we tell about ourselves, those told about us by collectivities and the ones told by the individuals with whom we interact (Kearney, 2002). From this perspective I wonder: how do narratives associated with the label of "struggling reader" influence the identities of adolescents who assume this identity, including those narratives they tell about themselves as readers and learners, and what it means to be successful as either?

In the pages that follow I detail my research with five adolescent struggling readers who participated in a seven-month multiple case study designed to examine their experiences in schools and the implications of these experiences on their learner identities. Specifically, I examined these questions:

- What are the stories readers tell about themselves, literacy, and learning?
- What do these stories suggest about readers' perceptions and perspectives of the classroom, their abilities, and themselves?
- In what ways do stories told by and about readers transact with literacy learning and what are the implications for literacy classrooms?

Beginning in chapter one with a description of Bakhtin's (1981) theories of dialogue and Herman's (2001) notion of the dialogic self, I outline the theoretical framework that influences my understandings of struggling reader identity development and serves as the basis for this study. I continue in chapter two with a review of the literature on struggling readers, sociocultural perspectives of literacy, and struggling reader identity development. In chapter three I then provide a discussion of the central role of philosophical hermeneutics in my methodology, specifically the role of Ricoeur's (1984) three-fold mimesis and how it pertains to my research questions and design, including considerations concerning my participants, methods, and analysis. Chapters four and five detail the stories of my student participants and the analysis of their stories, including a discussion of the understandings to be gained from each by teachers and researchers working with struggling readers. Finally, chapter six concludes with a discussion of the implications and significance of this research.

Amidst the theory, research, and understandings of the ideas shared here, this dissertation exists largely as a collection of stories. As I sat listening to the students who shared their narratives with me, some of the stories detailed moments of triumph while others overflowed with pain. Sometimes the students and I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdities a story revealed, while other narratives prompted tears in the eyes of the student as well as in my own.

Respected doctor and poet William Carlos Williams once told his young colleague, in reference to their patients, "Their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (Coles, 1989, p. 30). It's in the tradition Williams described that I invite you to encounter these students and their narratives. As you read the stories shared by the students in this study, I encourage you to listen and see how their narratives speak to one another as well as to your own about reading, to school and to education. In addition, I invite you to respect their stories, acknowledging that even though multiple interpretations might exist for the events the students describe, the interpretations they share are the ones that are most real to them and have contributed to the way these students have constructed their identities.

Finally, I invite you to learn from their stories because in them school takes on a very different shape than the one many of us who work in schools might recognize. As an academic I realize that, with some exceptions, "those of us with advanced degrees and professorships in the academy loved school; we worked for grades; we inculcated the three lessons [of surveillance, discipline, and punishment] best of all" (Margolis & Fram, 2007, p. 211). As products of the system we now perpetuate, school worked for us. But

it's for those of us for whom the system worked who especially need to listen. The stories shared by the students in this study represent many of the unheard voices of the students that fill our classrooms. These voices include the students who don't love our subject matter the way we do, who struggle with the system in ways we never did, or who come to the challenges we pose with philosophies about education, reading, and learning entirely different from our own. In the face of these challenges, these are the students who most need our help, and for that reason that it's essential to listen to their voices. However, as we critically consider how to see our world differently, it may also be that it's we who need their help most of all.

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical Framework

As I considered Skyler's situation from the perspective of a researcher, particularly in conjunction with the philosophy I had been reading, the significance he awarded to the stories of his third grade self weighed on me. Both the stories we tell and those told about us become part of our identity. This perpetual telling of stories, memories, hopes, and both past and present ambitions, contributes to the construction of a "*narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime" (Kearney, 2002, p. 4). In this way we ultimately write and become "the autobiographical narratives" that make up our lives (Bruner, 1987, p. 15). For Skyler, this certainly seemed to be the case.

Constructing stories becomes a part of our interpretive process, allowing us to attach meaning to events, people, and changes in our lives. As individuals whose stories come together to represent our identities, the words, actions, and ideas we encounter in the past, present and future exert significant influence on the way we view ourselves and see the world. Bakhtin (1981) described the ideological becoming of the individual as "the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" into one's own discourse (p. 341). Entering into dialogue with others and adopting words and meanings from their surroundings allows people to make sense of their selves and of the world. This assimilation occurs at a fundamental level as the discourse of another functions not just as "information, directions, rules, models and so forth" but "the very bases of [our] ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of [our] behavior" (p. 342). In

other words, the influence of others plays a key role in our personal identity development, manifesting its signature in the ideas, perspectives, and valuations espoused by each of us. This idea proves particularly relevant when considered in the context of the ideological becoming of struggling readers, like Skyler, and the individuals, structures, and ideas they encounter daily.

In addition, because these dialogues take place all of the time, the self exists in a state of flux, continually being authored and re-authored by both the individual and by others (c.f. Bakhtin, 1984; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Ricoeur, 1984). This dynamic conception of the self adapts the voices of others like characters in a story as we try to organize the events of our lives in personally meaningful ways and in ways that work with the narratives perpetuated in our larger community (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). As our narratives transact with new events, signs, and symbols of meaning, new possibilities for understandings result and consequently, so do new stories.

This dialogic conception points to the significant role of the other in the authoring of the self, as others both reinforce the stories we tell about ourselves and sometimes cause us to alter them. The implications of this theoretical construct take on a particular significance when considering student-teacher transactions. In student-teacher transactions, teachers co-author students' narratives and ultimately play a major role in the writing of student identity.

An understanding of the role of the other in the authoring of narratives allows teachers to realize both the power they possess in shaping individuals and the responsibility they hold as they influence learner attitudes, values, and experiences. As teachers attempt to understand not only the stories that make up the lives of their

students, but also the way these stories are told and re-told as a result of classroom interactions and experiences, teachers can help students re-author their experiences in ways that support them as learners and autonomous individuals.

The sections that follow offer an in-depth explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of the dialogical self and the roles these dialogues play in the way individuals author their narrative identities. This discussion will be followed by an examination of Ricoeur's theories concerning the mimetic structure of stories. Ultimately, the final section will describe how these theories overlap and the potential they both hold for making meaning from the stories individuals tell about themselves and their lives.

The Dialogical Self

In contrast to the humanist concept of the subject as a "fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action," Bakhtin proposed a more postmodern, de-centered subject (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007, p. 36). This subject centers around "two value-centers that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet are correlated with each other" and around which the architectonic ordering of life takes place: "myself and the other" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 74). Just as knowledge cannot be separated from the lens used to understand it, individuals cannot define their existence without doing so in relation to the other.

Ricoeur echoed this idea, explaining "the shortest route from self to self" as "through the other" (as cited in Kearney, 1996a, p. 1). Although the self represents a single identity, the construction of a life narrative "requires an additional, external perspective to our own" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 54). This outside perspective allows the

individual to interpret the signs and signals of the other in personally meaningful ways. Through these perspectives of “outsideness,” the individual comes to know the self (Kearney, 1998, p. 1). In transactions with others, individuals continue the authoring of their identity. Considering the significance of the other, those people students come in contact with each day, namely peers, friends, family members, and teachers, represent powerful forces in the creation of student identity.

The Dialogic Self Defined

The interconnected nature of the relationship between self and other led Bakhtin (1984) to explain, “the single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human existence is the *open-ended dialogue*” (p. 293). Only in dialogue with others can one truly understand the self. The other exists as a key in understanding the self because dialogue assumes “the existence of a person who tells and an actual or imaginal person who listens” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. xx). Dialogues, even those occurring in the mind of the individual, shape the self. Therefore, “the fact that a listener, another person, is always present or implied, makes the self a dialogical phenomenon *par excellence*” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. xx). The individual always pre-forms thoughts for, speaks with intentionality towards, and anticipates the response of the other. Either real or imagined, these dialogues take place with the other in mind as they are “dialectically merged” and mutually condition each other (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 383).

Herman’s conception of the dialogic self resulted from Bakhtin’s notion of the polyphonic novel, where the individual lives “in a multiplicity of worlds” that 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; e.g. Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). However, such dialogues extended 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, Kempen & van Loon, 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. Individuals, in dialogue with the voices of others, author and re-author the narratives that comprise their identity.

External voices. Hermans (2001) described how, from a young age, individuals become “continuously involved in dialogues in which representatives of the community (mother, father, aunt, uncle, teacher, peers) place them in particular positions (child, pupil, friend)” and address them in approving or disapproving, but never neutral, ways. The individual transforms these dialogues from the “‘you are...’ utterances from the community to ‘I am ...’ utterances in constructing a self-narrative” (p. 263-264). In this process the individual receives the perspective of the other, opening up a way to self-understanding.

Outside voices represent powerful forces in the telling and interpretation of individual narratives. The poet, teacher, and doctor William Carlos Williams described to his student Robert Coles how, as doctors, they had to pay close attention to the things they said because the stories they told revealed themselves and also projected ideas onto the stories of their patients (Coles, 1989). The same idea holds true for teachers working with students who are “highly dependent on the voices of significant others and the (collective) stories told about him or her” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 120). Stories

students tell about themselves comprise their identities, but so do the larger collective stories told about students by teachers and institutions.

Expounding on Ricoeur's philosophy of the self, Dunne (1996) explained the overwhelming significance of these relationships because a child's "basic senses of himself or herself—as worthy of love or respect, as capable or incapable—are mediated by 'significant others' and deeply internalized" (p. 144). Through interactions with others, students develop their sense of self. As developing readers, writers, and speakers, the influence of significant others helps and hinders the way students view themselves and their abilities. Narratives created in conjunction with external voices reflect students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities.

Imaginal voices. The dialogues that occur within the mind of the individual as they consider the words and positions of what Hermans called "imaginal" others also play a significant role in the dialogical self. Imaginal dialogues "exist alongside actual dialogues with real others and, interwoven with actual interactions, they constitute an essential part of our narrative construction of the world" (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992, p. 28). In this space imaginal and actual positions exist side by side and are "*interwoven* with actual interactions," making these voices and positions key participants in dialogue, even if they do not actually exist as physically present individuals (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 70). Voices of others represent perspectives the individual has assumed and incorporated into his or her repertoire of positions.

While these dialogues may take place outwardly, they primarily occur inwardly as individuals question, pose issues, and critique their decisions against the background of the voices of others. These dialogues with "our critics, our parents, our consciences, our

gods, our reflection in the mirror, the photograph of someone we miss, a figure from a movie or a dream, our babies, or our pets” all represent exchanges that contribute to the way people make meaning of their experiences (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992, p. 28). The results of these communications influence the individual’s understandings of self and of the world.

Because these positions “are not simply ‘copies’ of the views of others, but imaginatively constructed and reconstructed in the course of development,” they may not be the actual perceptions of a living other; rather, they exist as internalizations, interpretations of voices and assumed positions that influence the construction of the self (Hermans, 2001, p. 264). Still, these voices work like a story’s character imbedded in an individual’s “mental life” (Coles, 1989, p. 138). In this way the voices become incorporated “as *living presences*” in the individual (Morson, 2004, p. 326). The stories that result from these dialogues and the identity formations they reinforce influence the individual as well. Just as the voices of real others work as a force shaping student identity, imaginal voices perform a similar function.

Collective voices. The narrative identity of the individual “operates at the level of *both* individual *and* communal identity” (Kearney, 1996b, p. 182). Individuals draw their identity from the communities they are a part of and these communities draw their identity from interpretations of stories they tell. As individuals identify with “particular groups, classes, or categories of people and disidentify with other ones” both of these associations contribute to the composition of individual identity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 120). These collective narratives represent another featured voice in the dialogical self.

Carol Christ argued “an important feature of collective stories is that they are preexistent, that is, many of them exist before the individual becomes a member of the community” and are part of an identity individuals assume because such stories help organize experience (as cited in Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 118). Like other narratives, these collective stories are never neutral, but work in both positive and negative ways in the construction of the self.

The stories told by collective voices allow individuals to adopt ideas about themselves in order to make sense of various positions or stories and manifest the “intensive transactional relationships between self and society” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 120). In schools this might be seen in roles assumed by different social or ability groups. For example, the identity of a “struggling reader” may be one identity a student assumes as a result of descriptions or repeated associations with certain other students or experiences. These may result from actual dialogues or from inferences the student makes as a result of these experiences. As Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained, the individual’s “view and experiences of people who represent these groups are strongly and pervasively influenced by the collective stories in which these groups and their representatives function as characters that are depicted in highly colored and affective ways” (p. 120). Therefore, identities are formed both by and in conjunction with the larger narratives of collectivities.

Further, these dialogues, both with others and with communities, are not limited just to words, but to all forms of expression. They take place through transactions that occur as the whole individual “participates wholly and throughout his whole life” with “eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds” as “he invests his entire

self in discourse” that “enters into the dialogic fabric of human life” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). The gestures, routines, habits, and patterns that play a role in dialoguing with the other all become additional parts of this interpretive process and the transactions that take place.

Finally, it also becomes important to note the effects of the heteroglossic tensions inherent in these dialogues. Bakhtin described the “processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification” that occur when voices engage in dialogue (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 272). Although greater unity and understanding often results from these exchanges, a certain sense of stratification occurs as well. In the context of the dialogical self, this means that these different voices constantly competing for supremacy never reach a final agreement. Instead, an acceptance of disparate voices means individuals may simultaneously see themselves in conflicting ways, depending on which voice speaks the loudest. For students that self-identify as struggling readers, this heteroglossic tension becomes evident as they negotiate their understandings of themselves as students who struggle against the backdrop of their successes. In a sense, they might see themselves as both struggling and successful, but constantly trying to reconcile their identity as one or the other.

Authoring

Authoring plays a central role in understanding the human experience (Clark & Holquist, 1984). Both the authoring of a literary work and the authoring of a life provide avenues to explore the relationship between the self and the other:

Just as an author of a novel...expresses her authorship—thereby asserting her moral authority—in the process of creating and writing her book ... so do we, as

individual moral agents, express our authorship—thereby asserting our own authority and responsibility—through the moral stories we tell about our lives.

(Tappan & Brown, 1991, p. 190)

The stories individuals choose to incorporate into their identities become part of a complex web of meaning that serves as an interpretive framework for future experiences.

Additionally, the stories of the individual represent a unique history of stories unlike those of anyone else. Coles (1989) explained how individuals become their own “appreciative and comprehending critics,” pulling together “the various incidents in [their] lives in such a way that they do, in fact, become an old-fashioned story” (p. 11). The way individuals incorporate certain experiences into their personal narrative varies from person to person. But the selective process of incorporating certain stories, while excluding others, demonstrates the “coming-together-of-a-life” is by no means an objective act (Kearney, 2002, p. 4). Instead it represents a strategic process of reflection, interpretation, experience, and reinterpretation.

In this way, the narratization of the self becomes foundational to all activities, structuring events and assigning causes to the elements that comprise the story of a life (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). The self, “ever ready to explain anything” in the process of continual interpretation, creates and assigns meaning to narratives in order to understand the world and the self’s role in it (p. 46). As new events, symbols or meanings are introduced, understandings might be altered in order to account for additional meaning or interpretations. This process results in the creation of new stories and new ideological positions.

Thus narration also becomes a perpetual process of interpreting and re-interpreting, envisioning and re-envisioning one's life. Through the events and ideas individuals incorporate into their narratives, they "come to *imagine* and *know* themselves in the stories they tell about themselves" (Kearney, 1996b, p. 182). Stories represent significant forces in self-identity because stories *become* the individual's identity. The stories students tell and those told about them become central to their identities as learners. Not only are their own interpretations of their experiences central to this identity, but also the perceptions of themselves reflected through the perspectives of their peers, parents, and teachers. These perceptions, as well as those assimilated into one's understandings from transactions with larger discourses, such as schools and society, all come together as individuals realize their narratives about themselves as learners.

But because of the living nature of the word, narrative identities remain in a constant state of change. Narratives are "made and then unmade" in the weaving together of "different plots through the same personage" in a constant state of becoming (Pucci, 1996, p. 126). There exists no final word or state of the subject, merely "the easy speculative binding of the present to the past, a binding always taking the form of a narrative" (p. 126). Just as the stories students tell about themselves change, so too do their conceptions of their identity. New stories possess the power to bind or unbind past self-perceptions. Therefore, narratives, even if they exist only temporarily, remain in constant negotiation with one another and re-form identity.

Dialectics of Event and Plot

Although the voices of real and imaginal others, as well as the collective voices of groups, represent powerful forces in shaping the identity of the self, they do not

determine it. Despite the significant influence of the other, stories are not “confined to the mind of its reader” but exist in interplay between the other and the individual. The self “organizes it in the sense that the others’ views are taken up in a continuous dialogical process in which the child, and later the adult, ‘answers’ to these influences” (Hermans, 2001, p. 264). Narrativity allows individuals to become agents, narrators and readers of their own lives rather than living in the stories of others (Kearney, 2000). Through emplotment individuals act as agents in their own authoring.

Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained, “Emplotment marks the difference between a chronicle and a narrative *construction*” because coherence results not from ordered events, but from the organizational frame imposed on them (p. 22). Events derive meaning from their interaction with plot as they mutually shape each other (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Neither event nor plot is exclusively dictated by one another; the relationship is a negotiation between the two. It becomes a “dialectic relationship between event and plot” where the resulting theme evidences the features of greatest significance (p. 25).

Coles (1989) wrote “what ought to be interesting...is the unfolding of a lived life rather than the confirmation such a chronicle provides for some theory” (p. 22). Understanding the way events and plots come together remains of paramount importance. Doing so provides a means to comprehend the way individuals make sense of the world through narratives.

Emplotment

For many theorists, the process of emplotment provides insight into the narrative structure of experience, revealing the way narratives “segment and purpose-build the very

events of life” (Bruner, 1987, p. 15; c.f. Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Kearney, 2002; Ricoeur, 1984), helping individuals attach meaning to and describe the “features of temporal existence” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 3). However, just like the self, stories are not authored exclusively by the individual but are constructed in social contexts and influenced by others at each stage of the process (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Emplotment becomes a process of dialogue as events are imbued with meaning, ultimately authoring and re-authoring the individual’s identity. Applying Ricoeur’s theories of three-fold mimesis to the concept of the dialogical self provides a framework to examine the elements that comprise narratives and explore features that influence the stories of students.

Mimesis₁

Kearney (1996b) explained before the narrative imagination configures life into stories, it is already being used to *prefigure* life “in terms of symbolically structured and temporally schematized action” (p. 183). The prefiguring he described represents the role of the preunderstandings people use to construct their worlds. Mimesis₁ is the stage where the prefigured pieces that ultimately comprise narratives exist independently in the form of structures, symbols, and temporal creations.

As Bruner (1987) explained, “the mind is never free of precommitment” and “no innocent eye” exists that can penetrate “aboriginal reality” (p. 32). Likewise, for Bakhtin (1981) agents, goals, and questions do not exist absent of meaning. Rather, like the word, they “taste” of their contexts and are historically and contextually “populated by intentions” (p. 293). Plots are also shaped by the attitudes and values of the individual.

While there exists some shared meaning, the unique nature of the individual implies that no one really knows the meaning these hold for another and no two are the same.

These preunderstandings provide the foundations upon which individual narratives are constructed (Ricoeur, 1984). For the narrative identities of students, these elements include not only past and present school experiences but also family attitudes and experiences with school. Additionally, they include the way the norms of their worlds and cultures are validated or devalued by the school environment, as well as their interests and abilities. The way these elements are brought together and the themes used to connect them become central to the second phase of this mimetic process.

Mimesis₂ and Emplotment

In mimesis₂, the stage Ricoeur also calls the heart of emplotment, the preunderstandings of mimesis₁ come together to create narratives. This second stage functions as the “mediating role...between a stage of practical experience that precedes it and a state that succeeds it” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 53). As a bridge between preunderstandings and post understandings, it gives structure to the separate parts of the narrative. It brings form and perspective to a “heterogeneous set of circumstances or experiences” and allows the dynamic nature of narratives to be evidenced (Pelluer, 1997, p. xxviii).

Emplotment mediates between mimesis₁ and mimesis₃. Over time, pieces come together from the “manifold of events” into a unity that becomes “one temporal whole” (p. 66). Among the temporal characteristics “elements of past, present, and anticipated future” are “brought together by the procedure of juxtaposition, in an attempt to create new relationships,” reversing and representing previously established understandings in

the light of new events (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 54). This process both writes and rewrites individual narratives as new understandings result from previous ideas juxtaposed against new knowledge. A continuously negotiated student identity gains shape and direction from the themes the student identifies and uses to organize his or her stories as these different elements are brought together. Together these elements provide a meaningful construct to organize the narrative and set the stage for the next part of mimesis to occur.

Mimesis₃

Mimesis₃ “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader” as the story takes on temporality (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 71). Here the individual’s preconceptions and contexts are applied to the events, actions, symbols and parts of the narrative to draw out larger meanings from the whole. The world of the other and the world of the individual are brought into dialogue; larger themes are reinforced, supported and refuted by subsequent narratives.

Intersection and dialogue. For Bakhtin “existence, like language, is a shared event” (Holquist, 1990, p. 28) where “the importance of struggling with another’s discourse...is enormous” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348). The individual initially conceptualizes the self through words, forms, tones and ideas “wrapped in another’s consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 138) as he or she “assimilates the words of others” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 341) into his or her understandings. These words become part of a never-ending dialogue where individuals “cannot choose *not* to be—in dialogue, not only with other human beings, but also with the natural and cultural configurations we lump together as ‘the world’” (Holquist, 1990, p. 30).

The intersection of the narrator and hearer represents a transaction between two worlds and result in unique meaning. In the case of students, this intersection occurs as their worlds come in contact with those of the teacher, school, and larger community. The figuration of and meaning attached to stories becomes not just the responsibility of the individual, but also the result of the influence of the words and stories of the other. In this stage particularly, the stories told by others influence the larger meaning attached to developing individual narratives.

Because there always exists the possibility for multiple themes and motives for action, “the dialectical relationship between events and plot makes a narrative a highly dynamic and flexible process” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 25). Determining one specific meaning becomes impossible because “the ‘best fit’ is never a perfect fit” and “the construction of a rival account can never be excluded entirely” (p. 25). Individuals never really know the full chain of events that lead up to the interplay between events, individuals, meanings, and contexts in their emplotted stories.

Refiguration. This third part of mimesis is also “characterized by a narrative identity ‘stemming from the endless rectification of a previous narrative by a subsequent one’” (Kearney, 1996b, p. 183). In the continual process of refiguration, individuals assign meaning to and infer meaning from the stories that make up their lives.

Narrative identity remains anything but stable or seamless because of the perpetual change that results from constant reflection. Coles (1989) described this refiguration as part of the “mimetic power of a novel or a story” that works “into one’s thinking life” one’s “reveries or idle thoughts, [and] even one’s moods and dreams,” helping individuals appropriate stories of the past and re-structure the events of life into

something new (p. 204). Refiguration allows individuals to write and rewrite their storied pasts as they engage in the ongoing events of life. As individuals “weave different, even opposed plots” about their lives their narrative identity becomes “the name of the problem at least as much as it is that of a solution” (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 249). This constant refiguring works both for and against teachers trying to help students see new potentials within themselves and school. While it means students remain open to new interpretations that can alter negative narratives, there is no guarantee that once these narratives are altered future refigurations will reinforce them.

Similarly, in each moment “we meet ourselves in the past, the present, and the future...we tell remembered stories of ourselves from earlier times as well as more current stories” and “all of these stories offer possible plotlines for our futures” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60). The results of these exchanges become evident as narratives unfold. At its very least life becomes “a selective achievement of memory recall,” because “recounting one’s life is an interpretive feat” (Bruner, 1987, p. 13). As individuals select and integrate different elements into their self-narratives, these stories are refigured chronologically and thematically.

Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained how “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 disrupt a student’s sense of self and may cause the student to reconstruct their current narrative. This reconstruction, based on new events as well as memories of other experiences that support this retelling, represents a different self than previously constructed. Explained differently, where certain experiences may not have played a major role in the student’s narrative in one construction, the imposition of a

different theme may bring out the inclusion of events that justify a new interpretation.

These changes may result in a new theme and the assumption of a new perception of the self.

In Ricoeur's terms, this would mean parts of *mimesis*₁, heretofore not considered, change the emplotment that takes place in *mimesis*₂. Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained 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). As the understandings generated in *mimesis*₃ change, they have the potential to alter meaning derived from the events identified in *mimesis*₁ and their emplotment in *mimesis*₂. All parts work in an interconnected manner, revealing the power of the constant telling and retelling of narratives.

Tappan and Brown (1991) suggested the notion of authorship "not only expresses itself through narrative," but "also develops through narrative" because of the reflection that occurs in the event of telling (p. 187). Similarly, Ricoeur (1986) described narrating a story as having already reflected "upon the event narrated" (p. 61). This reflection involves "*learning* from the event" as the processes of narrating causes the individual to both "claim authority and assume responsibility" through the awareness brought about by the realization of individual thoughts, feelings, and actions. "Learning the lessons' in the stories individuals tell about the moral experiences in their lives" becomes part of the self-understanding generated from these events and an integral part of the individual's life perspective (Tappan & Brown, 1991, p. 192).

Ricoeur (1984) pointed out the seemingly circular nature of this mimetic process and described it as "an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point

a number of times, but at different altitudes” (p. 72). In the telling of stories new stories result and open up possibilities for future meaning in the actions, agents, events, and symbols of life, continuing this process of creation and meaning.

Self in a Process of Becoming

Bakhtin rejected stage theories with endings because dialogue, humanity and the individual know no “such a final resolution” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 93). The dynamic nature of the self posits the individual in a constant state of “ideological becoming,” through the adoption of words and ideas from the world and other individuals (Bakhtin, 1984). The authoring of a life exists as part of an ongoing process rather than a transition to a final state because “coherence of the self is not restricted to the individual per se, but is the result of a dialogical relationship between the individual and other persons. In other words, the self is not a given but an emergent” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 44).

Similarly, Ricoeur proposed “the identity of human subjects” as the “perpetual task of reinterpretation in the light of stories we tell ourselves and others” where “the subject becomes the reader and writer of its own life” (Kearney, 1996b, p. 181). Individuals possess the power to re-author their selves and identities. Pucci (1996) described the way Ricoeur’s philosophy of narrative explained how “becoming aware of oneself occurs within the re-appropriation of the past, while the future discloses new possibilities” (p. 125). The ongoing authoring and re-authoring of a life allows individuals to revisit the narratives of the past, bring them to new conclusions, and draw from them new meanings.

The ultimate object of an emplotted understanding of events is “to sense the alternativeness of human possibility” (Bruner, 1986, p. 53). This perspective offers hope for students who want to change the stories told about them and for teachers who want to help students re-author themselves in ways that promote academic success. Re-envisioning relationships between dialogical positions allows students to “move beyond the prevailing definition of narrative as intrinsically temporal” or having a beginning, development, and ending, and into one that “as a spatio-temporal structure, is intrinsically open ended” (Hermans, 1993, p. xxi).

While adolescent learners possess their own unique challenges that come with their age and situation in life, they may have an advantage over younger students as the adolescents and their teachers seek to author alternative visions of the self. Bruner (1986) explained as individuals grow to adulthood they “become increasingly adept at seeing the same set of events from *multiple* perspectives or stances and at entertaining the results as, so to speak, alternative possible worlds” (p. 109). Perhaps it’s in adolescence teachers and significant others can do the most to help students re-author their stories as students become open to alternative worlds and see themselves as readers, re-authoring their identities as such.

Looking Forward

The authoring of the individual occurs from the reflection of the self through the other. I love the way American author John Steinbeck (2002) once described this co-authoring, particularly because he couched it in terms of his own educational experiences. He described one of his former high school teachers in this way:

She left her signature on us, the literature of the teacher who writes on minds...I supposed that to a large extent I am the unsigned manuscript of that high school teacher. What deathless power lies in the hands of such a person.” (p. 143)

As Steinbeck suggested, as significant others in the lives of students, teachers play a pivotal role in the authoring of their students. An understanding of the role of the other in the shaping narratives allows teachers to realize both the power they possess in shaping individuals and the responsibility they hold as they influence learner attitudes, values, and experiences. As teachers attempt to understand not only the stories that make up the lives of their students, but also the way these stories are told and re-told as a result of classroom interactions and experiences, teachers can help students re-author their experiences in ways that support them as learners and autonomous individuals.

But what are the significant structures to the stories of struggling adolescent readers? Who are the agents that play a central role in these stories and what are the underlying beliefs that frame these identities? What kinds of signs, symbols and meanings do struggling readers use to emplot their stories? In order to thoroughly interrogate the narratives of struggling readers and the issues around which they construct their narratives, it becomes essential to understand the current research focused on struggling reader identity development. The chapter that follows provides an in-depth look at the research on struggling reader identity, organized specifically in terms of discourses, individuals and ideologies that most influence these readers.

CHAPTER 2

Struggling Reader Identity: A Review of the Literature

In his book *Teaching Stories: An Anthology on the Power of Learning and Literature*, psychologist Robert Coles (2004) wrote, “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. These moments become powerful forces in the molding of individuals and consequently point to the role of literacy in the development of identity.

It’s these encounters, experiences and events, as well as the individuals involved in these occurrences that will be explored in this chapter. But to more fully understand how these elements influence reader identities, it becomes necessary to frame the study of struggling reader identity development within the contexts of the current literature on this topic. In an attempt to make “connections *across* traditional boundaries” (Luker, 2008, p. 13) and draw on significant studies on reader identity from multiple fields, the research I will describe concerns studies focused specifically on reader identity, as well as studies focused more generally on learner identity. By doing so I hope to offer a more comprehensive view of the research used to frame the specific issues faced by struggling adolescent readers.

Specifically in this literature review, I begin by examining the major movements that frame the research focused on struggling reader identity construction. The findings presented in this review are based on research, practice, and theory informing struggling reader research and identity development in K-12 classrooms. Although I briefly review the role of other theories besides sociocultural perspectives, the findings presented focus primarily on those stemming from postmodern conceptions of identity.

This review then transitions into a discussion of specific studies about struggling reader identity and how these studies position identity development in terms of the role of student self-perceptions, experiences, schools and other individuals. Because of the way Ricoeur's ideas about the elements of story have been discussed in the previous chapter and the ways these elements will be discussed in the following chapters, I have chosen to loosely organize the discussion of these studies in terms of the preunderstandings that make up narratives. It is my hope in doing so that the reader will be able to better see how these different elements work in other studies and come together to influence the stories of my participants.

Methods

As a researcher of the social sciences, assembling my review of literature took place throughout the process of my research (Luker, 2008). Before I began my research, I conducted an in-depth review of the literature on struggling reader identity development. Then, later during the writing of my prospectus, my data collection, and my data analysis, I continued to seek out articles and research that informed the patterns I saw and the questions that were raised by my findings. Finally, as I concluded my

analysis, I searched out relevant research once again in an effort to remain in dialogue with these issues and address any areas I missed in my previous searches.

I began by searching academic databases, including ERIC, EBSCOhost Academic Complete, and JSTOR using terms such as “struggling reader identity,” “identity construction readers,” “secondary read*,” “adolescent read*,” “teen read* identity,” “adolesc* read* identity,” “marg* read* identity,” and “reluctant read* identity.” I then narrowed the results to articles and books that represented the following: (a) research on struggling readers, (b) research on learner identity, and (c) research on struggling reader identity development.

Similarly, I conducted a search using Google Scholar to locate possible articles not available through these databases. Again, using terms such as “struggling reader identity,” “secondary reading identity,” and “struggling readers development,” I searched the findings, selecting those about learner identity and struggling reader identity development. This proved fruitful as I found many published, peer reviewed articles not yet available in online archives. Additionally, I consulted colleagues concerning their knowledge related to this topic and examined reputable practitioner texts that addressed these issues.

Finally, I relied on a technique similar to one often used in qualitative research described as “snowball sampling” (Coleman, 2006, p. 118). Snowball sampling is the process in which interviewing one participant leads a researcher to another individual who might inform the study. I often found reading one text, then, by examining the sources used by the author, often lead to other texts. This process also helped me identify key articles related to these topics.

Each of these processes helped me confirm I had located major studies that frame this research. Throughout each of these searches I found many of the same articles and books repeatedly referenced. This helped me feel confident I had located significant texts related to these issues.

Struggling Reader Defined

Descriptors such as “reluctant” (Wilhelm, 1997), “marginalized” (Franzak, 2006; Moje, Peyton, Readence, & Moore, 2000b), “at-risk” (O’Brien, 1998; Miller, 2000; Taylor & Nesheim, 2000), “dependent,” (Beers, 2003), and “striving” (USDE, 2010) are used by experts to describe students who experience challenges reading, but the term “struggling” (Allen, 1995; Alvermann, 2001; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Hall, 2009; Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000; Vacca & Vacca, 2002) has appeared the 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 defined by these other titles.

Additionally, the meaning of this term becomes clouded because even among experts, the definition of “struggling” varied. In her use of the descriptor, Alvermann (2001) included those who struggle, those diagnosed with difficulties, those in need of remediation, and those unmotivated or disengaged. Beers (2003) suggested similar diversity when she explained the term doesn’t adhere to a “single template,” but also includes the compliant girl who doesn’t cause trouble in class and avoids being noticed, the class clown who jokes to avoid work, the ESOL student struggling to learn English, and even the advanced student who inevitably stumble over a difficult text. Moje et al., (2000b) also broadened this definition to those students who are “not connected to

literacy in classrooms and schools” and who are not “engaged in the reading and writing done in school; who have language or cultural practices different than those valued in school; or who are outsiders to the dominant groups because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation” (p. 405). Together these ideas encompass a wide spectrum of students, far more than just those with clinically diagnosed reading difficulties.

Here I limit my discussion of struggling readers to these definitions, but encourage those interested in a more thorough exploration of this topic to consider Franzak’s (2006) literature review on marginalized adolescent readers, which provides an excellent overview of the conceptual movements that shape and continue to shape reading pedagogy, the major issues facing struggling readers and the teachers, and the role policy plays in shaping these issues.

However, I include this array of definitions because each describes students who exist on the margins of classroom and school literacy practices and whose perceptions of themselves and their abilities to learn are directly influenced by the way they see themselves as readers. And, as David O’Brian (2006) explained in reference to his own use of the term “struggling,” I do this with the realization that “messing with shades of meaning changes little about how labels affect the students” (p. 34).

Such variety points to an array of sociocultural factors that influence conceptualizations of literacy and struggling readers. In the next section I describe major movements and frameworks that position ideas about reader development and identity. An understanding of these concepts proves key in situating studies of struggling reader identity and understanding the implications of this research.

Major Movements and Frameworks

This section begins with an overview of the different models for conceptualizing what reading entails and requires, as well as a discussion about why these elements matter when considering the issue of struggling reader identity. Following this discussion, I offer an overview of postmodern notions of identity that inform the way identity is conceptualized in this study. Finally, this section concludes with an overview of New Literacies Studies and an exploration of how these perspectives work with postmodern notions of identity to frame the focus of research on struggling readers and identity construction.

Reading: Process or Perspective?

The study of reading is often situated within different models, such as information processing (Beach, 1995), cognitivist, or psychological (Goodman & Goodman, 1994), that focus primarily on the ways reading works as a process or develops as an ability. According to these models, students are not reading and writing if “what they produce does not match...adult reading/writing” (Beach, 1995, p. 91). These views situate literacy as “a set of abilities or skills residing inside people’s heads” applied to comprehension situations, rather than as social processes (Gee, 2008, p. 2). Issues of self-esteem and motivation were often discussed in association with these difficulties as they influence reader development, but also dealt primarily with helping students overcome these issues (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Newman, 1982). Although this research remains important to understanding the way struggling readers are viewed, it says little about the concept of identity.

In contrast to information processing, cognitivist, or psychological perspectives, sociocultural perspectives view reading and learning as “influenced by the values, experiences, and actions that exist within the larger environment” as students’ and teachers’ experiences and viewpoints combine in the classroom (Langer, 2001, p. 838). From this perspective struggling readers’ issues with texts often stem from the range of “social class and culture disjunctions between home and school cultures” that come together in the classroom rather than from a sole lack of ability (Dressman, Wilder, & Connor, 2005, p. 11). Positioned this way, literacy education becomes “less about skill development and more about access to cultural resources and to understandings” (Alvermann, 2001, p. 679 -680). Understanding these differences becomes key to making sense of the concept of struggling reader identity.

Postmodern Notions of Identity

Rather than the unitary concept of identity described in humanist thought, postmodern ideas of identity situate it as influenced by context (Alvermann, 2001, Gee, 2008). While many sociocultural researchers cite Mead (1934) and Vygotsky (1978) concerning the role of society in shaping the individual through interactions, other theorists such as James (1890), Bakhtin (1973), Ricoeur (1984), Taylor (1989), and Hermans (2001) also contribute to the notion of the self as negotiated by the individual, by others, and by context. In these theories identity becomes a co-construction with the other. McCarthy and Moje (2000) explained in postmodern theories of identity the formation of the self and self-awareness exists in the mind as well as in the transactions between the individual and the world. In this way “learners’ identities both shape and reflect the meanings they make from text, their interactions with text, and the ways they

are positioned or position themselves” and the formation of all of these multi-dimensional parts takes place in constantly changing processes (Moje, Dillon & O’Brian, 2000, p.176).

This 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). From this perspective identity exists as a central component of meaning making, as well as a key element in understanding the self.

New Literacy Studies

Postmodern notions of identity play an essential role in understanding the movements that shape ideas about literacy learning. The field known as New Literacies Studies (Gee, 2000; Street, 2003) described work that “from a variety of different perspectives, views literacy in its full range of cognitive, social, interactional, cultural, political, institutional, economic, moral, and historical contexts” (Gee, 2009, p. 2). These studies framed literacy not as a neutral skill, but “a social practice...always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” and “rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (Street, 2003, p. 77-78).

Alvermann (2001) explained this shift in thinking posited literacy education as “less about skill development and more about access to cultural resources and to understandings,” making it clear how “schools that promote certain normative ways of reading texts may be disabling some of the very students they are trying to help” as normative reading skills become less useful in a technologically advancing and changing

world (p. 679 -680).

Because this view situated literacy as heavily influenced by culture and relations, New Literacies Studies focus on “how literacy practices are linked to people’s lives, identities, and social affiliations” helped educators recognize the “vast range of experiences that contribute to literacy learning” beyond basic skills (Compton-Lilly, 2009, p. 88). The implications of these studies make clear the role of school practices in shaping individuals.

In New Literacies Studies, literacy becomes defined by historical, economic, and environmental practices, leading some researchers to believe that students don’t fail in schools, but schools fail students when they are denied opportunities to practice literacy in personally meaningful ways (Dressman, Wilder, & Connor, 2005). Alvermann (2006) echoed this notion, posing the possibility that “traditional school culture is *making* struggling readers out of some youth,” particularly those who rejected traditional academic notions of literacy (p. 95).

Twenty-first century perspectives of literacy broaden ideas of literacy learning, providing teachers an increasing number of ways to engage struggling readers and transform identity. 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.

Together postmodern theories of identity and the work of the New Literacies Studies provide a framework for situating ideas concerning identity and struggling readers. In a sense these theories provide a background against which to view discussions centered on the significance of identity in reading research. In the remainder of this piece I examine research that offers insights into significant factors in the way students construct their reader identities. I then conclude with a discussion of implications of these studies on my particular research.

Influences on Struggling Reader Identity Development

A variety of interconnected factors influence student identity development. Adolescents find themselves constantly engaged in attempts to construct themselves in the world, while larger discourses and other individuals play significant roles in the development of adolescent identity (Dillon & Moje, 1998). These discourses include those of the larger society, the school, the curriculum, and the cultures that students value. Students draw on assumed norms, rules and symbols such as these as they make inferences about their role and place in schools. Similarly, the influence of other individuals and past experiences also play significant roles in the way students construct their narrative identities.

In order to frame them in complimentary ways to the preunderstandings discussed in the previous chapter, I have discussed the research in terms of influential discourses that direct experiences and shape motives, factors that shape student self-perceptions, as well as agents or significant others in these perceptions and experiences. The articles and studies described offer insights and suggest possible influences on reader identity development.

Discourses

Students' beliefs about contexts shape their assumptions about the world and influence the positions they assume. "Adolescents' multiple subjectivities are created through and in social and academic discourses and texts" and therefore the positions students are "encouraged to, allowed to, and prohibited from occupying in secondary schools and in the broader culture, shape the way they make sense of disciplinary concepts, literacy practices, and success and happiness in school and the larger world" (Dillon & Moje, 1998, p. 219). Therefore, examining the role these discourses play remains essential in understanding identity development in struggling readers.

The school. Previous research details how the discourse of the school community often influenced the way students viewed literacy, validating or rejecting those literacies students espouse. Dillon and Moje (1998) explained students "receive messages about their academic and social practices in schools and classrooms" that contributed to the construction of discourses concerning classroom participation and school (p. 195). These experiences taught students what counted as acceptable, school-sanctioned literacy and what did not. Adolescents whose reading choices often "relate[d] to personal identity construction" felt "this lack of acceptance as personal rejection" when schools did not sanction their literacy practices (Lenters, 2006, p. 138). In other words, the literacies schools validated and allowed students to employ became factors in the way students saw themselves as learners.

Other research described how perpetuating autonomous views of literacy in classrooms that situated literacy as a set of decontextualized abilities validated good-bad reader binaries and by its very nature left students to question who were the bad readers

in the class and try to figure out how to identify these students (O'Brian, 2006).

The general curriculum. Curriculum also played a significant role in the construction of student identity, particularly when students or teachers used student lives to explore texts and content. In his study of an English classroom, Wortham (2003) illustrated how social identity and curriculum potentially mediated one another, causing students to develop identities in part as a result of class discussions centered on certain themes. These observations demonstrated the way “details of the curriculum get used to help construct social identities for students and teachers in more subtle and context-specific ways” (Wortham, 2003, p. 228). Sometimes students are forced into roles based on the way teachers use curriculum to encourage connections to larger discourses and students’ lives.

English and language arts courses also played a specific role in identity development in struggling readers. Broughton & Fairbanks (2003) explained “language arts, perhaps more than any other academic discipline, has the potential to facilitate identity development” because the “nature of the literacy curriculum inherently lends itself to the exploration of identities, focused as it is on individuals’ abilities to read, write, listen, and speak” as well as opportunities to “respond to the complexities of their own and others’ life experiences” (p. 433). In a similar manner, Fecho’s (2000) use of classroom dialogue invited students to critique dominant identities and demonstrated the way issues of power and identity transacted in students’ lives. This study illustrated the way identity positioned individuals and the way students negotiated these positions.

The texts. Reeves (2004) illustrated the way texts “brought [students] into the world of the text against their will,” sometimes causing the students “psychic pain” but at

other times supporting “eagerly sought out” identities students enjoyed (p. 23). Neilsen (1998) also described the way texts offered adolescents opportunities to try on roles, becoming both a reader and a player in the text. These studies reflected the findings of multiple others centered on the power of texts to offer students alternative ways to envision situations and themselves as they experimented with alternative identities.

Similarly, in Tatum’s (2008) study of African American males, he showed how certain texts offered different ways for students to think about their life choices, connect to characters, and reflect on their own choices. Miller (2000) also used literature to offer alternative perceptions and to improve the self-concepts of students, in this case those of at-risk females. In both studies researchers emphasized the power of both content and ability development to re-shape identity. All of these cases demonstrate the way texts worked as powerful forces in shaping reader identity.

Another significant study demonstrated the significance of school-validated literacies. Triplett (2004) described the change in attitude and ability that occurred in a student who struggled with traditional approaches to literacy tasks when the student was encouraged to incorporate his strengths into literacy activities, rather than just focus on school-sanctioned reading. In a like manner, an ethnographic case study of eight struggling readers found engaging students in meaningful literacy activities validated their reader experiences, helped them see themselves in content, and provided needed support to acquire skills for academic success (Dressman et al., 2005). This data they found “increasing the quality and quantity of secondary students’ literacy activity holds the key to reducing those struggles in the secondary-school population” (p. 9). Meaningful literacy experiences engaged students and simultaneously provided the

constant support needed helped to help these learners acquire the skills necessary to achieve success in school.

Each of these studies point to the significant role of school attitudes towards literacy, as well as the influence of school sanctioned literacy practices. When schools allow non-traditional approaches to literacy learning, such as texts outside the canon and those enjoyed by students, they tell more than one story about what reading really is and struggling readers experience greater opportunities for success. Also, when schools provide opportunities for students to see themselves as readers, struggling readers often adopt new reader identities.

Student Perceptions of Self

The way students perceived their abilities influenced the way they approached texts (Dillon & Moje, 1998, McCarthy, 2002). Wortham (2006) stated that “thinking of oneself as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ math student is certainly an aspect of identity, and developing this aspect of identity may well influence how much a student learns” (p. 142). If the same idea holds true for reading, then the stories students tell about themselves and their abilities will play a key role in their academic success. Examining the specific ways perceptions played out in the literacy development became an essential component to unpacking the complexity of struggling reader identity.

Academic/reading abilities. Literacy abilities represented a key component of identity construction because they were “essentially connected to particular ways that acts of writing and other literacy practices have been socially constructed and thereby given social meanings” (Mahiri, & Godley, 1998, p. 433). In McCarthy’s (2001) study of elementary students, “literacy seemed to play a major role in how [successful students]

viewed themselves” while struggling readers generally focused on factors outside school in their self-perceptions and interests (p.143). These students deferred to outside interests to support their identity, but the degree to which literacy represented a significant force in their lives diminished because their lack of abilities.

In another effort to transform struggling reader identity, Barden (2009) described the way acting became a forum for a dyslexic girl to increase her literacy skills while drawing on her strengths as an actress to help mediate her identity. Tatum (2008) worked with a young Black male on his literacy skills in an effort to reshape his identity and discourage him from engaging in “negative activities” (p. 48). The student previously demonstrated characteristics of a poor reader and underexposure to text, never completely reading a book. As he read texts that offered him ways to think about his life choices, make connections to the events and characters, and reflect on the person he was becoming, he began demonstrating characteristics of resiliency and started making different life choices. Both content and the development of abilities contributed to helping this young man re-shape his identity.

In each of these studies researchers emphasized the power of both content and ability development to re-shape identity, with texts playing a formative role. Offering struggling readers opportunities to dialogue with and transform these identities consequently improves their reading abilities. Exploring the influence of teachers, parents, peers, and discourses on struggling reader identity points to the powerful role of identity in reading education and to the need to understand how these transformations take place.

Resistance. Because of their perceptions of others and the discourses around them,

struggling readers often engaged in acts of resistance towards reading tasks. “Classrooms require students to enact specific identities in order to be successful, and struggling readers may not believe they can or should take on those identities” (Moje & Dillon, 2006). Their identities sometimes became marked by “unsuccessful efforts at (or perhaps resistance to) ‘getting reading right’ and [they] perceive[d] autonomy and agency working in entirely different ways in the classroom than teachers and other adults” (Alvermann, 2001, p. 678).

Although aware of their limited abilities, few students desire to remain struggling readers. Hall (2006) explained how “struggling readers may be trying to find ways to comprehend text and learn content even though they may hold negative views about their reading abilities” (p. 425). She described the way students sometimes became paralyzed as they tried to retain their sense of identity while they also tried to acquire the skills and identity of successful readers. This delicate negotiation took place as students worked to alter their situations as readers.

While some identified acts of resistance as attempts to “gain power” (Dillon & Moje, 1998), others viewed them as ways students exerted “themselves as subjects who controlled their experiences by refusing to read what threatened them” (Reeves, 2004, p. 23). In both cases students demonstrated the need for autonomy and the importance of agency as the individual mediates their identity and reader development.

Significance of Others

Significant others, namely peers and teachers, heavily influenced the development of struggling readers’ identities, shaping the way students viewed themselves and their abilities. Although a few studies noted the ability of some students to look beyond the

opinions of peers or teachers when making choices about engagement in literacy learning (Finders, 1997; Hall, 2007; McCarthy, 2001), the ways students identified themselves as readers and wanted others to identify them heavily influenced their decisions about how they performed their identity in class (Moje & Dillon, 2006, Tatum, 2008; Wigfield & Asher, 1984). For this reason school learning and identity construction became heavily intertwined. As Wortham (2001) explained, “classroom discourse is multifunctional—speakers simultaneously describe the subject matter and also use speech to position themselves with respect to others” (p. 127). For this reason it became important to explore the role of the other in identity development.

Peers. The identities students assumed in class varied with the relationships established with teachers and peers (Dillon & Moje, 1998). Case studies of struggling middle school readers described the influence of peer perceptions and social and academic comparisons at schools, as well as the way the desire for peer approval sometimes outweighed desires to acquire reading skills. Hall (2009) noted a middle school struggling reader whose identity centered on how she wanted to be presented to her peers. Hall explained the student considered “how her peers might interpret her actions” as she decided how she would perform her role as student (p. 304). In this case the risk of being perceived as a struggling reader by peers sometimes outweighed the students’ desire to acquire reading skills.

Conversely, Finders (1997) described the way adolescent girls used what they read and how much they read to construct their feminine identity. In her study, many “popular” girls pretended to disengage from assigned literacy tasks and not read certain texts unsanctioned by popular groups in the school, although when these same girls

talked privately with Finders, they admitted to doing both. Although teachers perceived the girls as struggling readers, the girls actually read and engaged with texts on their own. However, they adopted the identity of struggling readers as a way to find acceptance in desired social situations and groups. For example, Finders (1997) study demonstrated how literacy regulated social interactions among girls and influenced the way they enacted their identities. In another study, students in remedial reading classes measured their reading successes in comparison to their peers, felt little autonomy in their education, and believed few opportunities existed to use their strengths in school (Donaldson & Halsey, 2007). In each of these cases, peer perceptions significantly influenced struggling readers' views of themselves and views of their ability to succeed at literacy tasks.

Students' perceptions of their own abilities, the way they wanted to be perceived as readers, and their desire to learn from the text, influenced their engagement with reading tasks. Hall (2007) explained struggling readers sometimes chose to engage with texts and instruction in detrimental ways, even though they wanted to improve. Also, when the identity students tried to perpetuate clashed with the reading behaviors teachers tried to enforce, students failed in the literacy tasks (Hall, 2006). This proved particularly true in cases where students risked exposing themselves as struggling readers. Some students resisted potentially self-revelatory practices around their peers and tried to rely on other means or strategies to understand content.

Teachers. Although the role of peers proves significant, teachers also play a major role in the formation of struggling reader identities and influenced struggling readers' self-perceptions. "As adolescents explore different subject positions, and as they are

positioned by others around them—whether parents, peers, or teachers—they project various subjectivities to their teachers” (Dillon & Moje, 1998, p. 195). For this reason the role of the teacher becomes particularly significant.

Together teachers and students mutually constructed learning and defined “what counts as teaching, learning, and literacy for themselves and each other through their day-to-day interactions” (Prentiss, 1998, p. 106). As students learn what it means to be a student from a variety of sources, including teachers, “models of literacy practice are continuously constructed and reconstructed, defined and redefined over time by members of classrooms in terms of what they expect, take up, and value during their interactions” (Prentiss, 1998, p. 125). When students rejected these models of literacy they often rejected the identity of successful student and took on that of struggling reader.

Like Rosenblatt’s (2005) transaction between the text and the reader, Fairbanks (1995) demonstrated students’ responses revealed not only their constructions of the text, but also themselves. Therefore, as teachers interpreted students’ readings, they also “read students” (p. 40). As a result, teachers needed to “disentangle actual readers from a construct of ‘the reader’” and allow them to respond to texts in ways authentic to them (p. 41).

Triplett’s (2007) interview study of students, teachers, and administrators demonstrated the power of teacher beliefs to reinforce or negate struggling readers’ identities. In cases where teachers lacked skills to help struggling readers and did not invite students to talk about their reading struggles, students felt “invisible, interrupted, and not cared for” (p. 123). In contrast, when the teacher felt empowered with the necessary skills to help struggling students and listened to students as a natural extension

of meaningful relationships, students were not considered struggling readers. Their identity as a struggling reader was reinforced or negated by teacher attitudes or beliefs about reading and struggling readers in general.

Wortham (2004) too described the intertwined nature of student identity, teachers, and learning identity. Although not focused specifically on struggling reader identity, he explained how “local models of identity” have yet to be established in classrooms at the beginning of the year and “versions of available identities” have yet to be handed out (p. 18). These models of good student, bad student, Black female student, or disruptive male student influenced student social identification. They also affected “the way students make sense of themselves in the curriculum,” demonstrating “social identification and academic learning...drew on many of the same categories and depended on hybrid, overlapping models to accomplish both ends” (Wortham, 2006, p. 21). In this way the identity the student wanted to project also influenced the identities the teacher created for students.

In a like manner, a multiple case study of middle school students showed how different perspectives of students and reading allowed teachers to gain broader views of students and their abilities. Teachers’ perceptions of students’ strengths, weaknesses and motivations influenced student-teacher engagement. But, talking to struggling readers allowed teachers to reconceptualize their ideas about reading instruction and “the multitude of influences that can affect student learning and growth” (Hall, 2006, p. 426). Teachers supported identity development as they allowed students to imagine and enact other possible identities. The stories teachers believed and reinforced proved key to the kind of reader a student became.

Rex (2001) also discussed the importance of taking advantage of these opportunities to help students transform their identity. She explained that through the teacher's "shifting pedagogical role and actions," students work to become more competent readers (p. 288). Instructing students about what it meant to be a part of a culture of readers invited them to consider ideas about literacy they hadn't before.

Again, in this case as well as the others described, expanding students' stories about what it meant to be a reader, as well as opening up those of the school and teachers, allowed teachers to support student learning and influence student identity development. Understanding the complexities of literacy and identity issues provides teachers increasing numbers of ways to engage struggling readers and constructively, rather than destructively, transform identities.

Teachers needed to look beyond positions students created for themselves and those students adopted. The amount of student-teacher engagement was often influenced by teachers' perceptions of students' strengths and weaknesses as readers as well as by teachers' perceptions about student motivation (Hall, 2006). As teachers allowed students to imagine other possible identities for themselves, teachers supported identity development (Dillon & Moje, 1998).

Often teachers defined what it meant to be a reader, but these definitions were not always the same as those held by students. Williams (2004) illustrated how teachers often constructed the identity of "reader" in one fashion, but students constructed it as something else. In other instances, when these constructions clashed, teachers and students often seemed to work against one another to achieve literacy goals. Hall (2009) demonstrated the importance of viewing "reading instruction and students' reading

development through multiple lenses” in order to employ multiple frameworks that allow teachers to view literacy in a variety of capacities (p. 304). Doing so allowed teachers to validate students’ literacies, build on these literacies, and strengthen academic skills.

Although the above studies discussed a variety of components demonstrated to influence and shape struggling reader identity development, each component played an important role in a complex process. Rex (2001) discussed the importance of taking advantage of these opportunities to help students transform their identity. She explained that through the teacher’s “shifting pedagogical role and actions,” students work to become more competent readers (p. 288). Instructing students about what it meant to be a part of a culture of readers invited them to consider ideas about literacy they hadn’t before.

Again, in this case as well as the others described, expanding students’ stories about what it meant to be a reader, as well as opening up those of the school and teachers, allowed teachers to support student learning and influence student identity development. Understanding the complexities of literacy and identity issues provides teachers increasing numbers of ways to engage struggling readers and constructively, rather than destructively, transform identities.

Implications

The documented long-term effects of reading struggles demonstrate “literacy failures can hurt adolescents deeply,” causing them to “generate identities that interfere with future literacy learning” and require “special conditions to shape new and productive identities” (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000, p. 3). Particular attention must be directed to this issue.

Although instructional resources exist to help struggling readers, “too many young people leave our schools with identities as poor readers and failures” (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 11). These resources include teachers who combine high academic standards with explicit support, as well as asset-oriented teaching that accesses cultural, linguistic, and experiential resources of students, and opportunities to engage in inquiry-oriented learning (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Teachers, administrators, and researchers also need to “develop an awareness of understanding of the multiple contexts that shape learners’ lives and their ways of learning” and the role the culture of the larger society plays in shaping and influencing these contexts (Moje, Dillon, & O’Brian, 2000, p. 176).

In addition, offering students opportunities to reexamine their own early literacy experiences and become part of a community of readers leads to the construction of views of reading as a valuable activity to be shared and enjoyed (Taylor & Nesheim, 2000). Egan-Robertson (1998) found student identities “as capable writers, researchers, and literacy learners were not ones the students achieved in their regular educational experiences” but developed when given opportunities to experience other positions or identities in alternative activities, such as a writing club (p. 480). This demonstrated student identities can be negotiated in educational settings, but in order to do so there must also be a reconceptualization of teaching and learning literacy practices.

In order to accomplish this task, learning must be viewed as an ontological, not just as an epistemological, process. Wortham (2006) explained how the “intertwining of subject matter, argument, evidence and academic learning with social identification, power relations and interpersonal struggles” caused students to reflect on what it meant to

be human and develop intellectual virtues “with respect to the stories we tell about ourselves and others” (p. 290). Rather than decontextualizing knowledge, educators needed to unmask “the false purity of academic learning, showing how power relationships, cultural beliefs, social routines and other non-academic processes penetrate into the heart of schooling” (Wortham, 2006, p. 284). Doing so allowed teachers and students to make visible the forces that contributed to struggling reader identity and cultivate environments where the re-negotiation of these identities could take place.

A Call for Research

Although studies at both the elementary (McCarthy, 2001) and middle school (Broughton, & Fairbanks, 2003; Finders, 1997; Moje et al., 2000a) levels point to a variety of influences on reader identity, only recently have researchers turned their attention to struggling adolescent readers specifically (Donaldson & Halsey, 2001; Hall, 2006; Triplett, 2004). But even among these studies, examinations of struggling high school readers are significantly absent.

Current literature addresses and affirms sociocultural notions of identity and the identity of struggling readers as a co-construction developed in dialogue with others, and heretofore research has primarily considered the role of teachers, texts, and personal perceptions as they influenced the identities of struggling readers. As a result of this research, teachers, administrators, and researchers have been encouraged to “develop an awareness of understanding of the multiple contexts that shape learners’ lives and their ways of learning” and the role the culture of the larger society plays in shaping and influencing these contexts (Moje, et. al., 2000a, p. 176).

However, little research focuses on the dialogues that take place within the student

under the influence of these stories and the transformations that take place as a result of these negotiations. The need exists for research that explores the way readers' dialogue with the influences that shape their narrative identities and make clear the role of the other. This includes the need for studies examining ways to help students think about the identities they assume as readers and how these transact with their other identities (Williams, 2004).

Also, little research at this juncture explores how the making or remaking of struggling readers of any age occurs (Hall, 2006, 2009; McCarthy 2001; Rex, 2001). In particular, the role of teachers must be addressed in greater depth. Research is needed that examines ways in which teachers work to create classroom spaces where students take risks and re-envision themselves as the readers they want to become.

Needed studies also include those that consider students' reader identities and the way these identities transact with their other identities. But to get to the heart of these kinds of issues it's imperative to listen to the voices of adolescents themselves (Franzak, 2006; Moje, 2002). Here the theories of the dialogical self take on special import. 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.

But to engage in this kind of examination, we must first establish that these dialogues occur in the minds and lives of students. More importantly, we must also consider how we, as teachers and researchers, can claim to know these are taking place if students don't even realize they are occurring. To address these central questions, it

becomes essential to develop a methodology for approaching these issues. The chapter that follows details the methodological approach I took to examine these queries.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology & Methods

My brother Skyler smiled and laughed as he related this memory about his experiences reading in Sunday school, but the way he saw these experiences as still influencing his academic performance seemed more painful than funny. He explained,

In elementary school I think my teachers knew I was a little nervous, so they wouldn't ask me to read. But ... in church when we would read our scriptures in Sunday school ... [they were] written in very Old English...and [I'd] get nervous reading some of these things and I remember reading them and messing up—you know, little kids are mean [laughs]—getting teased by people for not knowing what certain words were. And now I think that just kind of comes back, even at college. When we're reading something in front of class I get really anxious...Even now, when things are a lot better than they used to be, even now if I have to read something in front of my classmates, I get really worried and nervous that I'm going to mess up on a simple word that no one else would.

His descriptions of the anxiety he still felt when teachers asked him to read out loud in school resurfaced often in our conversations. This occurrence in his Sunday school class, and other moments like it, exists as a story he dialogues with almost daily. Although now, over 15 years after this moment, Skyler's grades reflected academic success and his personal reading habits his love of books, these early memories maintain significant influence in his narrative about himself as a reader and learner.

Unfortunately, among the students in this study Skyler's experiences are not unique. As discussed earlier, the narratives they each tell about their identities as individuals, readers, and learners represent complex combinations of moments, individuals, ideas, and memories brought together over years throughout their lives. 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; Ricoeur, 1984). These ideas prove particularly relevant to the study of literacy because identity "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). Therefore, studies that offer insights into the complexities of identity help make clear the challenges struggling adolescent readers face.

As a researcher seeking to understand the way literacy experiences influence the identities of struggling readers, it became imperative to identify a methodological framework conducive to interpreting the stories shared by the students in this study. In this case, the principles of philosophical hermeneutics, specifically Paul Ricoeur's theories on narratives, offered a methodology to guide the interpretation of this data. Philosophical hermeneutics provided a way to examine how the elements that comprise stories, what Ricoeur (1984) called preunderstandings, offered insights into the interpretations of the narratives of adolescent struggling readers.

The sections that follow detail an overview of the principles of philosophical hermeneutics and the mimetic structure of stories, as well as an exploration of potential insights these ideas provide when used to conduct identity research, particularly that framed by the theories of the dialogical self. These sections will be followed by an

overview of the research design, including the purpose of this research, methods of data collection, and analysis. The concluding sections will discuss issues of validity and trustworthiness, as well as limitations of this approach. Ultimately each section will contribute to a discussion of how philosophical hermeneutics, specifically Ricoeur's concept of three-fold mimesis, offers a methodology to examine issues of identity construction in the case study narratives of struggling adolescent readers.

An Overview of Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic Traditions

The term “hermeneutics” refers to “the science or art of interpretation” from the centuries old traditions of theological, philosophical and juridical fields of understanding (Grondin, 1994, p. 1) most often associated with ideas of early hermeneutic philosophers such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey as well as Heidegger and Gadamer (e.g. Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008; Thompson, 1981). But within the field of hermeneutics, different traditions distinguish the differences between these specific perspectives.

For example, conservative or objectivist hermeneutics follows “a methodological approach involving [the] bracketing out” of fore-conceptions to find meaning (Freeman, 2007, p. 926). In contrast, critical hermeneutics, based on the work of Habermas and sometimes Ricoeur, seeks “the elaboration of a critical and rationally justified theory for the interpretation of human action” (Thompson, 1981, p. 4). Often associated with the work of critical theorists, it seeks to empower through meaning. From another perspective, Caputo and Derrida's radical hermeneutics “exposes...the ruptures and gaps...the textuality and difference,” opens up questions of being and “describes the fix we are in” (Caputo, 1973, p. 6). The work of radical hermeneutics engages the

hermeneutic process, but does so in an attempt to seek understanding by pointing out gaps and disconnects among ideas in order to further dialogue.

Although the work of Heidegger represents the beginning of the field of philosophical hermeneutics, this tradition is most often associated with the ideas of Gadamer and Ricoeur. Philosophical hermeneutic traditions focus specifically on “the event of understanding or interpretation” of the other (Freeman, 2008, p. 386). Whether the other exists as an individual, culture, tradition, belief, practice or event, each of these “others” shares the characteristic “that they appear to us as in need of being understood” (Schwandt, 2004, p. 31). In each of these instances, meaning hinges on interpretation.

In this sense, philosophical hermeneutics provides a methodological framework for interpreting transactions between individuals, texts, or the larger world. It also provides a lens through which to view the methodology of narrative inquiry as researchers conduct research, analyze 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 emplotted narratives of struggling readers construct from their interpretations of their experiences with reading, with school, with their interactions with their teachers, parents, and peers concerning reading, the theories of philosophical hermeneutics become essential to the way I examine and interpret these stories as well.

Mimesis: Aristotle and Ricoeur

Ricoeur (1984) explained “understanding—even the understanding of another person in everyday life—is never a direct intuition but always a reconstruction” (p. 97). Building on the aforementioned ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer, Ricoeur used the

concept of narrative to explain how individuals “make sense of the temporality of...experience” (Pellauer, 1997, p. xiv). The construction and re-construction of narratives takes individuals through the hermeneutic circle as they engage in meaning making.

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 individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole” as each part comes together to form meaning (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65). Freeman (2007) explained this focus on emplotment “builds on Gadamer’s notion that tradition is a productive force” and demonstrates the way language “mediates between the tradition that constrains our ability to see or hear in new ways and our imaginative capacity to anticipate and create new meanings” (p. 939). Through the process of emplotment “the relatively unclear preunderstanding of daily life is changed into a more lucid literary configuration” resulting in a meaningful whole (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 5).

Ricoeur (1984) explained how, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Aristotle described the essential elements of narrative in terms of muthos and mimesis. For Aristotle, muthos described “the organization of events” into a pattern or plot and mimesis referred to the “active process of imitating or representing something” in poetic form (p. 33). Aristotle viewed a narrative as “whole if it has a beginning, middle, and end” and explained it is through this succession of events that ordering and meaning takes place (as cited in Ricoeur, 1984, p. 38). The ordering of events created a semblance of completeness to the events, people, and objects that made up narratives.

But for Ricoeur, Aristotle's definition of mimesis neglected the temporal element of time. Therefore, Ricoeur drew on Augustine's ideas of time and created a threefold model of mimesis that revealed a more complicated process of meaning making. Ricoeur (1984) described the way the world follows "the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time" (p. 54). 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 preunderstandings that make up the narratives individual's form about their lives and themselves, we can better understand how they interpret their lives and construct understandings of their encounters.

Mimesis₁

Ricoeur (1984) described plot as "grounded in preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (p. 54). The meanings and symbols attached to action exist as a part of our own interpretive frameworks before we construct narratives. These elements exist all around us, imbued with meaning, but independent of us in the form of structures, symbols, and temporal creations. Instead, we have given meaning to these things and therefore use them as references for understanding. Such preunderstandings serve as the basic elements from which we construct our worlds. For Ricoeur (1984) this "world of action" in mimesis₁ is the actual existence where the events of narratives play out and are organized through their structural, symbolic and temporal nature.

Meaningful structures. This first aspect focuses on action that is already “symbolically mediated or ‘figured’ in the ordinary language we use to identify and speak...in everyday life” (Pellauer, 1997, p. xiv). These structures include actions, agents, goals, circumstances, motives, experiences, and the who, what, why and how questions connected to them (Ricoeur, 1984). Agents include not only ourselves, but others, and our relationships with them. Goals include those ideas we commit ourselves to and work towards. Agents, goals, circumstances, and motives are all implicit in actions and the experiences that result from our actions. Together these elements make up the pre-forms that serve as the base for narratives that structure the action.

Symbolic resources. This second component entails the “signs, rules, and norms” that already articulate the world and allow human actions to be narrated (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 57). These are the features that give public meaning to and establish rules for interpreting behaviors. Symbols include those things that embody meaning and action extracted from “social interplay” or what Ricoeur (1984) calls “*readability* on action” (p. 58). These meanings provide 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 moral preferences direct the resolution of hypothetical situations in the mind of the individual. Therefore, they also direct the narrative (Ricoeur, 1984).

Temporal character. This characteristic recognizes the “temporal structures that call for narration” and helps distinguish our actions in relation to the time in which we act. Ricoeur (1984) calls this the “within-time-ness” that gives dimension to linear time and is defined based on the significance of Care. Care gives a notion of the significance

of presence and temporal understanding to time; it serves as a reference looking forward to the future and also a reference back to the past. He explained a day is not “an abstract measure” but a measurement of time “that corresponds to our Care and the world in which it is ‘time to’ do something, where ‘now’ signifies now that. . .’ It is the time of works and days” (1984, p. 63). Those things and moments that we attend to, that we are preoccupied with, that we are present in, are those things that allow us to construct and reference time.

In this way temporal character, together with symbolic resources and meaningful structures, brings mimesis₁ into full effect. It is “upon this preunderstanding” that the foundation is provided and “emplotment is constructed” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 64). Without them there would be no plot and therefore, no story.

Mimesis₂ and Emplotment

In mimesis₂ the preunderstandings of our actions that make up mimesis₁ are put together to create narratives. It’s in this second stage that functions as the “mediating role...between a stage of practical experience that precedes it and a state that succeeds it” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 53). This stage serves as a bridge between preunderstandings and post-understandings and gives structure to the separate parts. In this way it gives form and perspective to a “heterogeneous set of circumstances or experiences” (Pelluer, 1997, p. xxviii) and allows the dynamic nature of narratives to be evidenced. In other words, it is in this stage that the emplotment of the narratives takes place.

Emplotment serves this mediating function between mimesis₁ and mimesis₃ in three ways. First, emplotment creates connections “between individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole” as each part contributes to the central plot

(Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65). Seemingly separate events are linked in a substantive way and together they ultimately result in a meaningful whole. Second, emplotment also “brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances” and “unexpected results” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65). These unexpected results parts add complication and meaning to the individual events. Collectively events are brought together in a series of successive occurrences that bring out the relation between seemingly disparate parts. Finally, temporal characteristics also work as an element of emplotment to bridge *mimesis*₁ and *mimesis*₃. Over time pieces 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 not chronologically at the same time.

In regards to the latter, Ricoeur (1984) pointed to the role of the “productive imagination” in the generating of these narratives, connecting “understanding and intuition by engendering syntheses that are intellectual and intuitive at the same time” (p. 68). He pointed out the need to discern between different paradigmatic conceptions of the universe as individuals construct their narratives. In these different paradigms he accounts for some of the derivation in stories and interpretations that find life and meaning in *mimesis*₃.

Mimesis₃

It is in this final phase of *mimesis* that meaning is imbued into the narrative. Ricoeur (1984) described *mimesis*₃ as marking the intersection of the individual’s preconceptions and contexts as they are applied to the events, actions, symbols and parts of the narrative to draw out a larger meaning from the whole. It is at this stage a “fusion

of horizons” occurs, to borrow from Gadamer (1975/1989), as the world of the text and the world of the individual are brought into dialogue with one another.

Ricoeur (1984) pointed out the seemingly circular nature of this mimetic process, but described it instead as “an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes” (p. 72). For in the telling of stories, new stories result and open up possibilities for future meaning in the actions, agents, events, and symbols of our lives, continuing this process of creation and meaning.

“The act of reading is thus the operator that joins *mimesis*₃ to *mimesis*₂” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 77). Through the processes of what he calls schematization and traditionality, the interaction of the individual and the features of the story come into dialogue. Although emplotment has occurred, meaning comes to the story as the individual actualizes 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 the understanding the hermeneutic process of meaning making for the individual. Laitinen (2002) wrote this “rendering of unity to one’s life, with all of its fortunes and misfortunes, is something that only narratives can accomplish.” (p. 13). Organizing separate events into complete wholes helps individuals make meaning of their lives and in turn construct their ideas about themselves and about the individuals with whom they interact.

The dimensions of *mimesis* not only provide a frame through which to view stories, but they also serve a valuable methodological function in research as well. These elements allow for the separate analysis of “those structures that are part of any narrative as a narrative and those that belong to hearing or reading it” in order to distinguish

between “what a narrative says” and “what an audience makes of what it says, and not confuse the one with the other” (Pellauer, 1997, xv). Thinking about breaking down the process in this manner helps me better consider the construction of stories that people tell about themselves and their worlds.

Hermans Connection

Hermans and Kempen (1993) discussed the way individuals order and reorder events throughout their lives as they try to make meaning out of experiences. These authors explained 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 people tell and retell stories as situations change; in turn their stories change as well. Therefore, stories gain meaning as the events come together in interconnected parts and are altered as new events are introduced to the narrative.

Hermans’ later work elaborated on this idea (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007) and this concept he described compliments the process of the threefold mimesis Ricoeur (1984) detailed in *Time and Narrative*. The events and moments in life that are ordered and re-ordered seemed to be those parts that Ricoeur described as comprising mimesis₁. Then, as time is added in, these elements are brought together as interconnected parts in the process of emplotment. Finally, mimesis₃ takes place as the individual works to make meaning and understand the world based on his or her experiences.

However, it’s the second part of Hermans’ idea that gains additional meaning based on Ricoeur’s mimesis and pertains particularly to the stories shared by the readers in this study. Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained “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, negative failures disrupt a person's sense of self and may 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 *mimesis*₁ not considered before into account that ultimately change the emplotment that takes place in *mimesis*₂. Hermans and Kempen (1993) explained 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 *mimesis*₃ changes, it has the potential to alter *mimesis*₁ and *mimesis*₂. All parts are connected. As such, this constant telling and retelling become key to understanding and making sense of our narratives.

From a methodological standpoint, these ideas speak to similar processes and possess interesting possibilities. For Ricoeur (1984) "a narrative that fails to explain is less than a narrative. A narrative that does explain is a pure, plain narrative" (p. 148). If narratives are the way individuals make sense of the temporality of their experience, and if those narratives change over time, the narratives they share encapsulate layers of meaning. Exploring these elements of narratives and the power and meaning individuals give them, leads to understanding about why individuals think the things they do and perhaps understand the world of the other.

Ricoeur's philosophies about the construction and hermeneutic interpretation of narratives provide a rich framework from which to analyze the narratives of the readers in this study. By examining the preunderstandings my participants used to construct their narratives about themselves as readers, as well as the ways they refigured and

configured these elements, calls into question the power of individuals, institutions and ideas on the identities of these students. In addition, the way they emplotted their narratives and interpreted them provides insights into the ways these students act as agents in the telling and retelling of these narratives and ultimately their identities.

In terms of this study, the implications of Ricoeur's ideas are manifold. First, the significance of certain preunderstandings in the formation of narratives will be emphasized as I analyze each narrative, looking for the preunderstandings that provide its foundation. The importance of these preunderstandings will be re-emphasized as we consider the lasting influence of these narratives over time. Second, examining how students emplotted their narratives will offer insights into how they both assumed and gave away their agency in relation to their identities as learners. Finally, identifying the stories they used to make sense of themselves as readers and learners, including the stories from their past that they continue to connect to their identity, will demonstrate the role of the dialogical self in the way they make sense of who they are as readers and learners. Understanding this element will potentially help teachers and researchers find ways to use these dialogues to help these students re-author their identities.

Research Design

Using Ricoeur's narrative philosophies as my methodological framework posited stories as the central organizing feature individuals use to make sense of their experiences those features to which they attach meaning and significance. This task includes making choices about what elements matter as well as the meanings attached to certain experiences. Against the backdrop of this framework I designed my study to examine the following research questions: How do the narratives associated with "struggling readers"

influence the identities of adolescents who assume this identity, including those narratives they tell about themselves, reading, learning, and success? How do transactions between struggling readers and teachers contribute to re-emplotting these narratives?

Through a multiple-case study (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2004) examining the narratives of students who self-identified as struggling readers, I unweave the narrative identities of five adolescents and examine the influences on their narratives, as well as the events, individuals, and ideologies that lead them to emplot these narratives. By conducting multiple in-depth interviews (Riessman, 1993) and observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I gathered the stories of individuals who categorize themselves as struggling readers. Then, using Ricoeur's ideas about narrative construction as my methodological framework, I conducted a narrative analysis (Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993) of these stories. Based on the mimetic structure outlined in Ricoeur's concept of the threefold mimesis, I analyzed the way my participants interpreted the meaning of the experiences and elements that comprised their reader identities. The analysis of this data resulted in my own reweaving and retelling of these stories as I identified and discussed those elements that contributed to the construction of these narratives and presented possible interpretations concerning these understandings.

Methods and Data Sources

Multiple-Case Study and Narrative Inquiry

Case studies exist as preferred method of research in a number of fields, including psychology sociology, and education, because they allow researchers an in-depth look at

a phenomenon and the particular contexts that surround it (Yin, 2009). In this particular study, the central focus of the research involves the narratives of multiple individuals who each self-identify as struggling readers. Because this study involves looking at a number of cases in an effort to examine the narratives of struggling readers, it may more specifically be classified as collective (Stake, 2000) or multiple (Yin, 2009) case study research. These studies are often preferred over single case studies because the analytic conclusions from multiple cases are more robust than that of a single case (Yin, 2003).

Stake (2000) described case study inquiry not as a methodological choice, but as a “choice of what is to be studied;” what it is can be studied a variety of ways—including hermeneutically—but in each instance the concentration is on the case itself (p. 435). In this instance, the “what” are the narratives told by the adolescent struggling readers who participated in this study and the way these narratives influence their identity construction.

Because the narratives shared by these students exist as the central focus of each of these case studies, I also approached this study as a narrative inquiry. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) explained, “people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” (p. 2). Stories provide individuals with a way to make meaning from their lives and narrative analysis seeks to understand these meanings and processes. As a “subtype” of qualitative inquiry that makes meaning from stories (Chase, 2008, p. 58), this methodological approach “examines the informant’s story and analyzes how it’s put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity” (Riesman, 1993, p. 1-2).

This approach works particularly well in studies of identity as it “allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning” (Riessmann, 2000, p. 24). Narrative research in this vein “treats narratives as lived experience” and reflects an interest in “the hows of storytelling” as much as “the whats of storytelling” (Chase, 2008, p. 67). As a researcher examining the “self-shaping quality of human thought” and stories that “create and refashion personal identity” (Hinchman & Hinchman as cited in Riessmann, 2000, p. 24), narrative inquiry unpacks the complexity of individuals and their constructions.

The Story of My Inquiry

Research Sites and Participants

What we called Snowpocalypse '11 may have, in other regions of the country, looked like just another winter storm. But in the US Southeast, with just a handful of snowplows sprinkled across the state, this winter storm froze semi-trucks to the roads, caused days of power outages, and much to the delight of students from kindergarten to college, delayed the start of schools across the state by about a week. To my dismay, it also delayed the beginnings of my research both that at a high school in the area as well as my research with local college students. But the second week in January brought sunshine, melting the ice and snow and the schools opened once again. A week later I trudged through the mucky wet grass—all that remained of our storm—and made my way into Crenshaw High School (CHS).

The high school students. For months during the preceding semester, Ms. Longworth and I worked together to obtain IRB clearance to conduct this study from both the university I attended as well as her school and school district. As a former recipient

of the teacher of the year award, a member of the National Writing Project, and teacher interested in opportunities to reflect on her own teaching, Ms. Longworth felt comfortable inviting me into her classroom and allowing me to observe the inevitable highs and lows that occur as a consequence of everyday experiences. In addition, the school and district willingly endorsed my work there. However, I still needed to identify and select student participants.

As I considered where to begin my search for students willing to share their experiences as readers and writers, Ms. Longworth's first block class seemed like the perfect fit. Creswell (2007) advised seeking participants "who are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored," and Mrs. Longworth's ninth grade college prep world history course at CHS included 30 students who were just that (p. 119). Home to a little over 1100 students, the freshman class made up over a quarter of that number. The student body was about 76% White, 11% Black, 8% Asian American and 5% Latino with about 28% of the student body qualifying for free or reduced lunch and these percentages were roughly reflected by the students in Ms. Longworth's class. Located about 50 miles outside of a large metropolitan city, this once predominantly rural community now served as a suburb where many of its citizens commuted to and from jobs in the city each day. However, many of the students still came from families who had lived in the area for generations and had mixed feelings about the changes taking place.

Ms. Longworth wasn't an English teacher, but she taught her class by supplementing the content in the state standards with high interest adolescent fiction,

selected purposely for the full range of readers in her class. Therefore, reading opportunities were inevitable in this environment. Although labeled a college prep course students and teachers both explained the label college prep really meant remedial or on level courses, at this school. In addition, although her class was technically a freshman course because it fulfilled a graduation requirement, she taught students from 14 to 18 years of age. This gave me access to students from a broad range of age and ability levels.

Mrs. Longworth and I obtained IRB clearance to conduct this study from both the university I attended as well as her school and school district. In addition, in the weeks before my arrival Ms. Longworth prepared her students and their parents for the invitation to participate in my research. After the first few weeks of school I also visited her class and talked to the students about the study. Towards the end of the period Ms. Longworth introduced me to her students; she told them I was from the University of Georgia and that I was interested in learning about them and about reading. I then introduced this project to the students in the class; I told them I was interested in talking to them about their reading habits and feelings about reading. Because I didn't want to label anyone, I tried to be clear about inviting students who enjoyed reading as well as those who didn't enjoy reading to participate. Students then completed a form that included a place for them to list their names and contact information if they were interested in participating in the study. I fielded a few questions, like "How are you going to pick who to interview?" and "Can we get out of class?" but then the bell rang and everyone ran out the door, handing me their sheets as they left.

As I sat at the back of the room sorted their responses, Ms. Longworth sent an email home to the parents explaining what had taken place in class today and invited them to contact either her or me if they had any questions. Although no parents responded, this communication provided them with additional information concerning this research. Out of the 30 forms turned in that day, 18 students expressed an interest in participating. I returned the next day to pass out assent/consent forms for both the students and their parents to sign, and to field more questions. Of the 18 slips I sent home, I received 15 back within the next few weeks.

At about this same time, Ms. Longworth also administered the Readers Self Perception Scale (RSPS) to her class in order to gauge student perceptions about reading and their abilities as readers (Henk & Melnick, 1995). Based on Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory, this scale was designed to measure the unique attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of adolescent readers in grades 7 and above. Past research focused on struggling reader identity previously used the RSPS to measure middle school attitudes towards reading (Donaldson & Halsey, 2007; Hall 2009). In my research this tool served a two-fold purpose: it offered Ms. Longworth a way to measure the attitudes of her students about reading while also providing me with some initial information about the attitudes and interests of the readers who agreed to participate in my study. Using this tool gave me a chance to see how students perceived their own abilities as readers before their first interview. For this research in particular, this distinction was key. The self-identification and application of the label "struggling reader" helped me identify participants who saw this attribute as a feature of their learner identity.

From this point I began scheduling and conducting interviews. The students had volunteered their email addresses and cell phone numbers, so I began emailing, calling and texting those who had turned in permission forms. In the first few weeks my efforts met with lots of missed appointments before and after school, frequent rescheduling, and a few interviews. Although I made attempts to schedule interviews with each of those students interested in participating, those who were interested and willing to interview with me began sifting themselves out from those who perpetually missed our appointments or forgot.

The final selection of participants occurred after I conducted the first round of interviews and the participants consisted of those students who had met all the aforementioned criteria and showed up for their interviews. Ultimately Maurice, Ana, Jack, Kaleb, and Myranda participated in three or more interview and observation sessions and the case studies of Maurice, Ana and Jack are presented here.

Because the school operated on the four period-block schedule, students enrolled in four different courses each semester. They also had a 35-minute study hall/advisement block Monday through Thursday after first period. I wanted to conduct the interviews before and after school in order to avoid taking students out of class. Although most of them asked if I could pull them out of class to do the interviews, I felt doing so seemed counterproductive to the education of students who needed academic support. However, since their study hall/advisement time was available to me, I offered to meet with them during this time as well. Consequently, most of our interviews were conducted at this time.

The college students. As mentioned previously, Hermans (2001) and Ricoeur

(1984) both speak to the importance of time in the way people interpret their experiences. Because stories are never fixed, but always in dialogue with our anticipated future against the backdrop of our past, they are constantly changing, even in slight ways. In the case of my participants, the implications of this idea meant that the perspectives they possessed as they told their stories about school and about their experiences as readers might change over the course of time. However, because of time constraints on my research, I could not conduct a longitudinal study. Instead, in an effort to discover the probe time in the construction of these stories, I wanted to collect stories from college-aged struggling readers as well.

Therefore, at the same time I began working at CHS, I also began seeking out college-aged students who struggled as readers. To select these participants I took a slightly different approach than the one I took with the high school students. deMarrais (2004) described the benefits of using a network selection in locating participants who fit a certain criteria and then seeking out referrals for others who might also fit this criteria (p. 60). It was after this manner that I sought out older participants for this portion of my study. In the course of my exchanges with individuals in the nearby community, I was subsequently referred to multiple college-aged struggling readers. Based on their availability and willingness to talk about their experiences, two undergraduates, one male and one female, also became a part of this study.

Although they attended two different higher education institutions in the area, both of the post high school students I interviewed were currently enrolled in college or university classes. Braydon, a 21 year-old freshman, was enrolled in his second semester of classes at a large university in the US Southeast and majoring in psychology. The

second, 23 year-old Sarah, attended a nearby state college, also in the US Southeast.

Here she took pre-requisite courses in anticipation of enrolling in an occupational therapy program. In both of these cases, the students and I met at a location of their choosing off campus to discuss their experiences. For more specific demographic information on the participants, see Table 3.1 below.

Student	Gender	Race	Year	Parents' education*
Braydon	M	White	frosh @ university	<i>Mom: HS; Dad: college grad</i>
Sarah	F	White	soph @ college	<i>Mom: college grad; Dad: HS dropout</i>
Anna	F	Biracial— Black & White	HS frosh	<i>Mom: HS; Step dad: college; dad?</i>
Jack	M	White	HS frosh	<i>Mom: deceased; Dad: HS?</i>
Maurice	M	Black	HS frosh	<i>Mom: currently in college; Dad: HS</i>

Table 3.1. Description of participants: This table provides a visual depiction of the students highlighted in this dissertation study as well as some basic demographics about each student. Information in italics denotes the parent or parents with whom the student lived at the time of the interviews.

Relationships with participants. Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) described establishing trust, talking about difficult or controversial subjects, allowing for emergent conversations, valuing different discourse styles, examining assumptions, and paying attention to the power issues as key elements in the researcher-participant relationship (p. 166). Therefore, Gadamer's concept of hermeneutic conversation provides a model that accounts for these principles for researchers seeking to use narrative inquiry as a method for understanding.

Establishing relationships of trust with both my high school-aged participants and the

college-aged participants became key to eliciting rich stories. In the cases of the high school students, looking for individuals to share their stories caused me to seek out these relationships with students willing to share their experiences. With the older students, my interactions with them and relationships previous to this study often resulted in their willingness to participate and share their stories. I trusted they would share their stories and clearly and as accurately as they could recall, and they trusted me to, in turn, share their stories in a way consistent with their intentions and understandings.

This isn't to say that the lines between researcher and friend or confidant remained clear; at times they seemed to cross and blur. In some instances, particularly during observations with the college-aged students, I found myself switching into researcher mode every time a literacy encounter or issue arose. Similarly, as a teacher my impulse was often to intervene and help the high school students with their school problems and understandings. However, through it all, the ultimate goal I tried to work toward consisted of showing "the seams of connection between ourselves, others, and those in between," and creating a space where these connections could take place (Dilley, 2000, p. 136).

Data Collection

I conducted my interviews and observations over a five-month period from the beginning of January through the end of May with member checks occurring throughout August. Interviews represent the primary mode of data collection in narrative research, supplemented by observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Riessman, 1993). In this case, each of my participants participated in three to five audio-recorded in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews (Riessman, 1993), as well as ten to twelve 80-minute

observations for the high school students and three to four for the college-aged students. This data resulted in approximately 20 hours of interview data and over 40 hours of observations. The observations of the high school students took place within the contexts of their high school classroom with the teacher participant, while to observations of the college students were more informal and less structured, consisting primarily of observations of them with their families, friends, and study groups.

Interviews. As a less-structured data collection tool, interviews invite “conversations in which both participants—teller and listener/questioner—develop meaning together” (Riesman, 1993, p. 55) and assist the researcher in seeking out “the meanings people construct as they talk about their lives, as well as in the social contexts and resources that enable and constrain those meanings” (Chase, 2003, p. 80). In this way, interviews with my participants provided opportunities for the sharing of stories and the discussion of meanings attached to them.

Transcripts of three to five audio-recorded in-depth interviews with these adolescent struggling readers represent the majority of the data collected in this study. The open-ended nature of the student interview protocol questions was designed to elicit detailed responses from the participants and allow them to share specific experiences in the form of narratives (deMarrais, 2004, p. 62). In drafting my interview protocols I consulted other studies previously conducted with struggling adolescent readers (Reeves, 2004) and those concerned with identity issues (Coombs, Fecho & Park, in press).

Based on these protocols, I developed a similar format and included three sets of questions with different areas of focus. The first area of focus centered on the student’s background, educational, and reading history; the second on the student’s current

experiences in school and with reading; and the third concerning their perceptions of education, teachers, and themselves as learners. Although I began with an interview protocol, the dialogues that occurred often proceed more like hermeneutic conversations, taking their “own twists,” and reaching their own conclusions as a co-construction of ideas between the me and the participants (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 383).

Additionally, although the protocol included three different sections, the first two sections of interview questions most often represented more than one interview that took place over multiple sessions. This usually occurred for two different reasons. First, in each case the initial questioning in the interview served as a time to allow the participant to become comfortable with me as the researcher and to build a relationship where we could enter into dialogue about these significant and sometimes sensitive issues (deMarrais, 2004; Dilley, 2000). Second, because the time periods available to work with the high school students often consisted of 30-minute segments, the interviews often had to be broken up over multiple meetings.

Throughout the interviews I tried to exhibit sensitivity towards my participants through active listening, exhibiting empathy, hearing what things were said, noticing what was and was not said and stopping the interviews if topics became too emotional to continue to pursue (Kvale, 2007). My work with struggling readers as a classroom teacher and in my family helped me recognize the delicate nature of these conversations. The topic of my inquiry possessed the potential to unearth painful memories and invited my participants to disclose potentially embarrassing past experiences. In an effort to minimize the discomfort to my participants, I made a special effort to display empathy and sensitivity to their stories.

Observations and field notes. The documented constructions of events, individuals, and occurrences through field notes represented an additional data source that provided another text “out of which we can tell stories of our story of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104). These observations included notes based on the participants’ literacy experiences in their daily lives.

In the cases involving the high school students, I observed Ms. Longworth and her students transacting in ten 80-minute sessions over the course of the semester. For the majority of these observations my role could be best described as the observer-as-participant where I conducted observations in order to establish a context for my research; however, on one or two occasions I helped Ms. Longworth lead class discussions and work with small groups as classroom circumstances necessitated, making me more of a participant-observer (Angrosino, 2007). My field notes based on these observations included notes about the students’ literacy experiences in the classroom and detailed classroom transactions between students and their teacher at the school during school hours.

In the cases of the college-aged students, my observations were more informal and revolved around their everyday lives. For both of them this included observing them in social settings with friends and acquaintances, at church, at sporting events, and with their families. In more than one instance I followed them around and took note of the ways they interacted with others, responded to particular situations, and engaged with texts. In these situations my observer role vacillated between that of a participant-observer and sometimes as a complete participant engaging in the activities of the group (Angrosino, 2007). My field notes and records of these observations included narratives

I wrote based on my observations, as well as questions raised by the transactions that I observed. Often these observations served as the basis for future questions in our interviews.

Analysis

Schwandt (2000) explained the hermeneutic “act of understanding” does not consist of two separate steps but as “a kind of practical experience in and of the world” that constitutes the kind of person the individual is, making understanding “‘lived’ or existential” (p. 196). From this perspective, analysis of the narratives of these struggling readers takes place not in step-by-step methods, but will employ “general principles” for interpretation, principally repeated re-reading and re-interpreting of texts (Kvale, 2007, p.109). Through the processes of constructing each individual case study, I transcribed, coded, analyzed, and wrote the narratives for each case, allowing me to engage in a continual interrogation of these texts and stories.

Assembling the raw data. Assembling the raw data served as one of the first elements of constructing cases studies, which included transcribing interviews with my participants and pulling together the observational notes I collected over the course of the seven-month study (Patton, 1990).

Transcribing. I include the transcription of the interview data in this section because generating this representation served as a key part of the analysis throughout the data collection process (Riessman, 1993, p. 56). Transcribing allowed me to identify portions of interviews to revisit for detailed analysis as I began to formally consider ideas that repeatedly arose in the interviews and observations. As I transcribed my data, I also considered the preunderstandings Ricoeur described and noted those agents, goals, and

circumstances that provided a foundation for the narratives my participants shared. Because these preunderstandings existed more as abstract categories for me to identify rather than concrete elements I needed to pull out of my data, identifying what I needed to look for became the first step.

Coding for clusters of meaning. As I reviewed the data in the form of the electronic copies of my transcripts, I identified narratives and comments shared by my participants that centered on their experiences as readers. Dahlberg et al. (2008) used the term “clusters of meaning” to describe the way codes, meanings, and themes are identified in hermeneutic and phenomenological research (p. 244). Organizing data into patterns allows researchers to generate understandings.

Although some types of narrative inquiries present the stories themselves as the method, others use narrative features such as characterization, theme, and plotline to make meaning from narrative, still others consider discourse patterns as the primary focus of analysis (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). However, Ricoeur (1984) wrote that narratives are emplotted based on the “preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character” (p. 54). Therefore, because these preunderstandings exist as the basis for stories under this framework, I began by identifying them in my data.

Meaningful structures. Once I identified these conceptual elements, identifying specific meaningful structures of the narratives became the first goal in my analysis, which meant identifying the actions, agents, goals, circumstances, motives and experiences in the narratives my participants shared. The agents included not only the individuals sharing their stories, but also the other people who played a role in their

stories as well. In the case of these stories, these other agents predominantly included teachers, parents, siblings, 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 other settings socially and in the home. Motives were closely connected to the goals students shared. Finally, the circumstances of their experiences most often became clear in the contexts of the stories students shared, particularly in terms of the setting. In this case, schools, homes, and church seemed to exist as reoccurring locations of these moments. Together these structures created the foundation for the narratives students shared.

Symbolic resources. This second component of preunderstandings included the symbols, signs and rules students identified as a part of the world where their narratives occurred (Ricoeur, 1984). These features gave additional meaning to their experiences and revealed the basis for their interpretations of their own and others' behaviors. Because these meanings provided a framework from which my participants interpreted their actions, these most often were identified as a result of comments about their understandings or interpretations of stories, as well as when the participants articulated connections between their experiences and their larger life philosophies. These symbols and signs also direct the narrative (Ricoeur, 1984). The meanings of these symbols and signs varied from individual to individual based on their beliefs, moral preferences and values; in these instances neutrality is impossible because moral preferences direct the resolution of hypothetical situations in the mind of the individual. However, even among the spectrum of beliefs, certain categories became clear. 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.

Temporal characteristics. The temporal characteristics of the narratives my participants shared also served as a key feature of their narratives. Ricoeur (1984) used the characteristic of Care, or those things and moments that individuals attend to, that they are preoccupied with, that we are present in as the way they construct and reference time. For the students in my interviews, their past experiences as readers often influenced this notion of Care. For example, in some situations they shared experiences that might not seem like a cause for concern or even worth noting for the average individual. Often this came as what they might consider “turning points” such as finding a book that changed their ideas about reading or having a teacher who helped them learn something they struggled with before. For students whose experiences with reading were so much a part of their learner identities, the moments they attend to as they consider these questions became key in this analysis.

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 way these readers emplotted these elements into the stories they use to construct their identity. Going back into my data and identifying the major stories students shared about themselves and their experiences as readers also became key.

Finally, going back to the theoretical framework, the stories these readers tell about themselves always existed in dialogue with their current and changing understandings. Identifying the stories where these dialogues were made clear also

existed as a key part of analysis. For me these dialogical moments represented the shift in the framing of their narratives as new events and individuals and experiences altered their concepts of some of their preunderstandings and consequently, changed the way they interpreted their narratives. Not all of the interviews with students demonstrated these dialogical moments as well as others; however, understandings can be gleaned from the dialogues and lack of dialogues taking place.

Constructing a case record. Writing exists as “the way the analysis happens” in narrative research “as the researcher synthesizes sources in the process of interpreting, evaluating and judging (Ouellette, 2003, p. 19). At the first stage in this writing process I constructed case records, meaning organized, edited and condensed the raw, coded data into more manageable forms before constructing my case study narratives (Patton, 1990). Drafting interpretations and writing about the way these preunderstandings played out in the narratives shared facilitated further interpretations of data and generated new meaning through the writing process.

Also, since coding, memo writing, and analysis in hermeneutic frameworks takes place not in a linear or separate process, but within the hermeneutic circle or spiral, I continuously examined the “relationship between the part and the whole, at a whole series of levels” as I compiled the 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 the stories of each student work with and against one another. This “non-linear style of analysis” represents part of the hermeneutic process and presented me with opportunities to “constantly digging deeper with one’s interpretation” (Smith, 2007, p. 5). Additionally, as I identified stories participants told

and retold, data not previously considered relevant also needed to be taken into account. Sometimes comments in a subsequent interview brought understanding to previously meaningless comments from a former one.

Writing a case study narrative. As the final part of constructing case studies, writing the narrative that portrayed the individual and their experiences represents a key part of the process (Patton, 1990). In addition, Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) described writing as a method of inquiry because, throughout the whole research process, writing plays an integral part. They explained, “writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery” (p. 484). For these reasons, the writing of the case studies also represented an essential element of the analysis and construction of the case studies as well.

Member checks. Re-visiting my constructions of the stories with my participants allowed them to confirm whether or not my constructions represented their stories (Riessman, 1993). This added yet another dimension to our ongoing dialogues “giving and taking, talking across purposes and seeing each other’s point” as we seek meaning (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 331). While it was not essential that we agree on this representation (Riessman, 1993), it was important to offer these opportunities.

Saturation. In hermeneutic research, “there is not talk about saturation” because “meanings are infinite, always expanding and extending themselves” and “consequently, no meaning saturation can exist” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 176). But analyzing my data and “deciding when to come out of the circle and commit oneself to speaking or writing” and committing to an interpretation that is “good enough” represented the final part of the analysis process from the philosophical hermeneutic perspective (Smith, 2007, p. 5).

For me in this inquiry, such moments occurred during data collection when the final interviews when students repeated stories from earlier sessions, often unbeknownst to themselves. The repetition of particular stories demonstrated both the significance of a particular narrative and its role in the way they conceptualized themselves. During the analysis and writing phase these moments existed when multiple pieces of data, within a single case or across cases, pointed to students drawing on similar interpretations of particular experiences or ways of responding to reading. But in a very real sense, the discussion of the data and understandings that result remain open to the ongoing hermeneutic conversation.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor explained, "In order not to be scandalized, one has to have a whole view of things, which not many of us have" (O'Connor, 2003, p. 129). The dilemma she describes mirrors that of researchers seeking understandings, despite differences in intentions, backgrounds, prejudices, and propensities between participant and researcher. In work shaped by hermeneutic theories, issues of validity like the ones O'Connor alludes to are addressed through the concept of "fusion of horizons," which helps individuals see from the perspective of the other. 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). It's this ability to see and understand that prove essential when considering the purpose of this research.

The hermeneutic circle situates understanding as part of an ongoing dialogue that precedes the individual who both modifies meaning and passes it on (Grondin, 1994).

Engaging with the other and with the world shapes individuals' understandings to the point where they "cannot help but to incorporate some of this worldly 'text'" into their own (Freeman, 2007, p. 929). Doing so changes understandings, but true dialogue does not occur until one enters the encounter with openness and tries to "really consider the weight of the other's opinion" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 330). When this type of dialogue occurs, the individual's own frame of reference (or horizon) seeks "expression alongside" that of another (Freeman, 2007, p. 930). In doing so, the individual discovers the "standpoint or horizon" of the other and "his ideas become intelligible," without the two necessarily coming into agreement (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 270). The "fusion of horizons" that takes place allows participants to develop new understandings through the perspective of the other as seen in contrast to their own and a genuine hermeneutic experience.

As the researcher I cannot abstract the bias of my own experiences from my understandings of my participants and this study (Maxwell, 2005). Throughout my discussion of the analysis of the data, my own understandings about the field of reading and education influence the way I interpret the students and their narratives. At other times, particular stories told by a participant take on significant meaning because of similar stories shared by my own former students, friends, or family members. In addition, on most occasions the relationships I built with my participants caused me to believe the stories they shared, even if our interpretations of their implications may have differed. Based on these variables alone, it would prove impossible to abstract the influence of my own experiences from my interpretations of the data.

However, philosophical hermeneutics posits understanding as the result of the fusion of horizons. Therefore, it provides for situations to be interpreted through the researcher's prejudgments and prejudices. For example, the unique stories of 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 view these stories offer multiple perspectives. My experience and education in the field of teaching provides me with understandings of potential 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 of the way these moments might be interpreted by struggling readers. In addition, viewing their narratives as reconstructions of the events, instead of factual recordings of objective realities, helped me recognize my own influence in the narratives I write, while also remaining true to the influences on the narratives students discuss (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

In case study research issues of validity center on issues of consistency and the ability to generalize 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 modeled 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 generalization to the whole population, studies such as this can reflect issues significant in the larger world. Although I might not be able to statistically generalize 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 generalized 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 invaluable.

But as is the case with all dialogues, as Ricoeur (1981) explained, in social science research there is no "last word" (p. 215). Interpretation remains open to challenge and critique. But even within our limitations, interpretations "emerging from the hermeneutic process can still move us to new levels of understanding, appreciations that allow us to 'live our way' into an experience described to us" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 286). As I continue to engage with this data, my own understandings will be deepened and expanded. Similarly, the responses of those who read it will enter into this dialogue. Thus, these stories and the interpretations I offer exist as a slice of a larger, ongoing dialogue around these issues.

Conclusion

In their book *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*, Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings (1991) wrote:

Stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. Telling and listening to stories can be a powerful sign of regard—of caring—for one another. (p. 280)

Stories told by struggling adolescent readers offer glimpses into the experiences of these students in schools and in 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. Coding and analyzing data based on the preunderstandings of mimesis offers 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. 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.

CHAPTER 4

Braydon and Sarah

An Introduction to Chapters Four & Five

Aristotle first proposed the idea that stories offer us a way to experience life without actually personally enduring certain events, ultimately opening the reader up to possible perspectives we might not normally consider and deepening our understandings (Kearney, 2006; Ricoeur, 1981). I've spent a lot of time pondering this idea over the last few years and I think this possibility Aristotle alluded to might be aptly summarized in the words of writer and poet Emma Lou Thayne who said, "Our stories are what make the difference, and if we can tell them honestly we can hope to help each other. In the end, we have nothing to offer but our stories" (as cited in Pearce, 2006, p. 81). In our roles as teachers, parents, researchers, and readers, we perceive the world in particular ways. However, listening to another's stories broadens our perspectives and allows us glimpses into the world through the experiences of another.

It's with this idea in mind that I encourage you to read the stories shared by the student participants in this study that comprise chapters four and five. Ultimately, I think this is why the students I talked to shared their stories; they hoped that by sharing their perspectives of school and reading, teachers and parents and researchers would reconsider what goes on in schools and how we inadvertently position one another through the stories we tell about what it means to be a reader and a learner.

Chapter four tells the stories of two college-aged students, Braydon and Sarah, who, much like my brother Skyler, have experienced academic success in post-secondary settings, but whose reader identities are intertwined with their early reading memories. Through the stories they tell about school, literacy, and learning, they share their struggles and interpretations of school practices. In addition, through an examination of particular narratives they each share, the role of the dialogical self becomes evident in the way they negotiate their current understandings of themselves as readers. Their stories make clear the potential for re-negotiating the identity of struggling reader and offer hope for bringing these changes about in the lives of students that struggle with similar issues.

In Chapter five the case studies of three high school students, Anna, Jack and Maurice, echo many of the early literacy experiences of Braydon and Sarah. However, the stories told by these high school students present slightly more complex pictures about what it means to be a struggling reader and how these identity negotiations take place. Through their descriptions of common classroom practices, their stories brush up against research and ideas about classroom practice, causing teachers and parents to take a closer look at the way they approach struggling readers. Their cases also include narratives that suggest the way the dialogical self influences the way they negotiate their reader identities, but leave many more loose ends and unanswered questions in connection to the ultimate destinies of these students. Chapter five concludes with a discussion about common ideas across all five of these cases and what questions these stories raise for teachers, parents, and policy makers as they consider the needs of struggling adolescent readers.

Case Study: Braydon

6FOOT8. It wasn't hard to guess who belonged to that vanity plate the instant I spotted it. Braydon once told me most people initially seem a little intimidated by his size, but he tried to embrace it; his vanity plate served as one proof of that. A three sport athlete in high school, now throwing the javelin for an NCAA division I track team (the basketball coach also tried to recruit him, but he had to decline the offer since he already made a year-round commitment to the track coach), his size, combined with his blonde hair and blue eyes, gave him an almost Thor-like presence as he walked down the sidewalk.

But the size of his frame seemed to match that of his personality as he quickly set most people at ease with his conversation and almost constant smile. Always quick to laugh, even at himself, he confessed his hobbies—beyond sports—included trying to “be nice to lunch ladies, bus drivers, professors, and just random people” he would meet.

His position as an athlete at the university offered scholastic benefits as well. In addition to his scholarship, he also enjoyed the academic support of tutors in each of his classes, of which he took full advantage. Braydon described himself as someone who loved school and learning. Despite difficulties reading as a child and a teenager, as well as being diagnosed as ADD his senior year of high school, he had dreams of one day becoming a professor of psychology with a library full of books, teaching other people psychological theories and ideas in engaging ways. As we talked, his understanding of his future field influenced the way he interpreted his own experiences. He would often refer to concepts he learned in psychology class as he described the way he transacted with teachers and other individuals in his life.

Although while away at college he no longer lived in the house where he grew up, he remained close to his family. When he was 21 his parents divorced, leaving his mother with custody of his high school-aged brother and seven-year old sister. His older sister also lived nearby with her husband and three little boys. Family seemed of paramount importance to Braydon and he unashamedly described himself as a “momma’s boy.” Coincidentally, it was an accidental conversation I had with him and his mother after a service project that led to his participation in the study. As she asked about my research she said, “Oh, you should talk to Braydon,” to which he replied with raised eyebrows and the word “Mom!” groaned in a tone easily recognizable to any mother who’s shared too much information about her grown child in that child’s presence. But as the three of us continued to talk, he later expressed a desire to share his experiences as a reader and a learner.

Though our discussions focused, in large part, on his current challenges as a student in his first year of college, the seeds of these challenges, and his understandings about how to work through them, traced their roots back in his early literacy experiences. What follows are some of the stories Braydon shared with me that offer insights into the ways agency, teachers, and past experiences influence the way he makes sense of his current experiences as a learner. Although the moments Braydon shared represent his unique interpretations of these moments, his experiences offer significant insights when considering the effects of many traditional in-school practices. The ways he describes his past and current experiences offer helpful ways to posit the understandings of students who struggle with reading and the way they might view many of the things they are asked to do in school.

Early School & Reading Memories

To Braydon, his academic past seemed “like a blur.” Besides some general references to getting in trouble for not paying attention, he struggled to recall many of his childhood school experiences. Reading *Spot’s First Walk* (1988) with his mom was really one of the only childhood memories he had of reading. He even struggled to recall when he was first labeled as a slow reader; however, he did remember this: “reading books with other kids in the classroom...I would be so far behind everyone else.” His speed in relation to others served as a significant indicator to Braydon of his reading abilities.

Past research has demonstrated reading rate contributes to reading fluency and reading fluently serves as an indicator of good readers (Samuels, 2002). In this context, Braydon’s understandings of what it meant to be a good reader were sound. However, research also demonstrates that comprehension is key to reading and making meaning from text (Baker & Brown, 1984; Samuels, 2002). Students need to do more than read fast; they also need to find ways to make the text meaningful and to retain an understanding of key concepts. As a result, even students who read the fastest often struggle with reading (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984). Despite research such as this, readers of all age levels often describe reading speed as an indicator of reading skill. For example, when I asked Braydon what it meant to be a good reader he told me good readers read fast and to him a struggling reader was a “slow reader who doesn’t get through it all as fast as the others.”

He also recounted moments of his own resistance to reading. Getting through even a few pages of text proved difficult. Although he technically read a page, he was

often unable to remember what he had read. “That was one of the big struggles with the ADD,” he explained, “reading things and then looking back at the page and being like ‘I have no idea what I just read.’” Although he wasn’t technically diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) until his senior year in high school, he felt his struggles with the symptoms of ADD most likely began much earlier. In many ways, his problems with reading didn’t seem to be so much about not enjoying books, but more about not liking the way he felt when he couldn’t do something he knew other kids could do.

His difficulties continued into middle and high school and included not just reading experiences at school, but also situations where he had to read out loud at church and at his home. Any time he found himself reading, he found himself comparing his ability to others around him. Although he no longer feels nervous to read in front of others, he used to feel anxiety when asked to do this because he “wasn’t the strongest reader.” He quickly clarified that he could read, but it was a struggle and not one he liked to have in front of others. He explained, “Even in gospel classes where it’s like ‘everybody read these scriptures’ if I wasn’t right up with everyone else it was like ‘why am I reading so slow?’ ... it became a self-label of ‘you’re a slow reader.’”

Braydon’s ability to be so metacognitive about his own abilities and labeling continually amazed me during our interviews. Much of this ability I attribute to his background and interest in psychology, but he also thought about what he said and reflected on it. The instance mentioned above makes it particularly clear as he described the way he viewed his own reading abilities in relation to his peers. This habit continued into high school, where his trouble getting through texts caused him to struggle to stay on top of his work. “I remember being in classes that it seemed like everybody else could

get fairly easily and I struggled with it.” Again, his struggles seemed to be exacerbated when viewed in relation to his peers.

Individuals Who Make A Difference

As demonstrated by his previous comments, Braydon often judged his position and abilities as a reader in relation to those around him. His tendencies to assess his own abilities in relation to his peers, particularly when it came to activities such as reading, often proved detrimental. However, the voices of others in his inner dialogues, such as his mother and teachers, countered the negative influence of his own voice and comparisons.

Peers. As noted above, the opinions of Braydon’s peers also exerted significant influence over the dialogues he internalized. Beyond the inner dialogues mentioned previously, social situations when his peers perpetuated certain assumptions about literacy skills also influenced the way he saw himself.

For instance, a week after the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, I sat in a darkening movie theater within earshot of Braydon and a handful of his friends. As the chatter drifted from one topic to another, I became intrigued by a conversation that began with two girls chatting about how much they loved the *Harry Potter* books and how they had re-read the entire series in preparation for the release of the final movie. As I listened I didn’t doubt these statements were true; I’m sure both of these girls did enjoy the *Harry Potter* series and were no doubt prolific readers. However, the fact that these girls might also be trying to impress Braydon and his football player friend sitting next to

him by bragging about their reading abilities was not lost on me either. But I silently wondered what these guys thought about all of this.

Braydon, without missing a beat, turned to his friend the football player and asked in a mocking tone, “Wait, so this movie is a book too?” to which his friend replied quizzically, sounding equally as puzzled. Needless to say, there existed a clear attempt to take a more light-hearted approach to this dialogue. However, these comments only seemed to encourage the girls, who continued professing their love of the books and then bragging about how fast they read in general.

As I listened to this scenario unfold, I thought about my conversations with Braydon. Whether in an attempt to impress these boys or as the result of gendered ways of reading and acting, these girls seemed to almost boast about their reading skills. But I wondered if they considered that their bragging could have the opposite effect of what they perhaps intended. Did Braydon pay attention to the impressive nature of the girls’ reading, or was he inwardly comparing himself against this standard?

As Braydon and other students in this study explained, reading struggles affected their interactions with others all the time. When one of these students found him or herself in a social situation playing word games like Hangman, Taboo, or even Pictionary, there exists potential for disaster. Misreading a card or not knowing a word constantly caused confusion. Braydon explained how he just “plays along” when people laugh at these ostensibly innocent slips, of which he was very aware.

Research points to the significant role the interpretations of one’s peers can play in the identity formation of struggling readers, in many instances even deterring students from employing reading strategies in fear of the social repercussions (Hall, 2006;

Finders, 1997). For Braydon this seemed not only true, but he also internalized the assumptions about literacy his social interactions perpetuated.

Parental influence. The voice of Braydon's mom existed as a significant part of his inner dialogues. Whether in sports or in school, he constantly referred to principles his mother taught him or comments she made as he explained his past and current struggles, as well as his philosophies towards life. In many ways, the role her voice played in Braydon's narratives significantly influenced the way he responded to his struggles with reading and school over the years.

For example, throughout his years in elementary school his mom represented a major agent in his stories and often served an essential supporting role in helping him work through his challenges. "When I was growing up, I never went to school without my homework done," he explained. He described staying up all night, on multiple occasions, working with his mom on projects he had forgotten about, sometimes crying in front of a computer screen, sometimes gluing things on a poster board. But whatever it was, it had to be done, it had to be right and his mom made sure he did it.

Research describes the role parents play in supporting students in their reading development, as well as in terms of feelings of self-efficacy in accomplishing reading tasks (Baker, 2003). This proved particularly true in Braydon's case and in his inner dialogues. When he talked about her teaching him to spell, he emphasized she always insisted he look the words up. She would never just tell him the answer, but she always encouraged him to live to his potential. He said "I think that was one of the things that my mom taught me, is that I always have potential. I think that's one of the big things that's helped me," he explained.

Understanding that she saw him as someone who always has potential rather than as a kid with fixed abilities made all the difference. Academically and physically, his mom helped him see his ability as something that could always improve. As a result, both in sports and in reading, his mother's words carry significant influence. "I believe my mom when she says, 'You're better than that,' or 'You can do better than that.' Or when I'm throwing she's like 'Throw like you know you can.'" Dialoging with his mother's voice, whether real or in his head, is one thing he sees as particularly helpful for him. He explained how, both in sports and in reading, his mother's words carry significant influence.

Teachers. Dialogues with teachers figured significantly into Braydon's past ideas about the classroom as well as the way he continued to conceptualize how to approach school and learning. Whether in kindergarten or high school, Braydon described the teachers who made the most significant impact on him as ones who cared and who "took him under [their] wings" and offered direction.

He shared a specific encounter with his high school psychology teacher that occurred one afternoon Braydon was being particularly disruptive. The teacher escorted Braydon into the hallway, but instead of yelling, the teacher told him "Hey, you know, I really like you Braydon as a student. You're a really smart kid. And if you put into the effort in my class, I'll get you into any university that you want." Braydon saw this as a turning point in his performance in that class and credits this teacher, in large part, for getting him into multiple universities.

Braydon commented on the significance of teachers, coaches, and others "who recognize your potential" in contrast with those who focus primarily on "how you are

doing and not necessarily how you can do.” The ability to see students in terms of their ultimate potential, rather than in terms of categorized based on their current performance, also represents a reoccurring characteristic of teachers my participants identified as “good teachers.” This points to the significance of teachers who see students not as a fixed identity tied to ability level or letter grades, but as individuals with potential, regardless of how he or she may be performing at a given time. His description seemed akin to what Jackson and Cooper (2007) described in teachers who approach teaching with a “pedagogy of confidence” that value all individuals and positions each with the potential to learn (p. 248). Although teachers prove significant, these kinds of teachers transform inner dialogues and identities.

Sports Are Life

For Braydon, so much of how he approached life paralleled how he approached sports. As he talked about one of his pre-meet rituals that helped him prepare to compete in the javelin, he explained what he enjoyed most about throwing the javelin was “It’s just me. Nothing anybody else does is going to affect what I do ... I set my goals, I’m achieving my goals, I’m reaching my potential, and that’s all that really matters.” I admired Braydon’s ability to set goals that mattered to him as well as his ability to narrow his focus and compete only with himself on the field.

He believed setting individual goals and working towards them served him academically as well. Setting goals that applied to him offered him a chance to continually improve and rewarded him with similar feelings of accomplishment. He explained this parallel as he described the way he felt after he worked through a challenging text earlier that semester:

Reading a book—even though I didn’t get all the way through that book—the sense of accomplishment that I got from reading it...felt so good. I was like “man, I read this book and I understand what’s in it and I can put it down and say ‘hey, I know what’s in that book, I can tell you all about it.’” It’s like a big thing. This success really was a big thing. He rejoiced, as he should have, in his individual accomplishments as reflected on his own progress. But at certain junctures his perspective on the field didn’t transfer as neatly to the classroom, particularly considering the way he positioned himself as a student. As he described his past struggles with reading, many of them centered on his performance and ability to read in comparison to others. A disjuncture sometimes occurred between his throwing philosophy and some of his inner dialogues about school because, rather than competing against his own successes, he positioned his own abilities in relation to those of his peers.

Braydon’s Dialogical Self Moments

Braydon’s narratives also reflected his recognition of this occasional disconnect between his theories and experiences as well. The examples and discussions that follow focus particularly on narratives that exemplify Braydon’s inner dialogues reconciling his past and current academic selves. As he considers the reader he once was and the student he is now, his dialogues demonstrate that, rather than a linear progression from bad to good reader, his identity exists in the process of becoming.

“In My Mind, I’m a Slow Reader”

As we talked, the way Braydon still grapples with his reading challenges became evident at our first exchange. When I asked him whether or not reading had been a struggle in his life, he oscillated back and forth as he explained:

Uh—I don't think—no, readings been—I was labeled when I was young as a slow reader, which even to this day affects me. Because as I'm reading I think “oh, you're a slow reader,” ... but I know I'm not, so it's like in my mind “I'm a slow reader” and then it's like sometimes I'll take like 10 minutes... and I don't concentrate on a page or something. It's definitely—like it's been an issue, it was an issue.

As he explained how the labels from his elementary school days replayed in his mind, his inner dialogues became apparent. From one perspective he saw his younger self as someone who struggled with reading, but from another, his current academic success does not reflect these characteristics. However, he still thinks about this label of “a slow reader” at times, even applying it to himself each time he began reading or lost his focus as he read a page. But in the same breath he explained how he knew he wasn't a slow reader, or at least the struggling reader he used to be. However, each time he struggled with a page or lost focus, these events brought back to his mind past experiences that re-enforced the story that he was a slow reader and injected themselves into his narrative.

Braydon's assumptions influenced the way he interpreted his current understandings about himself. Although his success as a student and athlete evidenced themselves often throughout his descriptions of his current and past experiences, his past struggles played a significant role as well. These moments reminded me of Skyler's dialogues as he talked about the voice of the dumb third grader influencing how he perceived his competency as a college student. In both cases a tension existed as these young men tried to reconcile their current reader identities with those from their pasts.

A specific example of these dialogical moments occurred in one of the weeks between our interviews as he sat down to do some assigned reading for class. His geology professor assigned the class to read a 124-page book in two days, but with 24 hours remaining until the deadline, Braydon was only 20 pages into it. He found the reading interesting, but confessed to feeling overwhelmed by the length. He explained,

I'm thinking, "it's only 100 pages, it's that's not that much, I mean, I can sit down in an hour and I should be able to read that." But then I think, "Oh, I'm a slow reader, I don't know if I'm going to be able to get that done."

Reading 100 pages in an hour and really comprehending it would be a huge feat, even for a fast reader. According to one version of his story, he saw this task as one he could accomplish and might even enjoy. However, he also situated this perspective along side the dialogue of himself as a slow reader, causing him to question his initial ideas. The expectation he set for his ability to tackle this assignment made this dialogue even more significant. This goal, achievable for few, meant inevitable failure for him, ultimately perpetuating his identity of struggling reader.

In a sense, it almost worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy as he created an unattainable ideal of what it meant to be a good reader in his mind, and then continually failed to reach this unrealistic expectation. Part of this expectation resulted from the way he conceptualized what it meant to be a good reader. For Braydon, reading well meant reading fast. Even though reading researchers point to the benefits of reading slow (Newkirk, 2012). Because he never questioned this definition of reading well, he continually considered his abilities as less than what they should be. Although he caught himself entering into this dialogue and even stopped himself at times during our

interviews, he still didn't question whether or not someone else's definition of good reader applied to him.

“Seeing How Far I Wasn’t”

Braydon and I also talked about how his ideas about reading have changed since elementary school and how, unless someone else was reading to him, reading “seemed like a chore...an assignment” that he had to do rather than something he enjoyed. The thickness of books, as well as the font and margins size, intimidated him as he made his reading selections. One of the reasons he enjoyed his geology book was because of the pictures. He confessed to feeling juvenile for wanting books with pictures, but he told me how having a picture every few pages or a diagram helped him recall the things he read in discussions with his tutor or professor.

Braydon's description of these features of text as preunderstandings that influenced the way he conceptualized his ability to interact with a text almost seemed to come right out of a manual for reading teachers. Most teachers recognize text features such as pictures, font and margin size, spacing of print and the thickness of books all play a role in the reading selections struggling readers make. Past research has already demonstrated the significance of these elements as they pertain to the way early readers transact with texts (Cole, 1998). In addition, research on adolescent males and texts points to the benefit of and their preferences towards texts with visual cues (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). But as Braydon continued to describe the final element that made such a difference to him as he read, the connection between these elements and experiences from his past that influenced his identity as a reader caused me to consider these elements from another perspective.

Page numbers. Discouraging...Like if I'm reading a book, I used to actually cover up the page numbers when I was reading when I was little...I would go through and I would either put like part of a sticky note over the top of them or when I would read I would hold my thumbs over the page numbers because it was discouraging to look at the page numbers and see how far *I wasn't*. You know what I'm saying? Like I'd look at the clock, "Wow, I'm a half hour in and I'm five pages into it." It's kind of discouraging, and kind of sad.

He paused, took a deep breath, and continued, "I'm just thinking about page numbers now, how I hated page numbers."

This recounting of memories of watching the clock and covering the page numbers evoked powerful feelings he associated with these experiences from his childhood. Although it may seem that at this juncture he is only dialoging with himself, his own comments reflect ideas he internalized about reading from the larger discourses of school and the community.

We continued talking and as I was about to turn off my recorder, he said, reflecting on the interview, "That was a good session, got a little emotional at the end. Got a little choked up." I paused and waited for him to continue and the mood shifted to a more serious tone. "It all started with the page numbers thing. I don't know. I have no idea."

After a momentary pause he continued:

Well, the thing about the page numbers—I'm about to cry right now ...but it's just like something that I repressed ... What we're talking about right now, it's the first time I've remembered it in probably 10 years [choking up] cause I used to

do that. ... And it was like--that numbers thing—I never told anyone that before—it’s something that I did because I realized—[choked up] sorry—that my disability was frustrating to me and the numbers were really discouraging. Like a reminder. ... Cause I knew how long it should take for me to read a page....I knew how to count the number of words on a page and how long it should take me to read a page, even in my head I could figure out, “Okay, a typical person, if they take--even two minutes a page it will take them this block of time to finish this book” and then I realized “well I’m not doing that, so.” Kind of like I would keep track of time—it was really—it was kind of subconsciously—I was aware of the time—then consciously I would realize, “Okay, I’m this far into it but I’m only this far ahead. I just remember it was really discouraging.

This narrative proved powerful, and not just because of the strong emotional response it provoked. Braydon’s inner dialogues around the issue of page numbers as well as his current dialogues with this issue became particularly evident in this exchange. In a very real way he dialogued with himself about what he thought he, as a reader should be able to do and what he was actually able to accomplish. In addition, even now, years later, almost having forgotten this experience, he still felt the weight of these dialogues. The feelings of struggle and discouragement remained very real.

When considered in terms of Ricoeur’s preunderstandings, reading the text represented his ultimate goal. As the agent working towards this goal, his struggles impeded him as he tried to achieve this goal. Each time the page numbers acted as a symbolic resource, not just of how far he wasn’t, but also of how he struggled. And, as someone who constantly found himself in this circumstance, these struggles became

significant. In addition, his comparisons of himself and his reading abilities to those of this “typical person,” whether he means one of his family members, a classmate or someone imagined, also inform the way he viewed his abilities. Based on his interactions with others, standards at school, and the individuals that surrounded him, he developed ideas about what it meant to be a good reader and what a good reader could do. In addition, the page numbers worked as a symbolic resource, symbolizing how slow he read and how he didn’t measure up to the standard, real or imagined. The numbers themselves became a qualitative measure informing the way he interpreted his ability. Ultimately, all of these preunderstandings come together in light of the dimension of what reading means for Braydon: speed. For him, good equated to fast and since he didn’t read fast, in his own perceptions, he wasn’t a good reader.

As Braydon emplotted these elements into his narrative, these elements all serve a mediating function as he evaluated his abilities and struggles in terms of what he thought a good reader was in terms of speed and ability to comprehend. His experiences and perceptions of this memory suggest his awareness of the way this narrative has been both a conscious and unconscious part of his identity. Although he claimed he hadn’t thought about it for a long time, it evoked significant feelings about his attitude and perceptions of himself as a reader.

Recognizing Our Stories

One of the most important characteristics of Braydon’s dialogical moments included his ability to be very metacognitive about the dialogues taking place. In the exchange just described, Braydon recognized these two narratives coexisting. Rather than accepting one or the other as undisputable realities, he not only acknowledged more than one

narrative of himself as a reader, but also recognized both versions influenced the way he worked when faced with a reading assignment.

This ability to recognize his competing stories also served as an essential component of his ability to change them. He went on to explain he needed to just “buckle down and do it [the reading assignment] because I know I’m not a slow reader...it’s being able to see, to accept the fact that I label myself and it’s not an actual thing.” For him, “stepping back from the situation and realizing it’s not true” became an essential element of countering the “slow reader” narratives he told himself.

Richard Kearney (2002) talked about the power of stories, and the individual’s power to change them. He described how this power ultimately lies in the ability to step out of the narratives that control our thinking, acknowledge the stories for what they are as one version of our experiences, and then choose to define ourselves by other stories if the ones we hold onto are not healthy parts of our narrative identities (Cayley, 2010). For Braydon, this dialogue represented the first of many where he recognized the multiple stories he told about himself and as a result, began thinking about how these dialogues influenced his perceptions of himself as a learner and as an individual.

At one point in our interviews, Braydon talked about how he no longer thought about himself as a slow reader, except for in a subconscious way. He commented, “I’ve gotten to the point where I can distinguish between what other people labeled me as and what I can actually do.” He went on to discuss how his success in his psychology class early in the semester proved to him he was a good reader and his academic success really just came down to a matter of him “buckling down and doing it.” However, as he continued to talk through this idea, pausing only to ask me to rephrase the question, his

ideas about himself as a reader almost seemed to come full circle, back to the narrative of him as a reader who struggled.

Psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) wrote about the importance of separating actions and labels. Actions and labels, which are short term and often the result of temporary challenges or issues, often become internalized and then progress to becoming fixed identities. This excerpt makes clear the complexity of teasing apart these competing, and sometimes conflicting, narratives, even for an individual who recognizes the need to separate his identity from these labels. Braydon explained:

I think about it too, whether I just say I'm not a slow reader. But I still believe I'm a slow reader, whether I've trained myself to say "I'm not a slow reader," I still kind of think I am. Definitely I feel like when I was growing up I couldn't learn stuff as fast because I was a slow reader. I felt like if we had a book project that I wouldn't be able to get as much out of it as other people. I don't know if I—I definitely didn't feel like it was anything against my intelligence, I just felt like I absorb information differently...maybe I think I don't have those skills and abilities. I don't think less of myself, but I think more of people who can read.

This passage makes clear the role of elements such as his peers and his past experiences as he emplotted his narrative identity. Using his peers and their achievements as a guide, he inferred what an appropriate reading speed was and how he differed from the norm. He also extended this inference to his concept of how much he gained from his reading experiences in comparison to others.

These experiences, in combination with other past experiences, contributed to his understanding of himself as a slow reader. Further, when viewed in conjunction with his

assertions only moments earlier that he no longer saw himself as a slow reader, the conflicting ideas become very clear. Although Braydon's dialogic understandings suggest the potential for students to change their narratives about themselves as readers, his excerpts also point to the many elements to be considered and the difficulties individuals face as they work to reconcile these ideas.

Changing Our Stories

Although conceptualizing this process of altering narrative identities as a stage process ignores the hermeneutic nature of the continual interpretation, analysis and re-interpretation that takes place as individuals negotiate their identity, it can be helpful to think about the re-authoring of narrative identities as a part of the individual's process of becoming. Bakhtin described the ideological becoming of an individual as a continual process of assimilating words and ideas from others, and this includes new notions about the self and its abilities. For Braydon, this meant continually dialoging about his abilities as a reader within himself. He explained:

I definitely have that internal conflict or dialogue where it's "Oh, I'm a slow reader, I've been here for half an hour and I've read two pages and I don't even remember what's on those two pages," and then you just go back and read and read. And then I'm like, "But you're not a slow reader, you just have to focus, you just have to do your thing. You're not really all into it. You need to—you're not a slow reader." Oh yeah, definitely. I still have that today.

While he acknowledges the presence of these dialogues, Braydon makes a significant distinction between his slow reader dialogues and counter dialogues. His successes,

coupled with his ability to catch himself in the midst of these dialogues, allowed him to stop these voices and respond to them with more accurate assessments of his abilities.

Focus on the Future

As he gazed at the shelves of books in the library where we were seated, he told me one of his many dreams consisted of owning a huge library and “being able to tell people what the books are about.” For Braydon it wasn’t about owning books only in the physical sense, but also owning them intellectually. Becoming a reader existed as a part his vision for himself.

Braydon’s narrative identity did not just consist of his past or his present, but also of his plans for the future. With one year of college under his belt and more to go, Braydon felt optimistic about the potential his life held. He intended to continue to compete as a college athlete, but his interest in the university system reached well beyond his athletic eligibility. Ultimately he set his sights on academia. “I want to be a professor. Get my doctorate in psychology and do it until I die.” His interests included teaching students concepts in engaging and interesting ways that would help them make sense of material and see its applicability in their lives. He told me how even now as a student, he often sits in his classes thinking about how he could incorporate video clips and his own experiences into the content if he was teaching. “I think about it a lot,” he explained. “A lot of times it’s frustrating because I make mistakes, there are setbacks, there are things that happen so I don’t get where I want to be.” But ultimately, he continued to move forward.

His ability to focus on the future reminded me of many of the other students in this study. Although they struggled, sometimes even questioning how they would

ultimately reach their goals, the narratives they told about their future dreams and desires influenced the choices they made in the present. It caused me to think about Bakhtin's concept of all utterances as directed towards an anticipated response. In a way, the stories these student told about their futures existed as utterances, directed towards a hoped for result. The sharing of these stories caused these students, almost imperceptively, to respond in kind. The telling of these narratives about their lives to be lived became the foundations for actualizing these moments. Their stories, in part, became the foundation for their future successes.

Lingering Questions Left By Braydon's Dialogues

Up through our last interview Braydon remained in dialogue with his own ideas about himself as a reader and learner. He related an experience with another student in the tutoring center who commented on the slow nature of his own reading skills. However, Braydon quickly exclaimed, "No, no you're not! Don't tell yourself that!" and then explained to the student about the learned helplessness that resulted from those kinds of dialogues. Braydon even jokingly remarked once that as a result of our interviews he felt guilty for not reading more.

These kinds of comments, although in one sense humorous, are also hopeful when considering possibilities for re-authoring the identities of other struggling readers. Without downplaying Braydon's strengths as an individual, nothing particularly extraordinary exists in his story. No single, re-defining moment took place. Rather, through a series of ongoing moments, his identity shifted. Although this process continues today, his dialogues when I left indicated he's headed in a positive direction.

But in a Bakhtinian sense, he will always be in dialogue with these ideas, but at varying degrees throughout his life.

Braydon's ability to articulate the strategies that led him to success and the role of others also offer much to be considered in terms of other approaches to support struggling readers. Although his case cannot be generalized across the board, the way he discussed certain strategies as advantageous—like watching the movie before reading the book, listening to books on tape, and building relationships with teachers—offer ways to consider strategies and interactions with the struggling readers that fill our high school classrooms today. For example, although as teachers our first inclination might not be to watch the movie before reading the book, perhaps this might be just the approach for the struggling reader in our class who currently doesn't read any of the books we assign anyway. Or, maybe the students that it proves vital to build relationships with are the ones who struggle the most in our class.

Finally, Braydon's stories point to the interwoven nature of the narratives of the self. His reading and learning struggles cannot be compartmentalized into a small corner of his life; rather, they influence his actions in a variety of other areas. From things as seemingly simple as organizing and procrastinating household chores so they don't become overwhelming, to more complex issues of navigating personal and professional relationships, his struggles sometimes bleed over into other areas of his life. His stories and those of many of the other participants in this study cause me to wonder about the influence of reading struggles on the lives of the millions of adults in this country. Those adults who were once those students in high school who were a part of the NAEP statistic that stated 70% of secondary students struggle with reading (as cited in Biancarosa &

Snow, 2004). What are the long-term implications of these struggles on their identities beyond academics, but in their lifestyle, professions and relationships? In a sense, teasing out the academic portion is only the beginning.

Case Study: Sarah

“Dawan, come here, I have something to tell you.”

As I walked over to 21 year-old Sarah, I couldn't help noticing she seemed bursting with enthusiasm. I hadn't seen her all summer because she'd left to work in another state, but I was anxious to hear about her life for the past few months since we finished our last interview.

I thought whatever she had to tell me might have something to do with her family because so often they served as the central element of the stories she'd tell me. It seemed almost impossible for Sarah to hide her love for them. At the time of our interviews she lived with her mom who worked as a trauma nurse to support their family, as well as her high school aged brother to whom she served as a “second mama,” and her older sister who recently finished college and returned home. Sarah also had another brother working as a missionary in Mexico at the time, but even though hundreds of miles separated them, they still remained close. Although her parents were currently separated, Sarah remained close to her dad and saw him occasionally.

I also considered her many interests and activities. Sarah's interests included, but were not limited to, riding the roller coasters at Six Flags, sewing, quilting, scrap booking and eating large quantities of ice cream. I had no doubt she had spent time doing any or all of these things since I had seen her last, so these too might be the focus of her excitement.

But Sarah also had a more serious side too. At the time of our interviews she 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. Originally she wanted to become a physical therapist, but one day while babysitting for a couple whose youngest son had special needs, the mom enlisted Sarah's help and asked her to accompany them to an occupational therapy appointment. As Sarah watched the occupational therapist working with the boy, Sarah thought, "No, this is what I want...I want to do this." She told me she felt a connection to the little kids she wanted to help because they worked so hard to overcome their challenges and she spent countless hours working towards this goal as well.

So, I braced myself for the tale of her latest adventure. Her dark curly hair bounced as she talked and her eyes and smile reflected her excitement. But to my surprise, the first thing she shared with me had little to do with work or the family she babysat or boys or the roller coasters she rode that summer; instead, she starting talking about books.

"It took me six weeks to make it through the Michael Phelps biography, but I liked it. *Twilight* took me four days." As I stood there listening, I didn't know what to say. I undoubtedly looked surprised. As a confident reader myself, I didn't think *I* could make it through any of the *Twilight* (2005) books in four days. But for Sarah, who struggled with reading since elementary school, devouring a book that thick that quickly represented the ultimate triumph. I don't think she could have shared better news.

But I was wrong.

“And,” her voice got quieter, “I started reading the scriptures on my own. I only read a chapter every night, but I’m doing it.”

It took me a moment to realize the full import of her statement. My mind flashed back to a conversation during one of our interviews six months earlier about the role of reading in her life. As a member of a church that encouraged daily, personal religious study, Sarah told me, “I actually have never read the scriptures on my own. I really struggle with reading. I don’t enjoy it and it makes me feel dumb.”

Now, as I stood processing her disclosure about her new reading practices, especially in light of everything she and I had talked about since that day, this change signaled more than religious enlightenment. For Sarah it meant actively participating in multiple Discourse communities central to her identity. Reading opened up the world for her, but not just in the sense of posing her new perspectives; rather, it allowed her to participate in a reader community as a student, friend, and member of a religion in ways she previously only observed before.

To really understand the import of this exchange, it’s important to understand Sarah. And, to understand Sarah, it’s imperative to understand her stories. Flannery O’Connor (1957) wrote, “You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate” (p. 96). Throughout the course of our interviews, Sarah’s stories demonstrated the validity of this idea. Although on just about any occasion Sarah could describe how she felt about something or what she thought about an idea, she almost instinctively drew on stories to illustrate her meanings. Whether this occurred when we talked about her past experiences in school or her goals for the future, Sarah always had a story to show what she meant.

The following sections offer glimpses into Sarah's stories that comprise her narrative identity. These stories begin with an exploration of her early experiences in school as a reader and a learner, and then transition into more recent experiences from her years in both high school and college. Through an examination of her stories about herself as a reader, learner and individual, as well as the meaning she attached to them, the way Sarah's stories work with and against one another in the construction of her reader identity becomes evident.

Early School Memories

"I was so excited about going to school," Sarah exclaimed as she described her childhood anticipation about kindergarten. "My sister and I rode the bus together. I loved my kindergarten teacher... It was a whole new environment of being in school and doing all the kindergarten things like coloring and counting... I loved every minute of it."

But after kindergarten, first grade was a struggle. As I listened to her description of first grade, I shuddered at its less than enlightening highlights. Sarah described her teacher as tough and painted the following visual of their literacy moments:

I remember we would use the big books so we would have six little books for each little group and she would have the big book. And she would take Red Hot or Big Red gum and Slim Fast...and she would, at book time...take that piece of gum—nobody else was allowed to chew gum in the school—and she would like fold that piece of gum in her mouth as she's reading the book and drinking her Slim Fast with a straw. A chocolate Slim Fast with a straw.

Acknowledging that students often remember rare oddities from the classroom, I laughed at this scene. However, the lack of significant impact of this year on Sarah was clear.

Other than a few memories such as this one and a few other episodes where Sarah got in trouble, Sarah seemed to benefit little from first grade. When her family moved to a nearby county at the end of the year, Sarah moved schools, but not grades and found herself in first grade all over again.

Second grade marked a significant improvement. Her teacher, whom Sarah described as “just one of the caring loving teachers” helped Sarah and her mom troubleshoot Sarah’s increasingly obvious academic struggles. “She got me on the road to succeed and to do the things that needed to get done,” Sarah explained. This teacher asked Sarah’s mom if she would be interested in getting Sarah tested for learning disabilities and for her reading struggles. 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 finally quit taking her medication though 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.

Third grade became a struggle as well with a teacher who she described as nice, but who she felt didn’t really care about the special education kids in the class. Sarah explained how her mom and her teacher would “go head to head each week,” most often because of an issue connected to reading. For example, Sarah wouldn’t complete her

reading log or the teacher would mark her book reports as “not great,” but in both cases it was because Sarah couldn’t read the assigned books. At other times her teacher refused to let students go outside to recess until they finished their work, but because Sarah struggled so much, she explained she spent most of her third grade year “inside finishing up homework and never got to go outside for recess” because she was so far behind.

Sarah attended summer school again that year, but the extra schooling did little good in terms of addressing her reading struggles. If anything, the worksheets her class did every day just drew more attention to the fact that she struggled filling in the word blanks as she flipped letters back and forth. “It was just a struggle of noticing...that I have a reading problem and I’m just kind of stuck with it. But that was a tough one. That was one of my least favorite things. I hated summer school.”

Luckily, things got better in fourth grade, which Sarah again attributed solely to the teacher. She described the way the teacher would offer her the support she needed, but still challenge her. “She would see where I could meet [the learning goals] and would make the stuff a little easier for me so I would be able to meet the requirements like everyone else in the class.” This teacher’s ability to push Sarah but also accommodate her special needs made all the difference.

Despite the highs and low with her regular classroom teachers, throughout her elementary school experience Sarah loved her special education teachers. She explained how they would often know when she was struggling or having a bad day, or even when she needed extra help. One thing in particular Sarah appreciated was that they always let her work out the problem before they tried to give her the answer.

I asked her if participating in a pullout special education program like this ever made her feel different or excluded from the classroom. Sarah told me it didn't bother her in the younger grades, but became a little problematic when she got to sixth grade. "When I went to sixth grade...that's where the definition of 'okay we're cool' and 'popular' start coming into play. And 'Oh, you go to the special ed classes' or 'You're going to the dumb classes.'" The distinction Sarah observed falls right in line with research in adolescent literacy. Jackson and Cooper (2007) explained, "Adolescents understand the intellectual stratification that occurs in schools; they know which group of students is considered smart and which ones are considered dumb, solely based on the academic track they follow" (p. 248). In Sarah's school these stratifications became noticeable and Sarah no longer felt like she could participate in the special education classes without the label and its accompanying stereotypes.

"I noticed I was more different because I had to go to special ed and the kids knew that I was a special ed students because I wasn't in their classes." Demonstrative of this point, Sarah recalled one of the first days at her new middle school when one period she unknowingly followed her peers to the wrong next class instead of going to her special education class. The teacher looked at Sarah's schedule and, as Sarah explained, "Kind of announced it to everybody like, 'Oh, you're not supposed to be here.'...They knew right then and there, 'Oh, you're special ed.'" This physical separation mattered more to Sarah in middle school than it had in elementary school. In addition, having her teacher point this out to the class caused Sarah to feel further alienated from the group, as well as embarrassed by this label.

Throughout the rest of middle school and into her first two years of high school, Sarah's experiences continued in much the same way as they had in elementary school. Like many of the other students in this study, Sarah even slept through silent reading time, just so she didn't have to read.

However, one day during silent reading she discovered a book she loved. This one book seemed to make all the difference because after devouring one book, she eventually found another, then another. The amount of reading she did gradually increased, as did the variety of her interests. Eventually, after passing all her high school graduations tests—even through in some cases this required taking the test multiple times—Sarah received her diploma the summer after her senior year. She identified this as her proudest academic moment. “It was a huge achievement for me because as the second kid on my dad's side who graduated from high school...it was a very huge achievement of mine.”

Homework

Like Braydon, Sarah's reading difficulties significantly impeded her ability to do homework across the grades and, as she described it “It was a flat out fight. My mom would sit at the dining room table and it would at least take me four hours to do it.” And, also like Braydon, memories of these moments brought tears to Sarah's eyes as she talked about them over 15 years later. As she talked about working on spelling words with her mom, she explained,

I would bring it home and I would do it, but it would be four hours of “I don't want to do it. I hate it. I don't want to do it.” So like in kindergarten and first grade we would have to come home and do spelling words...But my mom would

cut my erasers off [my pencils] cause if I made a mistake I would erase it or write something and then erase it because I wouldn't want to do homework because I hated it.

Initially her mother's actions puzzled me, until Sarah continued to explain she would erase the answers so many times—either because she kept messing up or because she feared she didn't get the answer right—that she would erase holes in the homework pages. Eventually her mother cut the tops of the erasers so Sarah would not only not ruin her homework, but so she wouldn't drive herself crazy fretting about the answers over and over and over. When these episodes didn't end in fights they often resulted in little Sarah falling asleep at the dining room table and waking up early the next morning to finish the homework she hadn't completed the night before.

Sarah also described her memories from kindergarten and first grade working through Hooked on Phonics, a reading program her mother had ordered, with her sister. But as her sister advanced through the different colors of cards, Sarah remained stuck on the first group. Like the spelling word battles, these moments would result in fights with her mother as well because the words Sarah saw were not the same ones her mother read on the cards. Sarah told me, "I would flip letters. I would flip "was" to "saw" and "saw" to "was" and "the" to "they" or I would see a word there and mom would be like "no, that's not the word." Again, these moments ultimately ended in both mother and daughter frustrated and discouraged. Although these memories exist as just a few of many moments in school where Sarah's reading difficulties made her feel different from her peers, they are representative of the moments she remembered as characteristic of her experiences in school.

Sarah's Dialogical-Self Moments

Like Braydon, Sarah's narratives offered multiple moments of insight, not just about the experiences of struggling readers, but also about the role of the dialogical self in the construction of her identity. The stories told in this section represent some of the most significant and reoccurring in our dialogues. Because Sarah recalled vividly so many of her early experiences, her stories serve as strong exemplars of the role of the dialogical self in the way Sarah considers her stories even now as she emplots her own narrative identity. Her stories also point to significant factors in the ideological becoming of Sarah as a reader and learner.

The Little Kid's Area

As Sarah and I talked about her reading struggles early in her childhood, she shared one of the first incidents she remembered with reading and school. In third grade her class would go to the library and each student would be allowed to select a text based on his or her Accelerated Reader level.

Accelerated Reader (<http://www.renlearn.com/ar/overview/>), a computer based program used by some schools to monitor student reading, consists of a series of quizzes students take at the completion of each book they read. The students' performance on the tests indicates their reading level and comprehension, which guides their future reading choices.

Sarah explained how the librarians would tell each student their 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 them 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, these moments figured significantly into how she felt her classmates viewed her. Already aware of her struggles, this purposeful—although well-intended—sequestering that took place as she searched for books apart from others demonstrated her difference to her and her classmates. More than likely, the librarian's intentions centered on ensuring student success by directing them towards books on a reading level she knew they would be successful. However, this physical dividing and representation of who read how well caused the librarians good intentions to be missed in the eyes of Sarah.

It's also important to consider the significance Sarah placed on the words of the teacher and other authority figures at the school. She didn't challenge their instructions; rather, she obeyed and internalized this label. This story about herself as a third grade reader existed as a significant one that found its way into many of the experiences Sarah shared with me. Whether she bought into this narrative based on these experiences with Accelerated Reader or as a result of tests or as a culmination of all her struggles, this is a story she dialogues with almost daily.

“I Messed Up on the Third Word”

The stories Sarah shared from her years in elementary school offered some unique perspectives on classroom activities. Reading in school, whether out loud, silently, with the group, or individually, proved problematic. She explained, “I never really volunteered in elementary school to read. When I did, I never got picked on to do it.”

Although the research on reading out loud varies, classroom teachers know benefits and drawbacks to asking students to read out loud exist (Allington, 1984; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). While the teacher gets to hear students read out loud individually, this means the other 30 students in the class may or may not be reading along. One version of this activity, called popcorn or round robin reading, represented a particularly problematic experience for Sarah as a struggling reader. Although there are variations of this activity, each essentially consists of students reading a text out loud and either the teacher or another student “popcorns” to another reader at a certain point. Since students don’t know when they will be picked, this is supposed to motivate all students to be on task as the class reads. However, research has shown activities such as these not only fail to offer the support readers need to strengthen their abilities and students who struggle “find this publish[ed] display of their lack of competence in reading an ongoing source of embarrassment that is not easily forgotten” (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003, p. 512). For students who struggle with reading anyway, being asked to read out loud without warning and without an opportunity to prepare for it is problematic.

Sarah described an experience from fifth grade involving a substitute teacher and popcorn reading.

The popcorn reading was like “If you mess up on the word then you have to popcorn to somebody else” so they started with me and I messed up on the third word and they were like “You have to popcorn to somebody else.” So you would popcorn, but the smart kids would only pick the smart kids, they wouldn’t pick the dumb kids because like the smart kids could read four or five sentences.

Although Sarah didn’t report anyone in class calling her dumb in this example, for her the meaning was clear: the smart kids read a lot and the dumb kids messed up a lot, and the category you fell into became obvious the minute you started your turn. Sarah’s interpretation of these events put her in the dumb category. Further, once these categories were established, the smart kids maintained control of the reading by “popcorning” to other students who could also read well.

For Sarah this activity and the response of her peers played a role in her interpretations of herself as a struggling reader. Influenced by the opinions of her peers, whether real or imagined, Sarah cared how her reading skills influenced her peers’ assumptions about her.

She described another example of popcorn reading where she and her mom had been able to prepare by reading the text the night before. One particular passage stood out to her because the subject of the text sounded like and the word looked like Sarah’s last name. She remembered thinking “Oh, that’s kind of like my last name, I want to do that.” She described how she really knew that page because she and her mom had read it the night before and she had re-read it multiple times.

Unfortunately, the teacher didn’t call on Sarah to read that section, but the teacher did call on Sarah to read another. But as she described it, “I didn’t know like half the

words. And I felt dumb or I felt like kids were laughing at me or they thought ‘Oh, she doesn’t know how to read like you’re supposed to know how to read.’”

Again, her understandings of the opinions of her peers played a significant role in how she perceived her ability as she read out loud. Sarah knew she struggled and this already made her feel like she was dumb; for her not reading equated to not being smart. But added to this was the way her struggles reinforced her past experiences with her peers, leading her to believe this would only result in them mocking her.

One of the most interesting features of this narrative exists in the way it still influences Sarah’s actions when asked to read out loud in school or at church. Although she still struggles, she’s developed strategies to help her, in her own words, “deal with it.” She explained,

It’s just one of those struggles I’ve had to learn how to deal with. But I’ve kind of learned how to manipulate it...I mean having the experiences of [thinking], “Okay you can ask for help” or you can be like, “Okay I don’t know this word” and somebody will say it, that kind of thing.

Like some of the other readers in this study, Sarah developed strategies of a less traditional kind to working through her reading challenges. She now sees asking for help as an option. She learned if she waited long enough or said she didn’t know a word, someone else would say it. These strategies are an important part of her inner dialogues, even now, as she works through her reading challenges.

She found herself doing this often, particularly with her sister and cousin, both of whom had become part of a support structure for her. Although at school she couldn’t rely on them, when she went to church or religious study classes, Sarah depended on

these two to help her if she struggled. When possible, Sarah would sit with these two on either side of her in class. If asked to read, Sarah would begin while the other two listen closely. When Sarah paused momentarily, this signaled she wanted help and one or the other will whisper the word to her. Sarah would repeat the word and continue reading.

Although not ideal as a long-term solution, this strategy worked for Sarah in many ways. It allowed her to participate in class when called on, just like the other students. Because her sister and cousin offered help when she needed it, Sarah didn't have to worry about standing out or appearing different. However, she still experienced the stress of not being able to read through these moments on her own.

“I Got to Read What I Wanted to Read”

Like some of the other students in this study, Sarah identified the time when she first read a chapter book on her own as pivotal in shaping her perceptions of herself as a reader. In high school she participated in silent sustained reading (SSR) time, but “didn't enjoy it...I hated it.” She felt this way her whole freshman year and into her sophomore year as well. It only became a little better that year because her teacher allowed her to fall asleep with a book on her desk without giving her any grief about it.

But then she discovered *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Bradshares (2001). Sarah asked her sister's advice about the book and although her sister was not interested in it, she encouraged Sarah to read it. She quickly became engaged and found it easy to read, even though it was a thick chapter book. Sarah told me,

I couldn't wait until SSR time because I would read it for 30 minutes. I would just flat out read...that's when I started to love reading a lot more than I did.

Because I got to read what I wanted to read and I didn't have a teacher telling me "This is what you have to read."

Research shows student choice in texts plays a significant role in reader engagement and ultimately the creation of lifelong readers (Campbell & Donahue, 1994; Palincsar et. al, 2007). In this case, Sarah's ability to select her own book made all the difference, perhaps even in part because of her inability to select them in elementary school. Her attitudes also reinforced the idea that students who struggle with reading don't like having teachers force books on them (Lesesne & Buckman, 2001). As Sarah selected her books based on her own interests, she flew through them. She explained this was the first book that "I had ever read by myself from front to cover—front to back."

This dramatic change in Sarah's desire to read not only marked a change in her attitudes towards reading, but also in her perceptions of herself as a reader. She explained this change occurred because

It gave me that accomplishment [like] "You know, it may take me a little longer to read a book, but I can read it. I like reading books on my own. I don't like being pressured to." And from that point on, I would read books.

Regardless of whether or not the change in Sarah was actually this instantaneous, it challenged her previous ideas about herself as a reader. This successful reading of a chapter book—the first one she had ever selected, started and finished on her own—became a powerful story in her inner dialogues. A new story about herself as a reader began and challenged her ideas that she couldn't read at all.

This successful reading of a text on her own also marked the beginnings of reading as a social experience for Sarah, another addition to her identity as a reader. This

book, and those she would read in the future, became opportunities to interact with others in realms where she had previously been excluded. She described how, after this experience, she went to her cousin to talk about the text and because of that discussion, her sister read this book as well. “Now it’s like one of our favorite books because it’s like a book that I understand that they understand ... they got it with me and it was very—just awesome.” Reading became an opportunity to become part of a community of individuals dialoging about stories.

Her statement describing this book as one “that I understand that they understand” also pointed towards significant ideas Sarah had about what kind of books she could read in comparison to her sister, cousin, and others. Previously Sarah saw herself as only able to read texts below her family members’ reading ability levels. Now, as one who could read texts that her family members found engaging, this idea of her as a third grade reader continued to be challenged.

By her own admission, this experience caused her to reshape her ideas about herself as a reader. Now she explained, “I would read books. Well, I would read one occasionally.” This moment also represented the beginnings of a new link in the chain of dialogues she authored. In our last conversation before she left for the summer to work in another state, she talked to me about her changed feelings towards reading and the role it would play in her summer adventures.

I’ve come to find ... that I like autobiographies better than I do fiction books-- about certain people I like to read. This past summer, or probably two summers ago, I started reading Tori Spelling books. I love her. So I read—I’ve read all three of her books... [My sister] got it for me in August, but I couldn’t read it

until December break, or Christmas break. So I read it for like two weeks straight over Christmas break. Usually it would have taken me a whole year and a half to read, but after reading a couple books, I've gotten faster at reading. I have a whole stack of books I have to finish down to the three or four books to take on vacation because I have a whole stack that I want to take.

She realized reading this first book on her own meant that she couldn't continue to see herself as only a third grade reader. Her ability to distinguish between genres she liked and disliked as well as her ability to offer her own opinions about books and to read increasingly faster altered the way she participated as a reader among her friends and in school and church settings. In short, she now considered herself a reader.

Beginning of the Semester

As Sarah described to me the way she reasoned through the beginning of most of her semesters, I considered the similarities between the dialogues she described and those of Skyler I mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation. Sarah explained at the beginning of semesters she often enters into dialogues with herself where she wondered,

“How am I going to get through it [school]?” and at the beginning of the semester I was like “How am I going to get through all nine papers. How am I going to get through it?”... At the rate teachers were giving these out, my brain was going at like ninety miles an hour going, “Okay, you can write your paper on this, and you can do this one and you can do this one,” but it's like my brain was already organizing it into “Okay, this is how you're going to do it.”

These inner dialogues that helped her organize her semester offered her a way to set herself up for success. Through dialoging she found a way to talk herself through the

moments of panic she felt as she encountered the challenges that lay before her in the upcoming months. Although these were not literal dialogues with others, like the ones Skyler described, they allowed her to talk herself through her initial doubts and create a plan for success.

Also, like Braydon, Sarah felt it was imperative to her success to talk to her professors about her disabilities. Then, based on the professor's response to this dialogue, Sarah would decide if she wanted to enroll in the course. Although some might see this as a strategy students employ to take easy teachers, for Sarah it was much more about assessing which teachers would willingly offer the support she needed, and which didn't believe in her ability to succeed. She explained,

The way I read them is I go up to them after class and tell them about my disability, "I'm a special ed student, here's my paperwork." And if they're just like "you're another one of those students?" Then I try to get out of their class and get into another one.

She told me about a sophomore English course she took at the beginning of college where the teacher gave very specific, non-negotiable rules and standards, particularly in connection with tests. This concerned Sarah because, as one of her accommodations, she took tests in the disability offices across campus. As she described what happened when she approached the teacher about this, Sarah related,

She said "You don't need the extra time, you're going to do it here," and she just kind of told me what I wasn't getting my accommodations. So I ended up—it was too late to get out of her class without getting an F in her class, so I went and talked to Ms. Swan, who's the head of the department over special ed disability

offices and told her what my problem was. She made me go talk to the head of the English department and I just sat in her office and cried to that woman. And she said “Do you have a class between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.?” and I said, “No, I do not.” She said, “You’re coming to my class and you’re going to be in my class from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.” I ended up going into her class and loved it and I wasn’t the only one—the only kid that had issues with the professor—the first one. That teacher ended up getting fired because she wasn’t available to the disability students.

The differences between the professors in this exchange would startle most students, but it’s easy to see why a student with disabilities would be concerned about exactly the kind of professor he or she signed up to take. In one instance the professor came across as anything but dialogic, unwilling to make accommodations—even legal ones—and unwavering. In contrast, the department head’s willingness to allow for Sarah’s special needs made all the difference.

“I’m An Above Average Student”

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

I’ve had teachers tell me, “Oh, you’re not going to make it, you’re just not worth anything.” ... 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.

The 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

categorizations of the school system, and influences her future goals. The notion of her as a student who, according to some teachers and professors, wasn't going to make it played a significant role in the way Sarah viewed her abilities as a student.

In addition, this discussion demonstrates the way Sarah's words and those of her teachers and professors brush up against one another, pushing at and reinforcing her perceptions of herself. The words of professors who verbally told her she wouldn't succeed in school found reinforcement in Sarah's mind in the form of assessments she took when she was in elementary school.

The label of "third grade reader" that Sarah mentioned also marked an interesting moment in her dialogues. As an outside observer and educator, I thought about this label significantly. 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 doubted she would score at a third grade level. However, this categorization, whether imposed by a school or an outside testing agency that defined the supposed limits of her as a student years ago, still weighed heavy on her identity. Reading had been difficult enough for Sarah, but believing she could not read beyond a third grade reading level did not, most likely, make this challenge any easier.

Although some of Sarah's past conversations with teachers appear less than encouraging, she also explained the significant role some of her teachers play as she currently negotiates her self-narrative. She described one 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."

From her comments it became obvious that having a teacher who believed in her ability to achieve—even if it took Sarah longer than other students—made a significant difference. She even explained the way she would go to this teacher to talk through this when she felt like she was struggling.

When viewed through the framework of the dialogical self, these dialogues become more than just reassuring comments from a teacher; they serve as purposefully selected ideas Sarah inserted into her master narrative about herself as a learner. In a very literal way, Sarah's dialogues with this professor shaped the way Sarah perceived herself and her abilities. This professor's willingness to both acknowledge Sarah's current dialogue about herself—that she was someone that struggled—but also challenge the predominant discourse of failure—that she 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. She helped Sarah craft a counter narrative to the one she had developed from teacher's comments before.

One has to wonder at the significant role of this professor's voice in Sarah's inner dialogues as well. At the encouragement of this professor, Sarah prepared to take the national exam. When Sarah discovered she not only passed the test, but passed with an above average score, she was thrilled. She described,

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 provided an opportunity to examine the way Sarah's past experiences as a learner exist in constant dialogue with her current abilities. The ideas Sarah formed about education and achievement over her years in school make clear what it means to be smart. High grades on tests symbolize achievement and serve as indicators of intelligence. Her past failures on these tests and the diagnoses she's received from similar tests represent powerful forces in the narratives she tells about herself as a reader. She still holds on to this identity, but at least is allowing it to be challenged by her successes.

However, the contradictory evidence provided by her above average score on this anatomy and physiology test allow her to question that narrative. Although she still described herself in this story as someone who reads 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 shared her scores with her mother. She

shared her numeric scores, but ultimately translated hers as “an above average student grade” explaining “I am not a below average student. I’m an above average student.”

The scores from this national exam served as another major marker to Sarah of her abilities. Unquestioning of the test, 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, I couldn’t help but hope Sarah held on to this label and let the other one go. Or, at the very least, considered this label as an element of her narratives in as powerful a way as she did the other. A dialogue between the two might lead to some re-authoring.

Sarah described the way this achievement helped her alter her perceptions of herself:

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 realize, “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.”

The comment contained echoes of those she attributed earlier to her professor. This exists as yet another example of Sarah incorporating into her own inner dialogues the words of another. 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 have now become Sarah’s words in a very real way, as well as a part of the inner dialogues that helped her see herself as more than a below average student.

It's also important to note this change took more than just empty talk on the part of Sarah's professor. Her challenges and her encouragement to Sarah went beyond empty praise and instead worked, taught and challenged Sarah in very dialogic ways. The way Sarah described the make up and set up of her class suggested that the teacher told Sarah she could be successful, but then let Sarah decide whether or not she was willing to do so. When Sarah made that decision, the professor readily supplied the extra support Sarah needed. However, she didn't avoid asking Sarah to work through difficult problems nor would she "dumb down" the curriculum. But because of her willingness to work with Sarah and Sarah's willingness to go beyond her own perceived abilities, the end result was success.

Focus on the Future

Sarah took these ideas a step further though when she viewed the experiences of the children she hoped to work with one day in her career as an occupational therapist. She compared their challenges to her own as she explained,

I've been in those shoes...I know their struggles, I know what they've gone through and I know I can help them get through their struggles like I have. ...I've felt their frustration where they feel like nobody cares about them, like nobody feels like they're worth anything.

But she also described how a teacher who can help them see their worth and teach them how to work in society, despite their challenges, could make all the difference. Sarah, although still working through her own challenges with school, knew she could be that somebody for these kids and wanted to make that difference.

As we concluded our interviews I asked Sarah how comfortable she felt talking to others about her challenges. Although she explained she hesitated to tell others about her reading struggles when she was younger, she felt that since she's gotten older, she's learned talking to people about them often helps them understand her better. She said,

The more I tell people about it, the more that they're willing to help me and the more they understand, "Okay, she doesn't like to read out loud, she doesn't like to read things. She doesn't mind us reading them, she doesn't mind putting her two cents input in like 'This is what I got out of it.'" The more people I tell, the more they're understanding, the more they're like, "Okay, she's not really weird, there's nothing wrong with her, she just has a reading problem." Or "She has a reading—or she's delaying."

In a study centered on dialogue, I appreciated how clearly Sarah articulated the understanding that resulted from her own dialogues about her disabilities. Her willingness to share these struggles with others helped her position herself in new ways. Rather than seeing her as someone "weird," others who didn't struggle with reading were able to consider her position—the perspective of the other.

Sarah's willingness to share reminded me of a conversation I once had with Skyler. He explained he wanted to talk about his experiences because at 25 he was no longer ashamed of his reading disabilities. Although I know there are moments where he still struggles when others don't understand, I wondered if Sarah felt the same way. A certain amount of risk is inevitable when disclosing struggles to strangers. But in doing so Sarah and Skyler created for themselves, as well as for others who struggled, understanding and support. Rather than avoiding the questions or puzzled looks by

responding in silence and leaving others ultimately to author their own understandings about individuals who don't read like themselves, entering into dialogue created opportunities to share their perspectives and ultimately their stories.

Later, when I asked Sarah if she thought about these elementary school successes and failures as she worked through her academic challenges, she told me,

Not in high school...I didn't think about it as much. But now in college, seeing where I was in high school compared to college has really improved a lot because I was here four years ago or six years ago in this experience and look how far I've come. My mom always tells me, "Sarah, your progression...it's huge."

I appreciated Sarah's willingness to state her feelings so honestly. At this stage of her life, she felt able to look back on her past experiences and see her progress as a reader and a learner. Although she felt like she had a long way to go, she was also able to see her skills and abilities as changing, in the process of becoming what she hoped they would someday be.

Lingering Questions Left By Sarah's Dialogues

Many of the questions remaining from Braydon's dialogues resonate with Sarah's case as well. 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 working 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. The vignette that opened this case that posits her as a reader in connection with her religious community

represents one of many other elements she will continue to dialogue with throughout the years. In these and other dialogues more challenges lie ahead for her.

In addition, 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 centers around which life and experiences are arranged (p. 74). It's around these centers 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 church and 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. In contrast, the connections she formed with her sister and cousin as they talked about books played a significant role in the way Sarah viewed herself as a member of a community of readers. By being able to take risks in a literacy community where she felt safe to fail but also where others knew she could succeed influenced her willingness and desire to face reading tasks. 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 reflected 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.

Like Braydon's narratives, Sarah's dialogues also raise questions about the lasting power of labels. Dweck (2006) explained 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 confirms 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, it's 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?

Finally, one of the things that most impressed me about Sarah was the way she used her dialogues to inform the work she saw herself doing in the future. As she talked about the way her struggles influenced her beliefs about the abilities of the children she

would work with as an occupational therapist, she explained, I know what they've gone through and I know I can help them get through their struggles like I have." I wondered about the way her narratives will influence the children she encounters in the future. Is she right? Will she be a more effective therapist because of her ability to relate to and connect with the struggles of these children? If so, what are the implications of this for teachers? One implication might be to suggest the teacher's narrative identity significantly influences his or her students. The way teachers view their struggles and abilities position them in very particular ways in the classroom and with students. Understanding to what extent these narratives matter in their work with students could also influence the way we train teachers to work with students.

CHAPTER 5

Jack, Anna and Maurice

Case Study: Jack

“Everyone is walking around as an advertisement for who he or she is” (Lamott, 1994, p. 46). Jack was a kid who made it clear that his relationship with you would be formed on his terms. The day I introduced myself to his class and invited them to take part in this study, I handed out a form asking students to let me know whether or not they were interested in helping me with my research. At the end of the period I collected a pile of paperwork and tallied up the yeses and noes from the class—from everyone, that is, except Jack.

Based on my observations of the class and my own experiences working with high school students, Jack displayed all the hallmark traits of that kid who could be the ringleader of the group and make a teacher’s life pleasant or a living hell. He stood out not just because of his size—he was about 6’4”—but also because of he was a 17 year-old freshman with a booming voice that he made sure you could hear. He paid just enough attention in class to stay plugged in to the lesson, but not enough to make it seem like he cared. Other students in the class didn’t seem afraid of him, but no one really wanted to cross him either. But according to Jack, this was the way he liked it.

As I began to realize, and as he would later tell me in our interviews, Jack did things his way. He once remarked, “I’m my own person cause nobody really acts like somebody else unless they’re trying to fit in...I’m my own person cause I don’t try to fit

in with nobody.” In terms of our relationship, it meant interrupting the lesson by saying “Hi” to me from across the room when I discretely tried to slip into unnoticed, or telling me he’d talk to me if he could get out of class, even though he hadn’t turned in his permission slip.

It was the latter issue that finally proved to be the turning point for us. I would respond by telling him what a great participant he’d be in the study, but I couldn’t really talk to him without a permission slip. As I held one out to him he’d take it and with a shrug tell me something like “Maybe, well see,” then wander off. But at the beginning of one class period, about half way through my visits to AHS, Jack came up to me and handed over a folded up piece of paper as he made his way to his seat. I took it, opened it and filed it away; later that day we started our interviews.

I learned a lot about Jack that first day. He really did know the ins and outs of the school; in fact, it was he who showed me the room in the guidance office where I held most of our interviews. “I just come in here sometimes,” he told me. “No one is ever in here.” As we talked he told me about how much he loved sports and how he played baseball, football and basketball—but he wasn’t playing this year for school. He lived with his dad, just the two of them, but he was the youngest of 11 kids and had eight brothers and two sisters. He had moved around a bit—never enough to be in a different state, but always enough to end up in a different school and a different county.

Jack became increasingly complex as our interviews continued and I began to see the way he framed things for me from perspectives I might not initially consider. For example, when he told me he ate salads every day and I questioned whether or not that was a growing guy’s ideal meal, he smiled and told me, “Well, with how much salad I eat

it probably is.” He then went on to explain how at school the side items—like the salad—are usually free, so since he never got an entrée he didn’t know if he ever got charged. He’d just pile salad on his plate until it covered his plastic tray, and eat until he was full. He also had a good reason for not having a phone number. He explained his friends weren’t always the best guys, so if he didn’t have a phone then they couldn’t get in touch with him. When he wanted to see someone, he hopped on his bike and went to find them.

Despite our different perspectives, I rarely doubted his honesty, or at least that he really believed the things he told me. The way he framed what he saw as occurring in school may have been different than how I would have framed it, but he always had justification for his interpretations. His answers were direct, to the point, and sometimes even frank. Once I asked him to tell me about the most influential person in his life. He replied, “I’ve been asked that so many times and I’ve made up so many answers.” Instantly I thought of all the persuasive writing prompts he’d probably experienced, or even journal entries assigned by well-meaning teachers. I made a mental note to check myself and my questions. If I expected him to be real, I had to ask questions that mattered.

Although I initially wondered if Jack’s narratives offered any insights about literacy learning and identity development, I realized it just took some listening to see his patterns. Although he rarely spoke in clearly delineated terms about the labels he’d assumed or the way particular individual’s influenced him, evidence of these influences existed in his narratives. Between the sorts of insights he offered described above, our conversations consisted of stories centered on three main topics: Jack making money,

Jack getting in trouble at school, and Jack the learner. Rarely told in that order, it wasn't until after we finished meeting as I pieced together his stories across multiple transcripts that I realized this pattern. But these categories represent more than themes among our conversations; rather, they serve as valuable past experiences and preunderstandings about the world that shaped the way Jack viewed himself as a learner and reader.

Jack Making Money

Whether it concerned his surplus of money, his lack of money, or his future ambitions to make money, Jack making money repeatedly surfaced in our conversations. These exchanges showed how smart he was, but also how—whether he realized it or not—his lack of literacy skills proved a barrier to his future success.

During our first interview, as I asked him about school, he told me “I don't even think about school. Like in the summer when I'm out of school, I'm glad to be out of school cause that's when I make the most money.” Puzzled by his comment at first, but not interested in the details, I went on with my questions, but when we talked about life after graduation he told me he wanted to be a landscaper because that's what he does now. With a few more pointed questions, Jack slowly began unfolding the details of his business:

This guy was throwing away a brand new lawn mower cause his lawn was too small for a riding lawn mower so he was throwing it out. So I asked him if I could buy it off of him and he said you can have it for free so I took it home and started cutting grass.

Taking out bushes, cutting grass, and maintaining yards kept him—or rather, his employees—pretty busy. Jack explained that people hired him to do their yard work and

then he would hire someone else to do it. At the time he boasted 6 employees, each of whom was older than him. “I pay them like a quarter of what I get paid...they get paid a little bit more than minimum wage.” His father even worked for Jack for a time. “I had to pay him a little bit more,” he told me. “Not a lot, but I paid him.”

This setup worked well for Jack. “I just do one or two little parts and then I take them out to lunch and then I pay them,” he told me. He then proceeded to outline the details:

I get paid \$500 then I pay four people, they work about seven hours a day. So they get paid about \$95 cash a day. Then I buy them lunch. We’ll go out to lunch. I’ll make about \$300 just sitting there and telling them what to do.

His math wasn’t exactly correct, but I got the idea.

I asked him how much reading he thought he’d need to do with this job and he explained, “None... Well, the only time I read is to read a manual to figure out how to operate a machine,” which he categorized as “pretty easy I guess.” He enjoyed being his own boss and wanted a similar set up in the future. When I commented that he already had what it seemed like he wanted he told me,

Yeah, but I don’t have a license... I would own my own business, but you have to go to college for like 4 years and that’s four more years of school that I’ll never get out of cause it’s a lot harder than this place [high school].

This comment puzzled me. Like Jack, many of my own former students excelled in mechanical or technical skills and spent their time in the auto shop or worked jobs after school where they applied these skills. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) wrote extensively about similar young men in their book *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the*

Lives of Young Men. Talent in these areas, however, did not seem to be rewarded academically and their engagement in literacy skills suffered as a result. All of this I understood. However, a disconnect existed in Jack's narrative. I did a little research; he did not need a college education to obtain a business license. So, was this a narrative he inferred from the school and their strong emphasis on college as the only post-high school option, or was it one Jack himself created to avoid committing to a lifelong career and the potential for success?

I didn't get an answer to these questions. But the issue that ultimately seemed of even greater import centered on Jack's notion of college as four more years of school that he would "never get out of" because it would be more difficult than high school. According to Jack's narrative, college wasn't an option because high school already proved too difficult to conquer. So as he worked out the story of his own future, he automatically ruled out any option that required education beyond twelfth grade.

When I asked Jack about what he would like to do after he graduates, he told me, "I just want to be rich. I just want to be rich one day, that's all." Based on other comments Jack made about money or times when he didn't have it, I wasn't surprised by this goal. He then explained to me one day when he and his father were shopping at a store Jack noticed a woman admiring a TV that she couldn't afford. A man who saw her looking at it promptly walked over and picked it up so he could buy it. This seemed like an odd story to share until Jack explained, "Some people they look at somebody and look at something and if they don't have the money to buy it, they just buy it to piss 'em off."

This interpretation intrigued me because so many of the details seemed to be inferred by Jack. The man didn't make any comments to Jack or the woman about his

purchase of the TV, nor had the woman made any comments to Jack about her desire for it or lack of money. But according to Jack, the scenario occurred the way he described because from his frame of reference, people who had money did things to make poor people angry, just because they could. Was it so important to Jack to be rich someday primarily because right now he felt abused by the rich people himself? If so, did this perspective offer any insights into the way he viewed those with an education? Or, did this all simply stem from a larger narrative he inferred about life as one big competition?

Jack Getting in Trouble

As we began talking about his past experiences in school, I expected Jack to start by telling me about his classes and his teachers, similar to the way other participants had shared. However, instead of talking about homework or assignments, he immediately began relating stories about all the times he got into trouble at school. He spoke with pride in his voice about the time in first grade when he started, what he called, “the biggest food fight” in the history of his elementary school. Later he talked about the time in third grade when he pantsed his principal on dress up day for wearing his jeans low like a “gangsta.”

Similarly, when I asked him about sad memories, happy memories, and all the memories in between, he could always place these moments in school, but they rarely seemed to have much to do with his education in a traditional sense. We talked about when he felt sad at school and he told me about when his mom died when he was five. We talked about a time he felt angry and he told me about getting written up four times in one day “for stupid things not even worth writing down on the paper.” When I asked him

what grade this occurred in he told me, “It could be elementary to middle school to high school. Pick one of those.”

Jack’s narratives about school rarely centered on learning. Rather, they alluded to a myriad of disconnects between the system established to offer Jack an education and the way his experiences within this system led him to interpret himself. He often pushed things too far, but I couldn’t tell if he really didn’t get it. Part of me could sympathize with him when he mentioned being written up all those times across middle and high school, but another part of me wondered why he didn’t understand there was more to being written up than only disobeying a list of rules on a paper. It was almost as if he didn’t really understand the rules of the game, but kept trying to play in ways he knew demanded attention.

Jack also explained to me that he avoided building relationships with his teachers. “It’s only 18 weeks. After 18 weeks I only have to see them in the halls.” Building relationships meant forging bonds and Jack liked to keep things simple. He told me if he built a relationship with a teacher “That means I have to come back to see her. I don’t like to go through all of that.” Confused by these assumed obligatory visits, I asked him if he had any teachers like that, who he had to go back and visit still. He explained he did have one teacher he went back to see—Ms. Marshall.

Ms. Marshall, Jack’s second grade teacher, was the one he named as his favorite. In her class he played games and didn’t have to say in their desks all the time. However, other than these scant details and mention of their periodic visits, this was the extent of our discussion about her. The rest of the teachers he talked about he did so with suspicion in his tone. According to Jack, he did so with good reason. “If you’re sleeping

in class and you're watching a movie—cause I hate watching movies unless they're really exciting—then I'll be falling asleep then she'll just call on me out of the blue and ask me what I just heard,” he explained. He also described how, if you're a student who gets a bad grade, “[teachers] will call on you every time to make sure you're paying attention or something.” I asked him if he had ever had a teacher prove he or she wasn't worth trusting and he told me, “Not really, I just don't like teachers.” He stated, with emphasis, “I would never trust a teacher for something, I just don't know why.”

My research in the field of psychology is limited to reading issues; I don't have the credentials to diagnose Jack with abandonment issues because of the death of his mother early on or even begin to speculate about other reasons why he might resist building relationships with his teachers. However, overwhelming evidence points to relationships as the core of successful teaching and learning interactions (Darling-Hammond 1997; Noddings, 1984). In addition, every other student in my study talked about the importance relationships played in the way they viewed themselves and the way they found success. Therefore, if Jack, for whatever reason, refused to build relationships with his teachers, I wondered if he would ever take the risks necessary to work past his reading struggles and re-author himself as a successful learner.

The role significant others, such as teachers, parents and peers, plays in the co-authoring of individuals seems contingent on the value the individual himself placed on the words, opinions and ideas of others. If Jack refused to build relationships with his teachers and, as we'll discuss later, very few of his peers, whose voices remained? It seemed possible that he and his father existed as the primary authors of Jack's understandings about school and narratives about himself as a learner. Teachers played a

role in disciplining Jack, but not in positioning him as a capable learner. Peers had limited interaction with Jack and on the surface Jack gave their words little value. This left his understandings about himself as a reader and learner to be constructed by Jack and his father.

Jack at School

Even though Jack never sat down and said to me, “Let me tell you about my philosophy of education,” over the course of our interviews his beliefs about the role of education in his life became clear. He described his attitude towards school like medicine he was reluctant to take, but had to swallow before his dad would take him fishing. “Just do it and get it over with...like those big horse pills,” he said. The significant role of his father’s ideas about schooling also became clear as he talked. Later he explained he thought the point of school was to give adults “a free babysitter...so they can go home and work and pay the bills. That’s what my dad says, so that’s what I think [laughs]. It’s a free babysitter.”

As one of the primary agents or significant others in Jack’s life, his father’s narrative about education and the purpose of it tightly wound itself into Jack’s. Jack’s father’s lack of emphasis on education as a worthwhile endeavor proved a useful one for Jack to assume as he considered his struggles in the classroom. By assuming his father’s stance towards education, Jack could perpetuate the narrative in his own life that education and reading didn’t really matter. However, these narratives met with opposition every day Jack entered the doors of the school.

Even being physically located in the school changed the way he viewed himself. Jack described school as a place where he became someone “lame, boring, dull.” He

explained, “Like at school...you have to be here. You’re forced here by law. It’s just boring here. But at home you can have a lot of fun.” So Jack spent his days at school, but not really invested in school. When I asked him to tell me about his day after his first block class, he rattled off his schedule and described when he sat in class, when he chose to leave, and when he slept. He didn’t mind being called on in class because “If it’s not reading, I do pretty good because I already did the work.” Lunch provided a break from the routine, but he didn’t even act as if he enjoyed this time, which he most often spent wandering the halls. What did he consider the highlight of school? “The last bell of the day...when I get on the bus.”

For Jack school was a pill to take, a babysitter, and a legal obligation to fulfill. His memories of the time he spent in school all seemed to filter through this lens. He went to school because it was required, but not because he saw any relevance in it for his life. Even his advice to new students reflected little tolerance for the education system. “If you’re old enough, drop out...or go to military school or something. Or try to make it as fun as possible. Learn how to have fun or learn how to do pranks.”

We did talk about one time he felt really happy in school; for one of the first times in our interviews he paused. With a smile told me, “This might take a minute.” He then explained, “All right. In fifth grade in the mentoring program I won the competition...you had to make like a Christmas tree behind your back ripping paper..[mine] looked better than everyone else’s...I guess that was pretty fun.” Again, echoing his comments about his love of competition, Jack considered the time he felt happiest at school when he triumphed in one of these competitions.

In fact, the only activities he mentioned as enjoyable in school consisted of competitions. He detailed moments in class when they played games to review for tests or to practice new content, but each description focused on the game itself rather than the content involved. Teachers who motivated students to work through the use of competition often hindered feelings of security in the classroom environment (Self, 2009). In contrast, encouraging collaboration rather than competition in the classroom helped students view learning as co-constructing meaning with peers (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Research examining the effects of competition in classrooms has shown competition in the classroom causes students to focus on the differences between themselves and others, sending a mixture of social messages that influence the way students perceive themselves (Cheng, Wu, Liao & Chan, 2009).

In this case, the research aligned perfectly with Jack, who remembered little of the content, but focused significantly on what these moments said about him. The messages Jack seemed to infer about himself from these competitions focused not on learning, but on winning and being the best. Those moments when he emerged as the victor stood out as triumphs. But what about the other moments when he didn't win?

Just to be clear, I'm not saying that it's the teachers' fault that Jack assumed the narratives he did about education and success. I'm not even saying there's no place for competition in the classroom. But it seems significant to point out that for Jack the sole focus of these games was not the learning involved, but the competitions and hierarchies the competitions reinforced. This, coupled with his academic struggles and his refusal to build relationships with his teachers, meant that those narratives of competition reinforced his negative ideas about education rather than challenging them.

Jack's Dialogical Self Moments

Although less obvious than the stories told by Braydon and Sarah, all of the narratives Jack offered about money, trouble and school played a key role in the way he viewed himself as a learner and a reader. As the central way of assessing and directing learning, reading played an explicit and implicit role in his narratives. The next few sections focus specifically on the way Jack described the role of reading in his life and the way these narratives influenced his identity.

Bakhtin's notion of silence became significant to the way Jack interpreted his experiences. Bakhtin (1986) wrote that the word "always wants to be heard" and "seeks responsive understanding;" therefore, "for the word (and consequently the human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response" (p. 127). Much evidence exists of a silent response, both on his part and on the part of others, in connection with the narratives Jack told. In the instances highlighted in this section, I discuss silence in regards to some of the reading experiences central to the way Jack made sense of his understandings of himself as a learner and continues to construct his identity.

"I Could Read, But I Read Slow"

When I asked him specifically about learning how to read, he reluctantly responded and said, "I didn't really—I just learned how to read on my own" at age four, five or six. Beyond this his memories of learning to read in elementary school were scant. He didn't like reading in school, but remembered, "reading little books—little kid books" in kindergarten. Among all the books he was supposed to read for school but didn't, one stood out as the exception: "Dr. Seuss. That's the only book I ever read...*Green Eggs and Ham* (1960)."

He explained, matter-of-factly, “They always put me in—cause I’m a slow reader—so they always put me in these little groups with other teachers with five kids...she helped us read” but he was quick to point out, “like I could read, but I read slow. So these other kids read slow too, so they put us all in one group.”

Based on Jack’s explanation of his early reading memories, his struggles and label as a “slow reader,” went back to an early age. He alluded to the particular nature of his struggles—reading speed—and the presence of other students as well. The separation into a particular reading group and the help he described receiving seemed similar to the experiences of other students in this study. And also like the other students in this study, these early experiences provided a foundation for the way Jack interacted with reading and assignments throughout the rest of his schooling.

Despite his reading struggles and self-described moments of disengagement, he did do his work sometimes. Jack recalled a time in fourth grade when he used the Internet for homework on an assignment for a book called *The Summer of the Monkeys* (1976). Although he didn’t want to read the book he “went to the library and told the librarian I needed the tape for my assignment and listened to the tape...Then I’d just read it and listen to it too.”

This strategy of finding the book on tape and listening to it continued to serve Jack throughout his educational experience. He was almost adamant about it. “Reading is just flat out dull,” he exclaimed. But, if teachers would let students listen on tape “that would be a lot easier.” He didn’t mind listening to teachers read, but confessed he mainly liked that because then he wasn’t the one doing the reading.

When I asked him if listening helped him read he told me, “I don’t know; it’s quicker.” But he admitted that he doesn’t follow along with the book anymore and most often “I just sit there and I listen to it.” His plan to get through the next book required for his history class entailed this same routine. “I’m going to order the tapes and get it offline.”

Jack then proceeded to detail for me all of the ways someone could make it to his or her freshman year without ever actually reading a book. He described the way he used the Internet to take notes about the current book they were reading in class—one he said was the first book he’d read that year but not finished—and watch the video of it online as well. He also talked about getting the book on tape and listening to the book, which seemed to be his favorite strategy.

I wondered at the way the understandings of Jack’s abilities, on both his part and that of his teachers, would have changed if conversations around what it meant to read had occurred. Numerous researchers and practitioners cite reading along with books on tape as a strategy to support struggling readers in elementary (Baker, 2003; Strickland, Ganske & Monroe) and in high school (Allen, 2000) classrooms. However, like other readers in this study, Jack’s definition of reading didn’t involve listening to books on tape. Was this because no dialogue about this as an alternative took place? It’s interesting to note that although he didn’t think listening to books on tape counted as reading, he still listened anyway.

“If I Don’t Know How To Do It, I Won’t Do It”

In a discussion about struggling readers, Janet Allen related an anecdote about a discussion she once had with a middle school principal as he inquired about her latest

theories about reading instruction. She told him she had a new idea and that, if accepted, it would save the district money on testing, which perked his interests. Finally she shared her observation about a strong connection between struggling readers and students who frequented the restrooms, stating,

Every time I ask these students to read, someone has to go to the bathroom. I think we should get rid of the reading test and just put all the eight graders in a room together and ask them to read. Those who ask to go to the bathroom probably need an intervention program. (Allen, 2000, p. 32)

Although this might seem an extreme measure, she went on to explain that students often exhibit certain behaviors that tend to indicate a reluctance to read.

As I met with Jack and the other students in this study, many of them shared with me what we called “strategies” to avoid reading in class, both out loud and silently. My participants and I talked about them as strategies because although the readers in this study might not have always been strategic readers in the traditional sense of the phrase—meaning those who understand and use techniques to help them comprehend texts (Beers, 2003)—these readers knew exactly what kinds of techniques would help them avoid reading in school. Although multiple students talked about these strategies, I include this discussion with Jack’s analysis because of all my participants he discussed these most blatantly.

Brozo (2000) described common coping strategies described by and observed in poor adolescent readers, including avoiding eye contact with teachers, engaging in disruptive behaviors, overcompensating for their reading difficulties by listening, relying on a classmate to help them out or other friend, purposely forgetting materials needed for

class, and intentionally giving teachers the impression that they had read by sharing information these readers heard on the news. To this list I would add a few others shared by my participants, many of which were exemplified through Jack.

For instance, when I asked him if he ever volunteered to read he explained, “No, I would here and there, just if nobody else would...cause usually [the teacher] picks on the kids that don’t like reading.” If the teacher asked him to read he’d say no, but if she pushed it then Jack would eventually do it. He told me, “If we did it for extra credit, I’d read every day...cause it brings up my grade.”

But then Jack explained to me that when the teacher asks him to read aloud the first thing he would do was “try to argue with her.” In his experience, he found that arguing got him out of reading most of the time. If that didn’t work he’d “read real slow than it’s so annoying that she’ll make me stop.” He also would “act like I didn’t know how to read. Like read all the words slow so she’ll keep on interrupting me and say them correct.”

He used similar strategies to avoid reading during silent sustained reading (SSR) time. Usually he chose to “just sit there” and “look around, [and] see what’s new.” However, when the teacher said something to him about his not reading he’d grab his book and act like he was reading, something he felt the rest of the class did as well. “But if I read by myself I read so slow.”

Like Sarah and Braydon, he seemed to have developed alternative strategies to get around his struggles, even if those strategies might not be those a teacher might advocate. I wondered if, as a teacher myself, in a class of 30-40 students, I would have had the ability, time or resources to call Jack on his fake reading or to dialogue with him about

why he should be reading and why he wasn't reading. Or, would I have simply responded in silence because he wasn't causing trouble? There's no doubt these dialogues needed to take place, but calling a student like Jack out in front of his classmates is a recipe for disaster. So how do teachers help students in this situation, especially if they are resistant?

When I asked Jack if any teachers had tried to help him, he told me he'd had a few that read to him "but that was just lame...if I don't know how to do it, I won't do it." For Jack the lines seemed clearly drawn between what he would consider and what he would not. Certain elements of the way he acted and engaged were not open for negotiation and no dialogue would take place concerning those matters. When I think of the way Jack often described his school and reading experiences, it reminded me of the words of Herbert Cole who wrote:

"Learning how to not-learn is an intellectual and social challenge; sometimes you have to work very hard at it. It consists of an active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate, and well-designed teaching. It subverts attempts at remediation as much as it rejects learning in the first place" (as cited in Allen, 2000, p. 14).

By all measures, these strategies Jack shared demonstrated a student making efforts to subvert learning. Jack refused to enter into dialogue with teachers who would challenge his understandings about education, success, and school. Jack did not question his own assumptions about what kind of response towards difficult assignments would merit the greatest results in the final outcome.

However, as we talked more about the way he understood certain school structures, I wasn't so sure this idea entirely applied to Jack. How much of Jack's struggles resulted in his resistance to learn, and how much from misunderstanding about what it meant to be a learner and what things he was asked to do would ultimately result in his success?

“Nine Weeks Without Doing One Piece of Paperwork”

The semester before Jack and I began our interviews, he had been enrolled in a literacy class designed to help struggling readers. However, he didn't see it as helpful at all. He explained that the teacher “was so paranoid about what everyone else was doing that it just didn't work. And I went through nine weeks without doing one piece of paperwork.”

The irony of this statement was not lost on me; I couldn't decide if I should smile or cringe. Research as well as commentaries by noted practitioners who advocate for struggling readers point to the importance of high quantities of quality time spent reading, as well as restricting writing tasks to authentic writing tasks designed to engage students in reading classes (Fisher & Ivey, 2006; Gallagher, 2009). Still others emphasize the importance of making reading enjoyable, rather than killing it with worksheets and the like (Atwell, 2007; Lesesne, 2006). In an effort to teach in ways reflective of this research, the school designed their literacy courses as opportunities to read engaging texts and change students attitudes and understandings about reading.

However, based on his comment, Jack brought very different understandings to his class. To him the teacher failed to do her job because Jack successfully made it through the course without doing any paperwork. The lack of paperwork represented a

failure on the part of the teacher to provide him with what he thought was an essential part of doing school: paperwork. Although he rarely had intentions to doing the work, to him and other students I talked to, paperwork equated to learning. I wondered if something as simple as a conversation at the beginning of the semester and an ongoing dialogue throughout the semester could have influenced this narrative of Jack's, if even only slightly.

A disconnect existed between the teacher's understanding about literacy education and Jack's understanding of what it meant to be successful both in this course and as a reader. Similar to the teachers and students in Lundsford's study (2002) of writing classrooms whose competing notions of meaning hindered their progress to the ultimate goal of learning, the disconnect between Jack and his teacher left both feeling frustrated. For Jack, who equated paperwork with learning, the lack thereof left him feeling he wasted his time. I can only imagine his teacher, who tried to create an environment where Jack could grow as a reader without the restrictions of fill-in-the-blank worksheets, felt equally frustrated. According to the research, this teacher did everything she should have done. She was kind and non-authoritarian, she offered engaging reading opportunities and authentic writing experiences. However, in addition to all of this, it seems Jack needed someone with whom he had a relationship and who he didn't perceive as what he later described as "a pushover."

He made a similar point as he described why he didn't even try to do homework he didn't understand. He explained,

If I didn't understand it, I wouldn't even try. Cause a failing grade is almost as bad as zero...cause if your teacher gives you a failing grade, she won't let you

redo a failing grade. But, she'll help you—and help you like make up the work if you have a zero. So, you have a better chance for not turning it in and letting her help you to get a higher grade.

His logic was sound, even if the application missed the mark. I couldn't argue with his reasoning and for a student who failed plenty of assignments, he had figured it out.

Attempting to try didn't pay off in terms of grades in the same way as a silent or blank response. However, as a teacher and educator I saw how this kind of logic ultimately hindered his ability to really learn.

How does this speak to his ideas about what it means to be a reader? What it means to be successful in school? It not only points to the need to reconceptualize education for students and try to see what they want out of it, but also the need to help them understand what it means to learn and be metacognitive about our choices as teachers.

“I Guess I Pulled One Out of Thin Air”

In between our last two interviews Jack took his midterm test for social studies. Just before his teacher handed back the graded tests, she mentioned to me that Jack earned the highest grade in the class. When Jack received his test a look of astonishment came over his face and he said something to the effect of, “I'm going to hang this on the wall.”

So when Ms. Longworth told me later that Jack scored higher than anyone else in the class, I anxiously awaited our next meeting. During our next interview I asked him how the test went. At first he adamantly refused that he had even taken a test, but when I mentioned hearing he had done well he questioned, “Oh, okay, the one we took a couple

of weeks ago and I made a ninety one?” I asked him how he managed to do so well and he replied,

I don't know, I guess I pulled one out of thin air. I don't really know...I was shocked really. I got like a grade higher than the smart kid in the class...I was surprised. I wanted to get it framed...I wanted to hang it up on the wall.

But when I asked him if he had hung it up or framed it he told me no. As I inquired about what his dad had to say about it, Jack replied, “I didn't tell him...cause I don't think he cares about that.”

His response stung a little, not because he didn't do any of those things, but because after our discussions about his attitudes about school as well as his father's, I almost felt like Jack expected me to know better than to ask. When you've formed your learner identity around convictions that school is a babysitter, a pill to be swallowed, and something you've convinced yourself doesn't matter, is it safe to let a success like this trouble your notions and think about changing your mind?

Although this success challenged Jack's conceptions of himself as a reader, he didn't reconsider his role as a student or reconceptualize himself as a smart individual; instead, he attributed his success to just picking the best answers sometimes. And again, it evidenced Jack comparing his performance with that of his classmates rather than with his own past successes and failures.

When I asked him if this changed his perception about his ability to do well in the class he answered “No. I can just learn new stuff and then it gets hard...when you learn new stuff it gets hard.” Ultimately he didn't see himself as a good reader or successful student; rather, he was someone who made sense of some things and struggled with

others, never really succeeding. However, among all of the moments we talked, this exchange is the closest he ever got to showing signs of dialogue concerning his perceptions of himself as a learner. Although he acknowledged the difference between how he actually performed and how he identified as a learner, he rationalized it away.

Jack's Educational Future

At our final interview Jack and I talked about his academic future. I asked him if he would consider ever taking a class where he could learn to read faster, but he told me he felt hesitant because “if I’m in it somebody’s going to say ‘this guy’s a retard’ and then I’m gonna get mad and then I’ll have to go and hit somebody and that doesn’t work well.” Based on this comment and others like it, Jack’s perceptions of himself as a learner may not be grounded in what his classmates think of him, but they are in part formed by what Jack thinks his classmates think of him. Whether this is an excuse to not learn or a legitimate concern, Jack equates reading slow to being “a retard,” a way Jack does not want to be perceived.

But what about becoming a high school graduate? Jack realized the complexity involved in a student of his age actually graduating. When I asked him about it he explained, “I really don’t know because I’ll be 21 before I get to senior year. And at 21 they go [whistle sound] and you’re gone.” This answer and others impressed me because as much as Jack talked like he didn’t care, he had contemplated these realities enough to be able to tell me what he could expect.

Ultimately, Jack’s lack of dialogues with his situation and his identity as a learner seemed to seek the quickest route of escape from school. Although unsure of which direction he’d take, he explained he considered dropping out of public high school and

entering the job corp. “They pay you to be there. They give you allowances, as soon as you finish the program they give you a job to start out at...[And] if you don’t want to be there, you don’t have to be there.” This alternative offered Jack many benefits that, to him, high school lacked. Money. A reason to show up that ultimately resulted in something tangible when he finished. The autonomy to stay or go as he pleased.

Lingering Questions Left By Jack’s Dialogues

The September after our interviews, I asked Ms. Longworth if she had seen Jack at school lately. After all, although he was no longer in her class, he was typically hard to miss. She told me she hadn’t noticed him in the halls, but she did a bit of checking around and emailed me a few days later to inform me Jack had been arrested on drug charges. The story she had heard consisted of Jack getting caught with drugs on him, Jack explaining to the cops his dad was dealing and in an effort to try to help his dad get clean, Jack took the drugs away. Different variations of this story existed in the school, but regardless of Jack’s actual intentions, the possession charge was hard to dispute and ultimately landed him in jail.

I haven’t talked to Jack since then. I don’t know how he’d tell his story from here. I can’t tell you where he’d place the blame for his failures in school or for his recent arrest, nor am I condemning him to a life of crime as a result of this arrest and his struggles with reading. As in most cases, a complex combination of factors led up to this moment for Jack. Many will also follow after it, shaping his future. But, knowing about his past struggles against the backdrop of his present situation makes it difficult to ignore a few statistics.

For example, when the government of the United States conducted the last National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), a separate component aimed specifically at prisoners was required because of the disproportionate percentage of inmates with low levels of literacy in comparison to the general population (2003). Among the 1.4 million adults in state and federal prisons in 2003, 78% of them performed at or below basic reading levels. In terms of this study “basic” means these readers can calculate the cost of multiple items on a menu but they cannot calculate the total cost of an office supply order using a catalogue and order form. It’s also worth noting that these statistics included inmates as young as 16.

In addition, in 2005 the Council of State Governments Justice Center developed a list of recommendations to help incarcerated adults prepare for successful re-entry into society after their sentences had been fulfilled. Among their recommendations they included assessing functional literacy skills of inmates “to identify possible gaps or barriers to success in the community” (Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council, 2005). At this stage of their experiences in the criminal justice system literacy struggles are recognized as a potential barrier to life success. However, ultimately waiting to rehabilitate individuals at this stage seems a long and costly option.

Were Jack’s literacy struggles a barrier to his success in school socially and academically to the point that they factored into his decisions that led to this event? It’s difficult to place sole blame on the system because research demonstrates students don’t always necessarily lack the ability to learn, but sometimes purposefully choose not to learn for various reasons (Hall, 2006; Moore & Onofrey, 2007). However, research also demonstrates that “agency develops as people communicate with others, internalize

strategies from their interactions, and apply these strategies to plan and regulate their own thinking and actions” (Moore & Cunningham, 2006, p. 137). In other words, the individual’s concept of their own ability to make choices, as well as what choices are available to them, results from dialogues with others, strategies they learn through these transactions, and the way these strategies work for or against them as they act.

The strategies Jack described for getting through school, dealing with teachers, and fulfilling his assignments—although not strategies I would advocate other students adopting—are in part the result of his interpretations of a culmination of dialogues.

Noddings (1988) explained it slightly differently when she wrote,

In a basic and crucial sense, each of us is a relationally defined entity and not a totally autonomous agent. Our goodness and our wickedness are both, at least in part, induced, supported, enhanced, or diminished by the interventions and influence of those with whom we are related. (p. 222)

Dialogues with his father, dialogues with teachers, interactions with other community members, and experiences at school. Surely the issues he struggled with became factors in his dialogues as he negotiated his perception of his identity as a student, reader, and member of the community.

To be clear, I am not pointing the finger of blame at the teachers or the school for Jack or any other students’ ultimate fate, but it seems impossible to ignore that their interactions with him mattered to some degree. The ideas he internalized about reading and education from home and school influenced his choices and beliefs in school. The frustration he felt as he continually failed and got into trouble significantly influenced the

way he viewed the things that took place in the classroom as well as the skills academic success valued, but that he lacked.

What would rehabilitation look like for a student who struggled in school like Jack? Is there a way to access his understandings and interests into the classroom? What kind of an education might offer engagement in authentic literacy experiences as well as help him learn skills for success in the future? Passing him through the grades all the way to graduation won't ultimately solve the problem. Sitting in remedial courses poorly disguised by the title "college prep" but lacking any students purposefully preparing for college doesn't provide the answer either. A review of the literature on tracking in US schools warns against the effects of separating and segmenting students based on ability level (Mayer, 2008), but keeping them in classes they aren't prepared to take doesn't work either.

As I sat in an airport one day watching Mike Rowe, creator and star of the Discovery Channel show *Dirty Jobs*, testify before the US Congress about the unfulfilled demand for vocational and skilled laborers in the US economy, I thought about Jack and his lawn business. Rowe talked about prevailing cultural prejudices against vocational and skilled labor positions that discourage many kids from even considering these jobs and schools from encouraging students from any other path besides college (Samaniego, 2011). As he spoke about how laborers who owned their own businesses often earned more annually than college graduates, I considered my own prejudices and wondered if the "college for all" picture we tried to paint in our school discouraged some students from doing what they really wanted to do, rather than preparing them for life after high school.

I remembered Jack commented that to own his own business he'd have to go to college, which meant "four more years of school that I'll never get out of cause it's a lot harder than [high school]." In his own way he described his place among recent statistics that stated "only about four in 10 Americans have obtained either an associate's or bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties" (Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011, p. 6).

Rowe explained, "in our effort to build up a college education, we've very quietly marginalized all other forms of knowledge" (Samaniego, 2011), and the Harvard School of Education agreed. In the "Pathways to Prosperity" report the authors explained

We fail these young people...because we have focused too exclusively on a few narrow pathways to success...Behaving as though four-year college is the only acceptable route to success clearly still works well for many young adults, especially students fortunate enough to attend highly selective colleges and universities. It also works well for affluent students who can often draw on family and social connections to find their way in the adult world. But it clearly does not work well for many, especially young men. (Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011, p. 11-13)

Considering the very real literacy skills and understandings necessary to do some of these jobs, particularly for students who don't want to go on to college, as well as the demand for individuals to fill these jobs, isn't this another point where as a society are missing the mark? Attitudes such as the ones Rowe described also contribute to the ideas students like Jack internalize about themselves as learners. Given the desire Jack had to run his own business, couldn't we create classes that brought literacy to life in meaningful ways

for students like him who chose to pursue other ambitions and careers? Changing means more than changing schools, it also means changing society.

Case Study: Anna

Similar to my experience with Jack, I initially wondered how my dialogues with Anna would significantly inform my work with struggling adolescent readers. Each day we met, she walked into the room radiating warmth and wearing a smile. With her caramel skin, large almond-shaped eyes and long flowing hair, she spoke confidently, but not conceited; at times she was even a little self-deprecating. As she told me about her family and her life, she and I both identified as oldest children and bonded over our mutual love of long distance running.

She talked of her interests and her family and usually spent the first five to ten minutes of our interviews giving me the general update on her life. She described herself as “a good kid,” and based on my observations of her in the classroom as well as on our interactions during our interviews, she never gave me any reason to doubt she meant it.

Anna filled her free time by volunteering, going to church, and spending time with her close friends and family. She also loved to dance and play sports, which should make it no surprise she considered PE her best subject. Recently she joined the track team where she competed in the 800-meter run and the mile, but she also intending on trying out for the cheer squad later that spring.

It would be easy to assume Anna enjoyed a carefree existence; however, her life had not been without some challenges. Like many other teenage girls, she struggled with issues of body image and self-esteem. She had definite ideas about what she wanted in the future, but the realities of life also challenged her ideas about what she could become.

Although her religion and her race existed as central components of how she constructed her identity, her dialogues with these elements caused her to question her individual worth almost as often as they reinforced it. And, like the other students in this study, she also struggled with reading.

Nieto's (2010) notion of cultural hybridity posits identity at the crossroads of the myriad of cultures and factors each individual espouses and inherits. For Anna, the factors she focused on the most in her narratives included her race, her religion, and her reading skills. But even among the groups with which she even partially identified, Anna's multiple interests and diverse personal background exacerbated her differences as well. As a result, she found herself constantly questioning her membership in certain groups, particularly when issues of race, religion, and reading ability collided.

For example, while many bi-racial teenagers growing up in rural Southern community experience tastes of racism, Anna, felt interrogated by the race question everyday. Anna's situation seemed particularly complex because, based on Anna's features, it's difficult to tell which races she might be and one hesitated to ask. She explained,

I hate when people ask, "What are you?" [I want to ask] "What are you?" ...Uh! It's so annoying after awhile. When I first came to this school a whole bunch of people asked me "speak Spanish" or like "Are you Hispanic?" or "Are you Indian?" or "Are you from the Middle East?" Maybe four or five people from Crenshaw County say, "Oh, you're mixed, aren't you?" And they're mixed, most of the time. I'm like, "Yes! Thank you!" It's annoying after awhile.

More than just annoying, this constant questioning forced Anna to constantly define herself in static, rather than dynamic terms. Or, as was often the case, she found herself responding to assumptions others made when they couldn't tell if she was White with darker skin, Latina, Indian, Black, or something else. People—even her friends—often asked if she was adopted. She regularly fielded comments like, “You’re mixed? Oh my gosh! I didn’t know that was possible!” and often drew stares. “When I’m at public places like IHOP and like Wal-Mart...when I’m with my mom they’re like—they just look at me like I’m trash.” With a White mother, White stepfather and White siblings, as well as a Black father and Black extended family she hadn’t seen in over 10 years, Anna answered questions about her skin color for others constantly, but also asked many questions in her own inner dialogues as well. Although this comment Anna made reflected her interpretation of their stares, her past experiences with strangers in public offered significant evidence for her reasoning and cause for concern.

Another preunderstanding Anna found it difficult to separate from her dialogues about herself as a reader included elements of her religious convictions. An important part of Anna’s culture included her Baptist religion, which played a significant role in shaping the way she lived her life. But even as a believer of “everything Baptist,” she couldn’t help but feel unjustly judged when a Baptist preacher told her she “was a mistake and shouldn’t really have been born” because of her biracial parentage. This statement, and others like it, caused her to not only dialogue with questions about her racial identity, but about her religious identity as well. To complicate things further, although Anna saw herself as a Christian, she also saw truth in other religions. She explained, “I’d call myself Baptist and Muslim...I believe in everything Baptist, but I

have some parts of me that are Muslim.” These parts included her belief in fasting and participation in Ramadan with friends. Allowing for these different parts of herself helped her reconcile differences and overlaps among all the cultures that contributed to her identity.

But whatever the questions she encountered, Anna seemed to filter each through her philosophy towards running that she described as also her philosophy towards life and reading. She summarized it in her own words as recorded during one of our interviews when she told me, “Just keep trying and you’ll love it. Sometimes you just gotta suck it up and get over it.”

Removed from the context of Anna’s own experiences, these words lack empathy and I questioned the true universal nature of their application. But for her, these words were spoken in earnest; this was the philosophy that helped Anna worked through struggles in her own life. Whether she was referring to sports or reading or encounters with other people, she referenced this idea on multiple occasions during our interviews. However, based on the content of our interviews, she also seemed to realize the complexity of applying this kind of a philosophy, as well as the numerous inner dialogues required for her to keep trying and get to a point where she felt competent enough to leave her struggles behind her.

As I approached our interviews, I did so with her reading struggles as my central focus. However, for Anna these struggles did not exist separate and distinct from the other elements of her life. Her inner dialogues about race and religion and the way they shaped her identity transacted with her reading challenges. Although these dialogues possessed the potential to reinforce or challenge negative stereotypes she held about

herself, they also held the power to transform these stereotypes that, in some ways, held her bound. Interestingly, I discovered Anna attributed many of her latest understandings about herself in terms of race, religion and reading ability to a literacy class for struggling readers that she took the previous semester. Her discussions about books and ideas in this class, as well as improvements in her actual ability to read and feel successful as a reader played a dramatic part in her most recent narratives.

The section that follows details Anna's life and literacy experiences from elementary school through high school and shows the significant role reading and school played in her life. The first section will be followed by an analysis of narratives that influenced Anna's perceptions of her identity as a reader and a learner. Each of these narratives demonstrates the role of the dialogical self in the way Anna made sense of her experiences and abilities. Finally, a discussion of Anna's narratives will conclude by exploring lingering questions left by Anna's dialogues and the issues these questions raise for literacy researchers and classroom teachers alike.

Early Life & Reading Experiences

Anna's spent most of her growing up years living with her younger brother and her mom, who was still a teenager herself, enrolled in high school, when she gave birth to Anna. Anna described her mom as strict, but felt this kind of upbringing fostered in Anna an independent spirit she felt proud of. She emphasized the importance of working hard to be independent and explained, "I never ask for help. That's just who I am...my mom was never like, 'Hey, I'll make you dinner.' No. You make it yourself." But despite this commitment to independence, Anna also described her family as loving and caring. She recalled with fondness memories of lying on the couch or in her mom's bed

at night as her mother read books like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1983) to her and her little brother.

Anna loved being read to, but, as she explained, “I’ve never been like a reader to read at home that much.” She told me she learned how to read in a private pre-kindergarten class where she did well, and in first grade school remembered her teacher read books like the *Junie B Jones* (2000) series. “I got into those books. I still read them,” she added. Anna loved reading little books and having teachers read out loud; she even recalled her second grade a classroom where the teacher built a reading tree house for students to climb into and read, if they were good.

Anna was never tested for reading disabilities or learning struggles, but she told me, “No one knew about me not being able to read good.” This may have been—in part—because she acted like the ideal student. “I was the teacher’s pet until fourth grade,” she explained proudly. Although research demonstrates a long list of behaviors students often assume to mask their struggles with reading—including disrupting the reading process, avoiding schoolwork, and avoiding the teacher (Jones, 2005), little research discusses attempts by students to mask their reading disabilities by building relationships with teachers or through good behavior. However, Anna, as well as other students in this study, appeared to have done just that. By creating an amiable relationship with their teachers and instructors, these students earned the praise, encouragement and support from the teacher that, at least in Anna’s case, she felt allowed her to hide her struggles.

But in fourth grade, things changed. Anna described her teacher as someone who complained about Anna’s work and was often unhappy with her. “I knew she didn’t like

me and I always got in trouble in class for some reason,” Anna explained. “I don’t think I was good—as good—in fourth grade, like reading wise and smart wise.” However, Anna conceded her own behavior played a role in this struggle as well. Rather than hiding her reading struggles with positive behavior, or perhaps because the teacher called challenged Anna concerning her struggles, Anna resorted to more traditional avoidance techniques for dodging reading opportunities and exercises in class.

I was pretty sneaky...I would always say ‘go to clinic,’...and then be like, “blah, blah, blah, I have a stomach, I have a headache.”...I did not want to be in that class. And that’s the reason I had to go to summer school, cause I didn’t like her. I probably failed because of that. And I had to go to summer school, but I passed with good grades, so I think it was just the teacher.

Like other students I talked to, Anna used complaints of physical illness to get out of class. Although this proved only a temporary and ultimately detrimental short-term solution to her difficulties, she still did it on a regular basis. She also cited her relationship with the teacher as a reason for her poor performance. As a result Anna spent the summer after fourth grade in summer school. She feared she might not pass.

However, with the help of summer school Anna moved on to fifth grade, only slightly nervous reports of her performance the year before might follow her. Fifth grade went well—at least in terms of her grades and relationship with her teacher—and she proceeded to middle school the next fall.

But Anna still didn’t enjoy reading on her own, even though she occasionally engaged in voluntary literacy activities. In middle school Anna still didn’t read much, but she did mention a book she tried to read that she found in her grandma’s attic.

Essentially, Anna started reading it, liked it, and lost it. In seventh grade when one of her best friends committed suicide Anna began writing in a journal. “All I would do was write,” she told me. Even though she hasn’t written in it for a while or told many people about it, she explained, “I just like writing. I think it’s fun and it gets out my feelings. If I’m like sad or something, instead of doing something that I shouldn’t do, I try to write.”

Anna’s use of journal writing, which she explained as an outlet to work through her feelings about her friend’s death, demonstrated one way in which literacy functioned not just as a school mandated activity, but as a sort of social practice (Hagood, Alvermann. & Heron-Hruby, 2010). Although not technically a part of the literacy practices she drew on to be successful in school, writing contributed in significant ways to the construction of her identity. More importantly to Anna, it helped her deal with her feelings about her friend’s death in a manner she felt was emotionally and physically healthy.

When Anna’s mom remarried a man with three kids a few years ago, the two families moved together to Barrow County where they found a house that would allow everyone to live under one roof. Anna started eighth grade in a new school, and although she still didn’t read much in eighth grade, she remembered reading three books in language arts that she loved: *The Giver* (1993), *Gathering Blue* (2000) and *Messenger* (2004) by Lois Lowry. However, her sporadic interests in a few book series and her out of school literacy practices thus far had failed to hook Anna as a reader. At the beginning of ninth grade she didn’t classify herself as a reader and struggled in school.

In addition, her literacy challenges didn’t end with the school day. Although no one at school besides her fourth grade teacher hassled Anna because of her reading

challenges—“they knew better,” she told me—at church she struggled when asked to read scripture verses aloud. In fact, like Sarah and Braydon, she cited these moments as evidence that she was a poor reader. Anna explained,

I thought I was dumb, really...I’ve always struggled with reading ... everyone at my church, when I would have to read in front of them, they would always say something. ... Like every Sunday, in Sunday school, I have to read like a verse or whatever and everyone’s just looking at me because I can’t pronounce words and all that stuff. I mean, how am I supposed to know what this word that no one’s used in like a thousand years means? ...I mean, everyone else reads so perfectly.

Ties between churches and the perpetuation of community literacy practices go back to the days of colonial America (Monaghan, 2005; Smith, 2002). Churches have long been sites that perpetuated literacy practices, valuing certain ways of reading. But more recently, Gee (2008) described churches as secondary Discourse communities—like schools, community organizations, and governments—where certain literacy practices are learned and valued, including things beyond reading skills like values, attitudes, and ideas.

For Anna and other students in this study, church existed as a Discourse community where certain literacy practices played a regular role in religious life. In Anna’s case, individuals read scriptures out loud in front of small and large groups on a regular basis, with little or no preparation. When she struggled to do this successfully, she experienced feeling of failure as a reader and as a member of this Discourse community. Because she struggled with something valued as an important practice in this community, she felt her ability to contribute as a valuable member of this community

to be in question. In addition, comments, looks, and disapproving glances from other members of this community exacerbated these feelings.

Building on the foundation of narratives such as these, it's easy to understand why Anna struggled. However, they also exemplify her strength as she continued to work through similar challenges. Throughout it all, my dialogues with Anna kept coming back to a few themes that she was dialoging with on multiple levels: her race, her religion, and her reading abilities. I can't say that she consciously chose to engage in any of these dialogues, but the context of her situation and her life made these dialogues significant ones. Her identity was constantly under interrogation in a few regards, including race and religion. But each of these issues found a place into her new relationship with reading and books.

Anna's Dialogical-Self Moments

Anna's narratives offered unique glimpses of the dialogical self because she so recently seemed to have started thinking about herself as a reader in different ways. In fact, as we talked, she often described herself in what I call "before and after" terms. Although the complexity of the dialogical self would trouble the notion of then versus now, the way Anna talked about the differences in her personal views of herself revealed recent shifts in the way she viewed her identity. She would talk about her attitudes, actions or inner dialogues from a perspective she espoused before she took the reading class, and then from another perspective she developed part way through her class or after the class ended. In a way unique from the other participants, her narratives demonstrate the way her inner dialogues shifted as a result of a few key factors: her literacy class, her teacher, and the texts she read.

“He Taught Us That We Could Read Anything”

Although before it began Anna expressed a hesitancy to enroll in a reading class, she felt like she connected with the teacher and that he understood his students, or at least made efforts to realize where they were coming from. She explained that the teacher, Mr. Larson, was “just really understanding.” But more than that, “he taught us that we could read anything.” In fact, she credits this teacher for ultimately getting her to like reading and for helping her and other students develop the confidence that helped them realize that, with effort, they could work through books and read them successfully.

As discussed previously, teachers play a major role in the construction of learner identities (Moje, 2000; Noddings, 1984). As she conceptualized herself as a student before and after the reading class, Anna used her internal dialogues to differentiate between her before and after attitudes. But this shift reflected more than just her response to reading, but also the way she perceived herself. She explained, “I used to think I was really stupid and stuff cause not many people thought I was smart—except my mom and she has to think I’m smart...But I actually feel smart now.”

Although Anna loved her mother, the value Anna placed on her mother’s assessment of Anna’s academic abilities amounted to little in terms of how she viewed herself as a student. Unlike Sarah and Braydon, both of whom relied on their mothers’ opinions significantly in order to construct their sense of self, Anna discounted her mother’s opinions. To her, moms had to see their kids as smart. But, having a teacher position Anna as smart made a difference.

Johnston (2004) explained language serves a constitutive purpose, meaning it can create identities and help students consider new ones. In classrooms, the language a

teacher uses helps students position themselves as certain kinds of people. On multiple occasions Anna referred to the language her teacher used as helpful in seeing herself differently. The use of specific phrases, inviting questions made a significant difference in the way Anna participated and viewed herself as a learner in this class.

Mr. Larson's comments didn't always consist of warm affirmations, but Anna wanted to be challenged. "You're not really learning anything if you're not challenged. You're just being average," she explained as she expressed her desire for teachers to help her learn. Like other students in this study, Anna wanted to be challenged, but as a struggling learner didn't want to be overwhelmed by tasks beyond her ability (Margolis, 2003). For example, Mr. Larson asked her to read books she considered hard and asked her to practice skills she didn't think she possessed, like reading out loud. However, these challenges took place in an environment where she felt supported and capable of learning. Ultimately, Anna wanted a teacher who would push her to improve, but not one who openly criticized her or failed to offer her guidance as to how to be better.

As Johnston (2004) explained, "[The teacher] makes sense for [him]self, and offers a meaning for [his] students. [He] imputes intentions and offers possible worlds, positions, and identities" (p. 5). Interacting with her teacher in this way that helped Anna reconstruct her identity as a reader. Specifically, the feedback he offered her became a part of the dialogues she internalized about her growth and ability as a reader. The way he positioned her as an agent in her own growth as a reader helped Anna construct a new narrative about herself.

Seeking out feedback from the teacher became key. Anna explained she didn't receive much feedback that semester in any class but her literacy course. "I only have

feedback for Mr. Larson's class last semester...[but] he made me feel smart—because it was never like bad things.” She saw this feedback as significant because of the power her teacher yielded with his station and title. As I watched Anna in her literature class, the teacher did take a genuine interest in her. She explained the comments he made helped her “feel smart” as she worked through the challenges she encountered as a reader and allowed her to act as an agent in her own learning.

Anna contrasted the feedback she received from Mr. Larson with that she received from the student teacher in this same class. Her dislike for the student teacher came from a few interactions she cited. Once the student teacher told her she didn't write the letter “M” properly as an upper and lower case letter, which embarrassed her in front of the whole class. In another instance she quoted the phrase he used to give directions in class as off putting. Specifically, when he told students, “You can and you will do this,” it turned Anna off from the class.

It becomes important to pay attention to Anna's reaction to the language the student teacher used. In both instances the student teacher took a very authoritarian stance in the classroom. Rather than positioning Anna as a student capable of exercising her agency, he minimized the choices Anna made about her own education (Johnston, 2004). Like others who Anna reacted so strongly against, he defined her in terms that left little room for dialogue.

I doubt that the student teacher realized the significance of his words. As a new figure in the classroom, he most likely felt the need to assert his role as the teacher or may not have realized the influence of his word choice. But for Anna, and learners like her, the message was clear. The words teachers use become a part of the inner dialogues

students play and replay in their minds. The words they choose and the way these words position students influence the way they construct their narrative identities (Bakhtin, 1981). It becomes essential for teachers to incorporate language use that enhances student agency purposefully work to position students as active learners.

In each of these examples, literal dialogues with teachers challenged Anna's notions about her own potential for success. Her teacher existed as a key agent in the way she challenged her narratives. Amidst these dialogues she found a space to re-create her identity as a reader by not only developing skills, but also by realizing the ways others viewed her as a learner in terms of her successes, contrasted to her own understandings of her identity which she viewed in terms of her struggles.

“If You Skin Us, We’re All the Same”

During the course of this semester the books she read became a means for Anna to engage with the constant questions thrown at her concerning her race. She was able to identify books that helped her think about the issues she was facing because the characters in the books faced similar issues. These books spoke to her in the way Steinbeck described when he wrote:

We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say—and to feel—
“Yes, that’s the way it is, or at least that’s the way I feel it. You’re not as alone as you thought. (as cited in Pearce, 2006, p. 79)

For Anna, the stories she read over the course of her reading class held this power.

Research on adolescent literacy describes the kind of connections Steinbeck alluded to above as helping readers explore challenges, situations, and occurrences in

one's own life (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988; Lesesne, 2006; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). This kind of approach to reading, sometimes referred to as reading autobiographically, offers students opportunities to make sense of their own lives through texts (Lesesne, 2006). Stories that allow students to see their own experiences in a book give them opportunities to reflect on their own situations. In numerous instances, Anna indicated the literature she read offered her ways to view her own challenges and make sense of her own experiences.

As mentioned before, one of the primary issues Anna consistently dialoged with was race. Anna alluded to the racism she encountered in her small town on numerous occasions, but one of the most racist experiences occurred in a friend's neighborhood as she listened to accusations made about her by a man she didn't even know. She explained,

I was walking with my friend around the neighborhood and [this guy] just came up to my friend and was like "Hey, who's your ugly Mexican? Why won't you tell her to go back to the f----n border?" And I'm just sitting here like, "Wow, you're so cool. You don't even know me and I'm not even Hispanic, so now you just sound like an idiot." And then my friend was a big mouth and was like "She's not Mexican. She's Black." So then he stared even more! He was like, "well then, why don't you tell her to go back to the ghetto where she belongs?" Yeah. ...when people say stupid things to me ...I take it personally, but I'm not going to make it worse by telling him something because I'm better than that.

For Anna, little dialogue existed between her and the individuals who sputtered these kinds of hateful phrases. She chose to respond in outward silence, but she still inwardly

pondered these words. As evidenced by her frequent allusions to comments like the one above, she thought about her race and how it defined her—on her own terms and in the terms of others—on numerous occasions.

However, the books she read in her literacy class offered her ways to think about these issues and offered a forum to consider solutions to her own dilemmas. Anna described a graphic novel, one of the first ones they read in the class, called *American Born Chinese* (2006), as one she connected to because of the issues of race it examined. This book, which begins as three seemingly disconnected stories, results in an interwoven plot that brings together the main characters. But the stories that mattered to her centered on issues of race and prejudice and resonated with her own experiences. For her, *American Born Chinese* was a story about “prejudice and judging people who were not like you are.” Anna explained,

My whole life pretty much...I’ve been judged. Like I’ve been told by Baptist preachers that I was a mistake and I shouldn’t really have been born because I’m—well—biracial, or mixed...I’ve been told a whole bunch of things. I’ve been told I’m Hispanic and they’ll be like “hey, go over the border”...I get stuff like that all the time. And you know, this book...it’s about this Chinese person who was from China but he like moved to America with his Chinese culture and everything...he moved to a new school outside Chinatown that was filled with people who were like ...“don’t eat my cats.” They’d be like saying that to the kid...and it seemed really hard for him.

Reading about the racism experienced by this Chinese American teenager helped Anna consider her own experiences. Although the character was not female or mixed race,

others constantly made assumptions about him based on their own stereotypical understandings about his culture.

Rosenblatt (1995) encouraged this kind of reading because it allowed students to “come across people like oneself or people with problems similar to one’s own,” and reinforces to the reader that his or her “situation is not unique, that it at least parallels what others evidently understand and have lived through” offering some perspective. “Through seeing his problems apart from himself, he is helped to think and feel more clearly about them” (p. 191). In this way the experiences of this character spoke to Anna as she dialogued with this text and found herself in his story.

Anna made similar connections to her own life when she read another book, *Speak* (1999), for this same literacy class. In this book, Melinda, a 14 year-old freshman, found herself ostracized on the first day of high school because she called the cops on a party earlier that summer. But because of her silence, the rest of the school doesn’t realize she only called because she was raped by one of the most popular boys in school. Besides the main story, this book offers biting social commentary on high school life and often appeals to young adults. So, when Anna told me she enjoyed it, I wasn’t surprised.

However, her explanation as to why she identified with the main character suggested Anna spent more time philosophically speculating about the issues in this book than I assumed. She told me she really connected with the main character because “When [the students] didn’t even know [Melinda’s] story, they were judging her because she called the police. You should ask someone before you start picking on them for what someone else said.” For Anna, this book helped her make sense of her own experiences.

Although she had not been a victim of rape, nor was she White or middle class, Anna did know what it felt like to be judged by people who only knew part of her story.

In both situations, the connections she drew between her own life and the stories she read made all the difference. Anna explained these books resonated with her because they spoke to “How life was for me growing up. Judged. Made fun of because of who I am.” But reading these stories offered her chances to project herself into the characters and experiences she read about, thus enlarging her capacity to understand her own situation. In a sense, these stories became parties in her imaginal dialogues, dialogues that ultimately allowed her to re-examine her own situation and possible responses (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

Rosenblatt (1995) alluded to this kind of connection with and meaning making through texts when she wrote, “The desire for self understanding and for knowledge about people provides an important avenue into literature” (p. 52). The ways others defined Anna, both implied and explicitly stated, forced their way into her inner dialogues. But reading these stories offered her a chances project herself into the characters and experiences she read about, thus enlarging her capacity to understand her own situation.

Recognizing similarities between her own experiences and those of the characters in the books she read created a meaningful purpose for reading in Anna’s life. They offered her ways to re-conceptualize the way she defined herself by race and they way others defined her as well. “I’ve had so many people ask me what race I am, but it’s like ‘does it matter? I don’t think so.’ I just say I’m other.” To clarify I asked if it was because she didn’t want to explain her situation to people, but she explained,

[My race] is too many. I'm European and I'm like British, Scottish, Irish, German—all that good stuff. Then like, I just don't like people asking me cause it's none of their concern. Race doesn't matter to me. It's just a skin color. If you skin us, we're all the same.

For Anna, the texts she read for class helped her see what Rosenblatt (1995) meant when she wrote, “Literature makes comprehensible the myriad of ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers” (p. 6). The books Anna read in her literacy class allowed her to see how others dealt with challenges similar to her own concerning racism and identity. They offered her an avenue to consider her own experiences with racism and unfair judgment, as well as opportunities to think about her own responses. Dialoguing with the characters in these texts, even though these dialogues were not of a literal kind, helped her view her own position from a new perspective. In addition, and perhaps most importantly in terms of her progress as a reader, exposure to these stories helped Anna connect with reading at a critical time and motivated her to increase the amount she read and the texts she read.

“This Class Changed Me”

Initially Anna hated reading aloud, and, as she mentioned earlier, she avoided doing it whenever possible. However, in her literacy class everyone was expected to practice reading out loud, so even though she was nervous and didn't want others to make fun of her, she accepted the challenge. Ultimately this risk taking paid off because she learned skills that helped her read better. At the time of our interviews she felt confident in her abilities to read in front of a group. “I used to read like really slow, like I was in second grade or something, and then—now I can read like fast.” Making a distinction

between her abilities before and after this class, she presented two different views of her sense of self as a reader.

Anna also credited her improved spelling, fluency, and increased desire to read to the work she did in her reading class. She explained:

Like, I just—I feel like smarter. Cause like now I know—cause they always taught us those skills, like listen, sound the word out—I never did that. That just looks so—that just looks weird to me...if I did it. No one else did it, so I just didn't do it. I wasn't going to be like trying to sound the word out. It's not happening. But now I feel smarter cause I can actually read pretty good.

Formerly, Anna's desire to blend in with her classmates trumped her desire to read well. In the past she refused to slow down, to sound out words, or engage in other practices that would support her reading ability but identify her as different. This was not unlike the struggling middle school reader described by Hall (2009) whose "goal to influence the identity her peers constructed for her created a paralyzing situation" as she directed her attention to sending the social cues that marked her as a good reader rather than focusing her efforts on developing her reading skills (p. 301). But in hindsight, Anna saw the benefits of developing reading skills outweighed the benefits of blending in for a semester.

Interestingly, after her reading class Anna also found herself less concerned with the way others might have viewed her when she read out loud.

I'm a good reader, but I'm not like the best. I can't read all those big words and stuff. ...I don't care what people think about me, but I used to, but now I'm just

like, “Whatever, I’m not going to change for someone who thinks my hairs not right or I don’t read good.” I’m not going to change. It’s not worth it.

Her dialogues at this stage pointed her desire to resist conforming to the group just to be like others around her. Her words indicated that she didn’t value the ideas of her peers or strangers at church above her own desires to learn. She no longer saw herself hiding from her perceptions of the judgments of others, but took risks to better herself. Although still working her way up to totally assuming this identity, her actions indicated her desire to do what she thought would be best for her, regardless of what others might have thought.

Anna’s dialogues also indicated she viewed opportunities to read out loud as opportunities to challenge others’ ideas about her as a reader. Reading out loud moments that used to be problematic for Anna now became opportunities to re-author stories about herself as a reader. She saw these moments as opportunities to challenge other people’s opinions and prove to them they made false judgments about her and her abilities. One of her comments in conjunction with this idea demonstrated her inner dialogues on this subject. She remarked:

I used to have to read in church and like I was so slow and everyone would just be like “Oh gosh, she’s going to read again.” But now I can read, so I’m like “Ha, ha, lady, I can read now.”

Pay particular attention to the way she positioned the woman from her church that commented on Anna’s reading ability. Rather than considering this observation as a statement of fact or one that Anna used to characterize herself, she responded to it in relation to her newly honed skills. The dialogues with individuals at her church still

remained ingrained in Anna's narratives. However, Anna's response to these comments—whether real or imaginal—reflected Anna's new understandings about herself as a reader. She no longer felt afraid to read aloud.

Ultimately, Anna also recognized the role her agency played in the shift in her reader identity. She explained, "I guess you could say I was tired of not being the smart kid... I just wanted to be a smart kid." I can't say that Jack or Maurice or other students who also struggled enjoyed "not being the smart kid," but it is interesting to note that Anna was one of the only participants who acknowledged her own role in changing her narratives and taking initiative to change her abilities. It's not that some of the others who struggled blamed teachers, but these students either didn't directly indicate they thought they could take an active role in bringing about change or they hadn't identified ways these changes could occur based on their own efforts. Although Anna didn't credit herself solely for the transition, she did acknowledge her own agency played at least a part.

However, she also recognized the significance of the skills she learned in her reading class as well as the efforts of her teacher. She didn't view herself as a student who had everything figured out, but she knew she was improving and she knew this course played a role in challenging her former notions about herself. "Before this class I hated [reading]," she explained, "and now I really like it. [This class] changed me."

Lingering Questions Left by Anna's Dialogues

Anna's dialogues about herself as a reader and a learner, particularly in relation to the recent transformation she felt she had undergone, offer hope for teachers working

with struggling readers and students who challenged by literacy tasks. But her narratives also alluded to issues in need of further interrogation for classroom teachers and students.

One of the most significant questions remaining from Anna's dialogues centered on the way she managed to fly under the radar of her teachers, until fourth grade when she felt her teacher didn't like her. Darling-Hammond (1997) wrote, "Relationships matter for learning... Teachers' connections to and understanding of their students help those students develop the commitment and capacity to surmount the hurdles that accompany ambitious learning" (p. 134). Did this fourth grade teacher really not like Anna, or was the teacher trying to call her attention to Anna's struggles in order to help her? Had the teacher just forgotten the important role of relationships? In the past, had Anna really tricked her other teachers into thinking she was a good student, or had they just not said anything about her academic difficulties?

Before this time, Anna explained she had always been the "teacher's pet" and maintained a good relationship with her teachers so they never questioned her abilities. After fourth grade she resumed her role gaining the teacher's favor and mentioned they rarely realized how she struggled. I wonder if Anna's willingness to comply with the routines and requests of school allowed her to mask her reading difficulties behind exemplary behavior, just as Jack's attempted to distract or frazzle teachers in order to hide his. Although research has identified acting out as an indicator of reading struggles, little has been written about students who use good behavior for this same purpose. How many more students in our classrooms are like Anna, particularly compliant and overly helpful girls, who go unidentified and unaided in their reading struggles?

Anna's case also raises questions about the role of religion in the cultivation of literacy practices among adolescent readers. Although new literacies studies draw attention to the role out school literacy practices play in the development of students' in-school literacies, few studies focus primarily on religion. Among those that do, the focus mainly lies in the examination of how teachers use this cultural capital students bring to class in order to serve their students. Church-based Discourses involve "an intricate network of ways of talking, acting, and valuing that can be quite pervasive in the lives" of church members, both in and out of church buildings (Gee, 2008, p. 174). As such, much remains to be learned about how religious experiences encourage or discourage students develop their reader identities.

Another interesting issue Anna's discussions bring to the forefront concerns the ability of students to be meta-aware of the dialogues in which they are engaged. Rosenblatt wrote, "As we become more clearly aware of forces that patter our lives, we acquire a certain power to resist or modify these forces" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 252). Throughout our interviews Anna constantly referred to comments made by her family members, her peers, her teachers, and other members of the community, as well as ideas she inferred from the TV, books, and society. But at the end of our interviews Anna explained how even the things we discussed in our interviews "replay[ed in my head] all throughout the day. [I'd be] Like 'Whoa, I've never thought of it before or thought about it at this point of view.'" This meta-awareness helped Anna see how, to an extent, she was caught in a certain story about herself both racially and academically. But, once she realized this, she possessed the power to change it. Viewed through a Bakhtinian lens, students interpret and reinterpret these dialogues constantly; Anna's case reminds us of

this. However, much remains to be discovered about how students can access these dialogues to transform their identities and how teachers can help them to do it.

Perhaps most significantly, Anna's frequent references to the power of the literature itself in her inner dialogues demands a consideration of the role of texts in the construction of the self. In his book *Teaching Stories: An Anthology on the Power of Learning and Literature*, Robert Coles (1989) described the potential fiction holds as a classroom tool to get at the heart of issues such as race, class, gender, and socioeconomic differences. He explained how stories helped his students "to look around...not only at 'others,' but at what they were doing with those 'others' in their minds" (p. 47-48). Fiction offers a way to examine the experiences of others, as well as our own, through story.

In this sense, fiction creates a way to connect to others and to open up dialogue about difficult to breach subjects. Students in high school classrooms are learning in the midst of constructing their identities as readers, but also as individuals defined by issues of race, sexuality, social class, to name only a few other factors. For these students, Anna's narratives suggest that fiction might offer the potential to open up new possibilities for reconstructing identities, particularly for students who struggle as readers. Not only do students learn from the stories themselves, but the students' desires to transact with the stories gives them the exposure to and practice with texts that they need in order to develop the skills for long-term literacy success. This process perpetuates itself and drives students to seek out more of the insights literature has to offer as well as to continue to help students increase their literacy skills through the physical act of reading.

Case Study: Maurice

Each day Maurice walked into class before the bell rang wearing a bright, multicolored hoody pulled up over his short Afro. Almost effortlessly, he'd roll his backpack off of his shoulders and then slide into his seat on the back row. As I sat in his class observing him day after day, he rarely spoke in front of the whole group or even to specific individuals. He'd smile at jokes and occasionally laugh quietly at his classmates' antics, but mostly he watched the teacher without saying anything at all. As I got to know Maurice better through our interviews, I often wondered if his teachers realized that this young man, who barely said a word in class and who seemed to do the least amount of work he possibly could to get by, used to be the kind of kid only years before who would never shut his mouth and could challenge someone like Jack in a battle of king of the classroom.

Growing up he'd bounced around from school to school in New York, Atlanta, and a handful of other cities. Although he admitted to slacking off, he felt his years of experience in so many different places helped him learn how to do school right. Throughout elementary he had goofed off, had fun with his friends, got in lots of trouble, then found ways to work hard for a few weeks in order to pass the end of year tests and get promoted to the next grade. He worked it down to a system and this plan worked relatively well for him until fifth grade when he got held back. But the next year and throughout middle school things continued as usual, with him spending most of his time at school loud mouthing and messing around with friends. "I was the person who always got in trouble—I couldn't shut up," he explained.

But by the time he reached high school, he realized his plan wasn't really working for him anymore, so he made some changes. When I met him as a 16-year old freshman, he described himself as "more quiet than ever" because, based on his past experiences, he now thought silence might be the key to his success. "When I was in eighth grade I did nothing but talk, like that's all I did. So now I'm in high school and I don't talk to anybody."

However, this new plan only partially worked as well. Ironically, now that he seemed willing to work, he only found himself struggling. "It's hard to work on more than one class," he explained. "Since I have four classes, it's harder to work on all of those classes." Subjects that had never seemed difficult suddenly became hard and he found it tough to concentrate on more than one subject at a time. Or, perhaps these subjects now seemed particularly difficult because concentrating on the work and actually trying to do it made him even more aware of his reading struggles.

The amount of reading he had to do proved challenging, in part, because Maurice always struggled with reading in school. In elementary he received special assistance in a pullout program for students who had trouble reading. Working in these small groups proved beneficial, but not enough to equip him with the skills he needed to keep up with the sheer volume of work required of someone in high school. But Maurice held tight to one of the skills he learned there—reading out loud to himself—and tried to go home at night and complete reading assignments by going down to the basement where he could shut out his mom, step dad, little brother and two little sisters, and read out loud to himself.

It also seemed counterintuitive that Maurice struggled so much because my interviews with him painted a picture of a child with an unusual, yet rich literacy history that alluded to some unleashed potential. With the exception of the kind of books found in his literature classes, Maurice's stories revealed a life filled with literacy practices. Whether his stories consisted of the occasional anime graphic I'd catch him working on in class or those he represented through the films he made in his video productions class, he had ideas to share and stories to tell. Some of these stories also found their way into the lyrics he wrote for his deathcore band, an interest I found surprising for the seemingly mellow, even-keeled individual I observed. Granted, the lyrics he wrote might not seem like the most poetic of expressions when mixed with the pig squeals and drumbeats he performed, but they were still lyrics. But most of all, he demonstrated the potential to apply literacy skills in the research he conducted to make sense of the role-playing games (RPG) he played on his gaming system.

Maurice's stories were comprised of a complex combination of individuals, practices, and experiences. The stories that follow detail some of the stories he shared with me about his early reading memories, as well as his experiences with reading and learning in high school. Of all of my participants, particularly the high school students, Maurice seemed the most forthcoming and the most candid when we spoke. While Jack shared his experiences freely, he didn't seem quite ready to be challenged on his educational philosophies. Similarly, Anna's recent academic triumphs seemed to allow her to willingly share her successes and talk about what she felt anxious to pursue. However, Maurice almost seemed as if he existed in limbo, trying to move past his

struggles, constantly attempting to work through them, but never quite getting to where he needed to be.

Early Reading Experiences & Video Games

Although Maurice's first reading memories didn't exactly consist of stories by Dr. Seuss or *Good Night Moon* (1992), his face broke into a smile when I asked him if he remembered reading when he was a little kid. He told me,

When I was little, my dad would always play role-playing games around me—all the time. Like, he would put me in this little playpen and just make me watch him play role-playing games. And that kind of taught me about a lot of stuff. And like somewhat reading, but not a lot, but I kind of got some reading from that.

Cause all you do in role-playing games is read.

Maurice went on to explain how his father would position Maurice in a location where he could see the screen and read the text boxes at the top of the screen aloud. Granted, the kind of father-son reading moments Maurice described aren't exactly what Jim Trelease (1979/2006) was suggesting as he advocated reading aloud to children, but these moments Maurice remembered with his father did seem to have a similar affect. This early exposure to role-playing games hooked Maurice and he spent a great deal of time trying to conquer games.

Role playing games, or RPG as they are commonly called, engage the player in the story by allowing him or her to make decisions on behalf of the character they select and assume control of in the game. Maurice described them to me by explaining, they're "like a story—it's like a big book made into a game. But it's like there's like a box at the top of the screen and you've got to read and it's like...a comic book almost." Although I

will discuss this idea extensively later on in this case study, right now it proves sufficient to say this reading experience Maurice described, however unique, played a formative role in the way he viewed literacy.

But beyond these games and into the realms of the classroom, Maurice struggled. “I haven't been so good at reading since like first grade,” he told me. He remembered receiving extra help during pullout sessions with a tutor. “I had to read and stuff with her, like everybody would be reading a book in class and they'd take me out to go—it was like me and three people—and we'd go and read with her.”

Although Maurice knew he received special help, he said he never felt embarrassed about it and he enjoyed the individual attention he was given at this time. “I felt very good at like one-on-one type of learning; it's hard for me to learn with like a big class... We each took turns. Even her.... Nobody gave me a hard time. It was good.” In this environment, he felt supported and no one teased him about his reading difficulties. In these sessions the tutor and the students would read together, which he particularly enjoyed because he felt he understood the material better when someone else read to him.

However, Maurice contrasted these moments with the time he spent in his other classes. Unlike the pullout classes, he didn't like reading in his regular education classroom because “it was always so frustrating.” He felt this especially when asked to read out loud in the class.

I would feel like [it] was making me embarrassed...Most of the time it was hard for me to read and I messed up on the word or something and [my classmates] would laugh so I just didn't want to read out loud.

Like other students in this study, Maurice retained vivid memories of the reactions of his peers when he read out loud. In each case, the laughing and the teasing existed as regular parts of these memories, ultimately causing the student who struggled to shut down and choose not to take the risk to read. These sorts of response echo research by Hall (2007) that described readers who often engaged in habits detrimental to their progress as readers because of concerns focused on the opinions of their peers. Eventually, Maurice, like many of the other students I've discussed, also started faking sick so he could get out of having to read in class and risk embarrassment in front of his classmates.

But beyond these incidents, Maurice couldn't recall many other early memories of school or of reading. "I just remember that I knew how to read. I don't remember anything about learning about it." He didn't even remember most of the books he read. However, one stuck out in his mind that he read in sixth or seventh grade: *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961). He explained:

I just remember one book out of all the books I read because it was my favorite book...*Where the Red Fern Grows*...I comprehended it more than any book. I don't know, I just really liked it when I read it. It was really great to me. Plus I was like—I was in the most trouble I even been in at home, so I had nothing else to do but read—and I read that all day and all night until I finished it...and then I rented the movie. And then I watched the move and it made me mad because it was nothing like the book.

Pay particular attention to the way Maurice described his experiences in reference to this book that he loved. He described comprehending it, reading it all day and all night, and even feeling mad when he rented the movie and it didn't correlate with the book. His

description relates to the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and teacher and theorist Louise Rosenblatt (2005).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described the state of “flow” as the state of being so involved in an experience that few other elements matter. Practitioner researchers (Atwell, 2007; Gallagher, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) refer to this state as the ultimate goal for students as they read. Similarly, Rosenblatt (2005) wrote extensively about the aesthetic response of readers, including the way students’ emotions and feelings correspond to the texts. For Maurice, his connections and responses to the text elicited just such a reaction, including even feelings of anger when he rented the movie version of the book and found it didn’t correspond to the original text in all the ways he had hoped.

Although Maurice never articulated what exactly this book did for him that others did not, he still responded. Connecting with and immersing themselves in a text in the ways Csikszentmihalyi described theoretically and which seemed to correspond with what Maurice described personally, resulted in the optimal reading experience. Unfortunately though, this memory existed as the only time Maurice remembered feeling this way about a book.

Early Writing Memories

Despite his early struggles with reading, Maurice recalled thoroughly enjoying writing. “I’ve always liked writing. Writing is like—I love writing. I think it just calms me down and stuff.” The narratives he related about his early writing experiences pointed to a rich history of individual engagement and interest in creating and constructing texts.

He told me how, as a child he would write stories based on TV shows he watched and movies he saw. He laughed as he described the following:

Most of the time I copied most of my stuff off of shows I seen...Like *Spiderman* and stuff [laughs].... Like I took my own character but made it from the plotline of that. I make my own little personages and like took stories from *Spiderman* and made it into a story for me and switched up a little bit about it.

Although he acted slightly embarrassed about this and said how dumb it was, I couldn't help but be impressed. I thought about the thousands of fan fiction sites on the Internet, filled with pages and pages of stories not unlike the ones Maurice used to write.

Although not a traditionally school-sanctioned literacy practice, these sites allow students to change stories and alter them. In ways similar to RPGs, these kinds of stories allow the student to take an active role in determining the outcome of the stories themselves. Research demonstrates the potential these sorts of sites might have in the classroom, including opportunities to engage high school age students in literacy activities almost exactly like the one Maurice described (Kell, 2009).

But when I asked if he ever shared these stories with anyone, he told me no, with one exception. Once in elementary school his teacher asked each of the students in the class to write a story they could turn into a book. For this assignment he selected one of the stories he wrote and that was the story he published and shared. This was one of his pleasant literacy memories, but unfortunately, also one of the last he could recall.

Maurice's Current Literacy Experiences

It seemed ironic that, given his past struggles with reading, Maurice engaged in so many literacy-based activities. I hesitate to use the dichotomy of in-school verses out-of-

school literacies because, as Alvermann (2007) argued, to distinguish between in-school and out-of-school literacies is “to separate these literacies from the very spaces that give them meaning and make them worth pursuing” (p. 20). Many of the literacy activities Maurice engaged in related in some way to school. However, they were not always highly recognizable.

Music & videos. Maurice spent much of his time outside of school writing music and lyrics for his band. When I asked him about his writing process, he explained that sometimes ideas just “pop[ped] into” his head and he wrote them down. He also loved working on movies for his video production class. He described how he and his friends spent hours outside of school designing projects and creating films beyond the scope of the requirements for the course.

RPGs. As I mentioned before, RPG continued to play a central role in the literacy activities in which Maurice engaged. He explained how reading the stories associated with these games helped him play better and advance through different levels. However, his reading in connection with the games also extended way beyond reading the texts of the stories contained therein. He also learned about a lot of other things through playing these video games. He expressed a slight amount of disgust when he explained *Castlevania* (1986), a game essentially about Dracula, was nothing like the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1940). He described a game called *Chrono Cross* (2000) that inspired him to research the meaning of the title. He learned it meant “crossing dimensions” and led him to conduct similar research into the subjects he encountered in the game, including research about the Dead Sea and the Black Sea.

Maurice then proceeded to tell me about other games he played and the topics he researched in order to better understand the plots of the stories associated with them. Another game called *God of War* (2005) contained allusions to Greek mythology. Although he explained his interest in Greek mythology went back to his childhood, he expressed an interest in learning more about this topic as well. Similarly, he described a game called *Xenogears* (2003) that drove him to read “every single Bible there is,” including the Koran, the Talmud, and Christian Bible. The plot of this game, according to Wikipedia, was based on the philosophies of Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung and explored many of the major religions of the world (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenogears>). As Maurice described to me how this game convinced him God didn’t exist, as well as his opinion that his own upbringing as a Jehovah’s Witness was wrong, I realized Maurice transacted in a deep level with the stories and ideas in the texts of these video games.

In my observations, his classmates also occasionally made connections between games they played and historical content they learned about in school. For example, when I observed Ms. Longworth teaching about the Vietnam War, a few students sat baffled that what they were learning about in class inspired the video game *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010). They made similar connections between the original *Call of Duty* (2003) game and their study of World War II and Hitler. However, Maurice seemed slightly annoyed by these games that focused primarily on shooting things instead of the story.

Gee (2003) argued learning to play video games represented a new form of literacy that offered potential for classroom learning. Similarly, many research studies advocate the use of RPG in teaching and learning settings. For example, studies include

research focused on high school students designing their own RPG to explore climate change (Klopfer & Sheldon, 2010), to form and test scientific hypotheses in microbiology (Spires, Rowe, Mott & Lester, 2011). Other studies describe their use in astronomy (Francis, 2005) and world history (Snow, 2010) classes. Specifically within the realms of reading, studies demonstrate video games offer potential to engage struggling or reluctant readers (Commeyras, 2009; Jolley, 2008).

Given the vast amount of research on this subject, listening to Maurice talk about these interests made me think about the many missing opportunities for both him and his teachers. Failing to make connections between popular culture and the content, Maurice's teachers skimmed past many points of connection with Maurice concerning content and on which to build relationships. However, Maurice's unwillingness to speak up about these issues resulted in missed opportunities as well. Gone also were the dialogues that could have engaged other students in the class and moments to make learning relevant to students' lives.

English class. The final point of disconnect he described involved his English class. Maurice expressed that he enjoyed English class. But when I asked him why, he explained English class gave him "a break at the end of the day." He told me he felt this way because compared to his other classes English required little effort. In his words, "[the class] is not really that hard."

This puzzled me until later Maurice described what occurred during his time in English class. Little was required of him in terms of reading; the majority of the time in class was devoted to writing in journals. The reading that was required either occurred in the context of class or as a part of independent reading time where he could fake read and

think about something else. Ironically, for these reasons, English was one of the courses he was passing.

In contrast to English, Maurice found many of his other classes difficult, particularly those with a heavy emphasis on reading. He told me,

If I'm reading a book, to me I've got to have somebody read it to me or read it out loud cause like—I wouldn't really comprehend the book if I'm reading it quietly to myself. I never do. I always have to read it out loud and then I'll comprehend it.

Further in this explanation, Maurice described his abilities based on his own observations very succinctly: unless he heard the story, his comprehension suffered. In some cases, he was able to get by because the teachers read aloud. But most often it meant Maurice planned on bringing the book home, going down to his quiet basement, and reading it out loud to himself, “like if the teacher was reading to me.” Because his teachers didn't read out loud very often, during reading time he would just “think about a lot of stuff,” until the teacher would start the rest of class. He learned to look at the book and try to make it look like he was reading, but he really just sat in his desk and thought.

Regardless of whether or not Maurice could comprehend texts when reading silently, his belief that he couldn't comprehend texts this way served as a powerful narrative as he conceptualized his own learning. He understood what was required in order for him to be able to read. But the sheer volume of reading he needed to take home and do proved overwhelming for him, especially as a slow reader. If all the reading a student needed to do school had to be out loud, when would any student have time to do this?

Philosophy Towards School and Education

Although Maurice obviously struggled with reading, his understandings about the way school functioned also worked against him academically in many ways. Like most teenagers, he didn't like homework and his rationale seemed solid enough; students work all day at school, so shouldn't that be enough? When do kids get a break?

The idea of homework itself wasn't the issue; teachers and researchers have expressed similar sentiments when questioning the validity of it in volume and purpose (Smith, Feldwisch & Abell, 2006; Vail, 2001). However, because Maurice acted on these beliefs and didn't do his assignments, he suffered academically.

Another idea that proved problematic concerned his approach to testing. He failed all of his midterm exams because he tried to focus primarily on the big tests at the end of the year instead of the little ones leading up to them. He explained,

The only ones I actually focus on are the big tests. In middle school it was like the CRCT [end of year test] and I would only focus on that. And then here I'm might only going to focus on the OCT [graduation test] and that's it. Cause I don't get the point of midterms. They seem stupid to me. They're just more like retarded, hard tests.

His explanation was neither flippant nor rude. Based on his other comments, he obviously disliked tests. But ultimately he did not seem to understand that the end of year tests tied to promotion were not the only factor that determined whether or not he would progress to another grade. In a school and culture that placed significant emphasis on testing, Maurice came to conceptualize passing tests as the central aim of his education. Most likely no one ever told him the things he learned in school and the tests

created by his teachers didn't matter. However, the message he listened to, the one that pointed to the significance of the end of the year tests, spoke the loudest. "[School] feels like it's just something that I have to get through," he told me. "Until the end of the year when I'm about to fail and repeat a grade. Then it becomes important."

Maurice's Dialogical-Self Moments

Although the situations of Jack and Maurice seemed similar based on factors such as grades, attendance, and class participation, their individual willingness to dialogue with ideas about themselves as learners distinguished them from one another. While Jack seemed unable or unwilling to challenge the dominant discourse he heard about himself as a learner, Maurice's narratives and actions revealed multiple moments where he questioned and tried to challenge his ideas. Although some of his attempts seemed successful and others less so, they each represented moments of transaction with significant individuals who informed his narratives, as well as dialogues with prevailing ideas about what it took for him to succeed and how he could go about doing this.

"I Might Have That"

Maurice thought a lot about what might be causing his difficulties in school. He constantly engaged in dialogues about why he struggled to learn, couched in terms of what he understood about school and the way the system operated. As mentioned previously, because he thought his loud and rowdy behavior in middle school got him in trouble, he worked hard to be silent in his classes. Similarly, as demonstrated by his next narrative, he also compared his challenges to those of his friends and thought about how their solutions might work for him as well.

One of the stories Maurice told that most vividly stuck with me centered on one of his attempts to solve this dilemma. On our first meeting as we talked about his struggles as a learner and a reader, I asked him what teachers should know about him. He told me, “I think I have ADD.” When I asked him why he thought this, he told me it was a long story, but that his friend was diagnosed with what he called “a minor case of ADD,” and Maurice thought he might have it too. I asked him if he wouldn’t mind sharing the story, so he explained:

Well me and my friend Troy...were talking and he was like, “Yeah, dude, I have ADD.” And I was like, “No you don’t,” and he was like, “Yes I do.” Most people I seen with ADD, they like jump off the walls and stuff and so I was like, “You don’t have ADD.” And he was like, “Yeah I do. I have that minor case where I—where—you can’t pay attention or nothing.” It’s really hard for him to pay attention...in class so now he has to take this pill...so I was like, “I might have that.” So he was like, “Take one of these pills.” So I just took it.

Just to be clear, I’m not condoning the sharing of prescription drugs, nor were there indications throughout our interviews that Maurice might be trying to use his friend’s ADHD medication for the reasons other teenagers use drugs. However, if we’re able to consider this event as an attempt by Maurice to intercede on his own behalf to find a way to help himself as a learner, this dialogue carries significant implications.

First, Maurice’s self-diagnosis reveals a number of his interpretations and understandings about himself as a learner. Above all, he realized he struggled to stay engaged and really understand what was going on in the classroom. His description of himself as potentially ADHD pointed to other dialogues on his part in an effort to explore

why he struggles as a learner. From conversations with others, as well as from current solutions to learning difficulties and constructions about what constitutes a successful learner, Maurice inferred this potential diagnosis might hold the key to explaining his struggles.

Also, Maurice offered this information in response to my question about what might be useful for his teachers to know about him as a learner. He realized this information about the cause of his struggles might prove valuable to his teachers. To him, having a teacher who understood he struggled with this challenge might also help the teacher understand him as a student. In addition, he developed this understanding not because of anything I told him, but based on his own understandings he constructed as a result of his interactions with schools and classrooms.

Similarly, beyond the scope of his own experience, Maurice considered the circumstances as his friends and peers as informative of his own. He acted as a meaningful agent as he structured his understandings of himself and the world around him; in these constructions the ideas, feedback, and experiences of his friends mattered. He cared what his friends thought. Although he interrogated Troy in particular in this instance, Maurice saw Troy's solution as potentially helpful in addressing his own learning struggles as well. Maurice was not waiting to be acted upon; he acted. Although his actions may have been slightly unconventional from the perspective of teachers or administrators, as well as potentially harmful as the result of sharing medication, from Maurice's perspective, trying one of his friend's pills was the easiest way to explore a potential solution to his dilemma.

Maurice went on to explain that he took the pill during third block, and since “it takes like an hour to kick in,” he didn’t begin to feel its influence until his fourth block class—his English class. That day his teacher assigned a journal writing assignment and, in Maurice’s words,

I like started writing down stuff and...I felt like I listened better...I just was concentrating on my work. I couldn’t do nothing else but do my work...We had to write this long journal, like three pages, and I wrote it all in like five minutes. And it was really neat. I never done that in my life.

According to Maurice, the difference in his traditional performance in English class and his performance after taking the pills seemed drastically different. Although he normally struggled to concentrate and narrow his focus in his writing, under the influence of this pill he did so with ease. He went on to describe this, saying,

I felt like I could think of more stuff to say and write. Cause like if I didn't take that pill I would just be like, "I can't really think of anything." We had to connect with something in the book...I could think better...I felt like I could connect with more stuff in the book. I wrote I lot more stuff down and I got a better grade on my journal.

His improvement in regard to his literacy practices included both performing at a higher level and an increased ability to stick with the task. Because the distinct differences he felt between his work with and without the pills, he felt like this diagnosis and accompanying pill might be the solution to his struggles. The effects of the pill, as per Maurice’s descriptions, sounded like those most English teachers would encourage in

their classrooms. Writing, reading, staying on task, connecting with the book—all of these practices became achievable for Maurice under the influence of this medication.

The Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2010) reported that as many as two trillion American children may be affected by ADHD with two to three times as many boys affected as girls. Medications like Ritalin, Dexedrine, and Cylert reduce hyperactivity, thus helping students concentrate and focus in school. Considering these statistics, Maurice's hypotheses about his own abilities before and after this pill was not too far remove from the realm of possibility. He may benefit academically from taking these drugs. Moreover, the ability to attribute his failure in school to something that could be diagnosed and controlled would not only offer hope for his academic future, but also cause a dramatic shift in his narrative. Instead of drifting or struggling through school, repeating the same challenges each year, this solution could help him experience success and change his narrative about himself as a reader.

As Maurice and I continued talking about his desire to try a similar solution to address his literacy struggles, he indicated that his mom was going to make an appointment with a doctor to see if he also qualified for these pills. Throughout the rest of our interviews I periodically checked with Maurice to see if this appointment had been made; however, at the conclusion of our visits, he still hadn't seen a specialist or tried any more of these drugs.

“It Makes Me See Myself Like I’m Stupid Most of the Time”

Throughout the course of our interviews Maurice also talked extensively about his past experiences as a learner and a reader. At one point towards the end of our interviews we were talking about difficulties he experienced with assignments in classes. I asked

him if he ever thought about the times in the past when he struggled, particularly as he thought about his challenges now in high school. Without missing a beat he explained,

Yes. All the time. I always feel that way. Every time I think about it, it just comes into my head, like it makes me feel stupid, like I can't get most of it. That's how I feel most of the times.

Although perhaps not in as articulate of terms as those quoted from Kylene Beers in the introduction of this text, his description reminded me of the students she talked about sitting in the classroom for seven hours a day, five days a week, struggling with reading. His sentence, "That's how I feel most of the times" lingered. Like many of the other participants, Maurice's described his feelings as a key indicator of his failures and struggles. But even more significantly, the way he described the appearance of past memories of failures that resurfaced in times he continued to struggle, pointed to significant dialogues in which he engaged concerning his identity as a reader and learner. Although he continued trying, the narrative of himself as a student who was stupid and who didn't "get most of it," was a powerful force with which he contended.

I asked him if there were things he had learned to do to help him avoid thinking about these moments but he told me, "No, I just think about it. It just comes up."

Although Maurice did say that sometimes thoughts such as these made him work harder, he added, "But then still I feel like I'm just not going to get it." His ideas about his abilities, past, present and future, based on his experiences and ideas he inferred from these experiences, existed at times as a part of a self-defeating cycle.

When I asked him if he thought these reoccurring feelings and thoughts of failure influenced the way he saw himself as a reader and learner, he paused and then explained,

It makes me see myself like I'm stupid most of the time, like I don't get anything. I tell people that and they're like "no you're not stupid," but I feel like that's not true. I'm always going to be stupid.

In this very literal dialogue Maurice described his feelings of failure, as well as the response of others to his statement. Although other people told him he wasn't stupid, his feelings and experiences told him otherwise. What he saw ahead in his future included a lifetime of academic struggles.

In addition, within the framework of the dialogic self and in connection with the preunderstandings emphasized in this analysis, this dialogue shared by Maurice seemingly presents a paradox. If the voices of others figure into our narratives, it would seem to suggest that the voices of others that tell him, "No you're not stupid," should help counter his own ideas of failure; but, in this instance they don't.

But what this assumption implies is that simply stating something might make it so. If this were the case, telling Maurice he was smart would fix his struggles. However, the verbal validation lacked the substance behind it to bring power to the language and help change occur. For Maurice, the culmination of the grades he received, his understandings of what it meant to be smart as inferred from his experiences in school, and his past experiences, countered affirming statements from individuals around him. If he could have seen indicators of truthfulness in these statements, he might have been willing to listen; but for him, he "fe[lt] like that's not true," and continued to feel the burden of his struggles.

Occasionally Maurice didn't feel this way. He explained how one of his favorite parts about school was when he received a good grade back on an assignment. He explained,

I get this really good feeling when I get a good grade back that says like an 80 or above—but most of the times since I've been in school it's been really hard for me. Like when I get a grade back I really feel good about myself.

The emphasis Maurice placed on the way school made him felt struck me, particularly when contrasted with the comments he offered earlier about feeling stupid most of the time in school. On a very basic level, how much of his response to reading centered on the feelings he felt when succeeding or failing?

Excited about this possible moment of relief from the feelings he earlier described, I asked him how often he felt good about his work in school. He told me, "I really don't get good grades now...when I get my stuff back I don't really like my grades and I just forget school...I'm trying to fix that but it's really hard though." For Maurice, grades became another element of his dialogues that presented him as an unsuccessful student. Like Jack, he tried to pay very little attention to them. However, this proved problematic when it came to testing time and the large amount of his day he spent in the classroom.

Maurice's past failures in school weighed heavy on his mind as he considered his current situation in the context of his past school experiences. He explained "I think about them [his past failures] a lot because I don't want to fail and retake all of this year over again as a freshman." Having been retained once, he was not anxious to be retained again. However, when I asked him if he ever felt like he wanted to participate in class or

to have his voice heard, he explained, “Not really. I just want to do my work and leave. That’s really all I want to do.”

For Maurice, school participation seemed like a balancing act between his past failures and the overwhelming burden of his current experience. Fearful of repeating these failures, he came to school and engaged at minimal levels. However, aware of the way he currently struggled, he resisted participation that would call attention to his difficulties.

Responding to Silences

One of the most prevalent ideas that ran throughout Maurice’s dialogues centered on the way he interpreted the lack of response he received from teachers in regard to his comments. He described how, after being retained in fifth grade, Maurice felt his teachers treated him differently because, according to him, the teachers thought he was stupid. He thought this because, “Every time I’d try to ask them something—like a really simple question or answer a real simple question—they wouldn’t want me to or nothing.” Afraid if they called on him he would answer questions wrong or read poorly, he figured his teachers simply didn’t invite him to participate. In addition, Maurice assumed the written work he submitted only contributed to this perception because he often turned in his assignments unfinished even though he knew “it was going to make me look retarded.”

I tried to think about the teachers’ responses, as explained by Maurice. Assuming his teachers acted with the best of intentions, perhaps they avoided calling on him to prevent any embarrassment they might have caused by asking Maurice questions he should have known the answers to, but didn’t. Maybe the teachers worried he’d look

foolish if he offered an incorrect response or if he messed up as he read aloud. Perhaps these teachers accepted Maurice's partially completed work and promoted him to the next grade because they felt sorry for him or because they didn't want to cause issues that often result from retention. But whatever the intent on the part of the teachers, moments such as these that went unaddressed only reinforced Maurice's self-perceptions of his poor reading skills and feelings of failure.

As in the case of Jack, the silent response becomes significant. Bakhtin (1986) described each utterance as intentionally directed towards a response and because of this intentionality, for human beings "there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response*" (p. 127). In other words, the way individuals respond to one another matters. As Maurice's interpretations revealed, often this lack of response to his questions and comments led him to interpret his identity as a struggling reader in ways much more detrimental than any audibly uttered comments from classmates may have been interpreted. Maurice's comments about these moments provide unique insights into the consequences of a lack of dialogue in the ideological becoming of struggling adolescent readers.

Maurice's inner dialogues became a place for him to interpret the lack of response from his teachers. These moments existed when his teachers failed to acknowledge the raise of his hand, didn't comment on the empty spaces on his homework assignments and allowed his voice to go unheard in class discussions. Rather than existing as the safe spaces other students who struggled sought out, for Maurice these silences emphasized his feelings of inadequacy.

Still very much guarded and silent in class, Maurice explained, “I don’t really tell my teachers nothing. It just depends on what type of relationship we have...I build a relationship with certain teachers that I feel like are caring, and then the rest of them I don’t really.” I wondered what kinds of moves a teacher might make to show a student like Maurice that he or she cared. He explained his decision depended on how fun the teacher makes the class, who else is in the class, and how the teacher teaches. His list of criteria resonated with what I knew about good teaching as he went on to describe that fun teachers allowed students to work with one another on activities, avoided book work and lecture, and gave students individual attention when they need it. He also mentioned how one teacher, one he felt particularly connected to, knew when he needed individual help; in contrast, the other teachers “just teach.”

It is interesting a student like Maurice who struggled so much with schoolwork, would provide a list of attributes so consistent with research without prompting. He knew what made a good teacher. Contrary to his elementary experience, this teacher from high school dialogued with him and gave him opportunities to voice his understandings in class. Opening up this dialogue proved key to helping Maurice feel invested and valued in school. He described this teacher’s class as “the best part” of his day; based on the value Maurice placed on the way he felt in school, it’s not surprising to see why.

His Future

Like many musicians, Maurice hoped things would work out with his band. However, if his music didn't work out, he shared that he had always wanted to be a doctor. But he also realized this goal might be problematic for him since school was so

rough for him. He explained, “I want to go [to college], but I don't want to go at the same time.” When I asked why he told me, “I want to have a good education and get a job, but at the same time—it’s just more school. I'm tired of school. Just more school—it would just make it worse.”

It’s not difficult to see evidence of Maurice’s inner dialogues in this statement as well. From the larger discourse of school and society, he knew a college education would most likely bring success. However, he also felt very aware of his current struggles. Over the last few years, as he watched his mom work through her own college coursework in her nursing studies, he realized the challenge that faced him. “I don't know what I want to do when I leave. I'm saying if I don't want to go to college, I don't know what else I want to do.”

Besides the possibility of college, Maurice didn’t see much reading in his future. “If I don’t have to read, then I don’t want to,” he explained. However, when I asked him if he would read to his own kids someday, he told me he would do the same thing his dad did for him—read video game stories—and probably even read some stories at night. However, one point he emphasized clearly,

Yeah, but I'm saying, if he [his future son] needs help in reading or something, I'd try to get him help. I'd get him a tutor or something if he needed help cause I don't want him to like—I want him to be smart and not stupid.

For me this statement existed as one of the most telling in Maurice’s interviews. He realized his own struggles and the significant role reading played in success. Although he himself did not currently value reading very highly, he acknowledged the role it played in academic success. Determined his own son would not feel the way he had felt

in school, Maurice would be sure to get his own child the help he himself had not been afforded.

Lingering Questions Left By Maurice's Dialogues

One of the most enduring questions that resulted from my discussions with Maurice centered on the seeming disconnects between the literacy activities he willingly engaged in and those at school that he did not. Although much has been written and researched about using out-of-school literacies in the classroom (Alvermann, 2007; Hagood, Alvermann & Heron-Hruby, 2010), many students like Maurice, who engage in non-traditional literacy practices by their own volition, still seem to be missing the connections between these practices and those literacy tasks they are faced with in school. Therefore, as teachers and researchers we need to ask ourselves what needs to occur in order for students to make these kinds of connections as well as what teachers can do to bridge in-school and out-of-school literacies in the classroom.

Also, as evidenced by Maurice's words, the dialogues he engaged in with others are deeply engrained in Maurice's conceptualization of himself as a learner. The voices of his peers and his teachers, both past and present, influenced the way he currently viewed himself, particularly in light of his struggles. Just telling Maurice he was smart didn't instantly change his perceptions of himself as a struggling reader, nor did telling him that he was dumb cause him to feel bad about his lack of success in school. Rather, he interpreted these ideas about his own potential from the contexts of his classes as well as from the actions of his classmates and teachers. He incorporated other evidence—for instance, his test scores and his ability to succeed on individual reading tasks valued at school—into the way he understood his own abilities.

In all of these dialogues, the emphasis Maurice placed on the role of his teachers proved significant. What Maurice described closely aligned with what Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) talked about as she discussed the importance of relationships in learning, emphasizing the need for mutual respect between teachers and students. He knew relationships mattered because, based on his own experiences, it was his relationship with a teacher that allowed him to take the risks necessary to learn and be successful. As a result, Maurice knew exactly what teachers did that allowed him to open and learn from them instead of closing himself off to those dialogues.

When we talked specifically about what teachers could do to help him he said, “You gotta understand where I’m coming from and try to just listen and just be friends instead of just yelling and telling me to do something all the time...instead of just being my teacher.” When asked him to clarify what he meant by the word “friend,” he defined “friend” in this context as someone who would “talk to me...and then I’d feel like we’d have a better connection. I could listen and then I felt like I could trust them and I could do my work better and stuff.”

Like so many of the other things Maurice explained to me, this just made sense. Learning involves risk taking and those sorts of risks should be taken among friends. The friendships he sought with his teachers and among his classmates involved relationships where it was safe to work through struggles, where responses could be met with understanding and dialogue, and where trust was paramount.

Reflecting Across the Cases

Throughout this research process I realized that I could not *not* think of Skyler’s experiences as I listened to the stories shared by the adolescent readers. I heard echoes of

Skyler's humiliation when Anna and Sarah talked about reading scripture verses aloud in church while people laughed at them. I heard echoes of Skyler's triumphs when Maurice and Anna talked about the one book that, for them, made all the difference. I heard echoes of Skyler's awkwardness when Braydon and Sarah talked about the effects their learning disabilities still have on the way they interact in social interactions. I heard echoes of his cunning as Jack, Maurice and Anna talked about their strategies to avoid reading. I heard echoes of his reliance on friends and family to help him get through hard times in the stories told by Maurice and Braydon. I heard echoes of Skyler's hope when Anna talked about one teacher who made her reconsider her skills and abilities as a learner. I heard echoes of Skyler's focus on the future as Sarah, Braydon and Anna talked about reaching their dreams, regardless of the challenges they faced. I heard echoes of his resiliency as I listened to all of these students talk candidly about their challenges, fears, struggles, and hopes. And ultimately, I heard the whisperings of those dialogues that Skyler still engages in as I listened to the ways each of these students continues to try and reconcile their past experiences, their current situations, and their futures.

Although an infinite number of preunderstandings could be incorporated into their stories, their stories share a number of similar preunderstandings in common. These common threads weaved throughout their cases a significant pattern, pointing to issues and elements that exist as central to the way adolescent struggling readers conceptualize their reader identities. The sections that follow highlight these key areas and reiterate the roles they play in identity formation in struggling adolescent readers. Specifically, the influence of past experiences, Discourses, other individuals, and the issues of Care that

matter most to these students, all provide opportunities to influence the way students conceptualize their identities as learners and readers.

Past Experiences Matter

First, the experiences our students bring to our classrooms matter. Research often focuses on the cultural capital of students (Bourdieu, 2007) and their funds of knowledge from their home cultures (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). But their past experiences as learners also merit consideration. The students we see now in our classrooms are the sum total of their experiences up to the moment they enter our classroom as well.

Bakhtin (1986) explained the meaning of a word exists as a part of all its meanings before and after we encounter it. In a similar manner, the students in our classrooms enter as the accumulation of the educational experiences they've endured throughout their lives. The experiences they have in our class exist among other meanings as "a link in a chain of meaning," that culminates each day in their individual process of becoming (p. 146). In other words, their experiences as readers before they reach our classroom influence who they are in our classroom, as well as who they see themselves becoming. Their history as readers matters.

Discourses Matter

Gee (2008) explained "the practices of such social groups are never just literacy practices. They also involve ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing, and believing" (p. 45). The understandings students in this study brought about the purpose of school, what it takes to be successful in school, what it means to be successful in school and even in life all influence the way they constructed themselves as readers.

In response to these Discourses, students developed strategies to survive and to thrive. Many of these strategies—like breaking down tasks, reading Sparknotes, or talking to and building relationships with teachers—worked in beneficial ways for these students. However, other strategies these students developed in response to these discourses—causing classroom disruptions to avoid attention or distracting others—were often unhealthy. For example, fake reading, leaving class, sleeping during reading time, and pretending to be sick were all strategies students used to avoid reading. Although these worked as short-term solutions to avoid reading, they didn't ultimately solve their problems with reading. However, because these strategies seemed to work temporarily, students continued employing them, despite how detrimental they ultimately proved.

Also, although students' ideas about themselves and reading were largely influenced by family beliefs, religions or cultures, they were also inferred from the way literacy was constructed at school. The assessments, measures and practices valued by schools came, in many instances, to represent education to these students.

Agents Matter

As Bakhtin (1981) noted, “the importance of struggling with another’s discourse...is enormous” because we make sense of the world and ourselves through the words of others (p. 348). These perspectives become key because “this is one way we really learn from people different from ourselves: we incorporate their voices *as living presences* within us” (Morson, 2004, p. 326). In the cases of the struggling adolescent readers in this study, the others that play a central role in the way these readers make sense of their identities include parents, peers, and teachers.

Words of parents matter. Parental involvement serves a central role in the ways students conceptualize the importance of reading, as well as the ways students navigate through conflicting beliefs about their own abilities. In the cases of Braydon and Sarah, their mothers played a central role in the way they worked through their early literacy struggles. As the students in this study conceptualized who they were and what kind of significance education and reading had in their own lives, the ideas of their parents were often the ones these students relied on to develop their own understandings about reading and learning.

Relationships with peers matter. Almost every student in this study made some reference to the response of their peers towards struggling readers. These relationships included those inside the classroom in academic situations, as well as those outside the classroom in social situations or within other institutions. Whether the students in this study actively sought to avoid the laughter of peers or judged their own abilities in comparison to those of others, the responses of individuals around them mattered.

Similarly, as Maurice suggested, learning most often took place when students existed among others they considered their friends. When students felt safe in their classrooms, they took the risks necessary to learn. Creating a community that functioned as a safe space, where students were able to support one another and valued one another for each person's unique contributions made all the difference. Also, allowing students to work in groups, to collaborate, and to learn from one another became key. Rather than comparing their abilities to one another, working these sorts of environments with peers helped these struggling readers thrive.

Relationships with teachers matter. In story after story throughout this study, the value of “good” teachers surfaced as a central theme. Students who struggle with reading are often perceived as students who don’t want to try, who can’t succeed, or who have given up. However, the majority of the students in this study described a desire to be pushed, to work hard, and to authentically succeed at reading tasks. Although they realized they struggled more than their peers, they didn’t want the easy teacher or the easy way; what they asked for was a supportive teacher who would offer feedback to help them improve and who would push them to work harder.

Students also characterized this teacher was also one who would act as a safety net as students took risks. Interestingly enough, these students didn’t seem to fear failure; each of them had already experienced failure in at least one way or another. Rather, what they sought out was a teacher who made it okay to fail and keep trying. These were teachers who made it okay for students to be included in the class, even if it meant they didn’t always offer the correct answers, or teachers who trusted students to do things, even if they didn’t do them right. These teachers also needed to have confidence in students, or as Maurice described it, be a teacher who “feels like I can get it” both through the language used and the way they engage with students in the classroom. These teachers don’t have to be teachers who coddle students, but they do need to be teachers who students can connect with and feel are invested in their futures.

Multiple students in this study also indicated that good teachers were willing to call the students out on their behaviors that undermined their success. This seemed odd at first, until I realized students wanted these boundaries established, particularly by

teachers with whom they already had established a good relationship and who could do this without making students feel bad or defensive.

Finally, good teachers also demonstrated a willingness to view the students as works in progress—in other words, saw students as in their own process of becoming. These teachers created classrooms where everyone might have been learning at a different pace, but that was okay. The students in this study stuck with the good teachers in the rough subjects because they trusted these teachers to help them grow as readers and learners and to lead them through their struggles into success.

Issues of Care Matter

Finally, those things the students cared most about became the elements around which they emplotted their narrative identities. As an element of mimesis, Care guides the focus of students narratives and influences which elements they choose to incorporate into the way they emplot their narratives. Those moments they focused on and preoccupied themselves with, or used to define Care, served as the major elements in their narratives about themselves. For the students in this study, this characteristic varied from individual to individual, much as it would in the classroom. For Jack, money often surfaced as a reoccurring element that defined this feature; for Anna, it was often issues of race that emerged in different situations. For others, it consisted of a focus on the future influenced the way they moved forward.

Although case studies do not lend themselves to generalizations across large groups, the similarities in the elements used to emplot the narratives of these struggling adolescent readers points to the significance of key individuals and ideas in the ways students make sense of their experiences in schools and with texts. Understanding the

role these elements play in the narratives struggling readers use to construct their identities leads to implications that prove significant for the whole community.

CHAPTER 6

Implications

After a few connecting flights and a four hour drive from the nearest international airport, I stepped out of my rental car last spring to realize T.S. Eliot was right: April truly is the cruelest month, particularly in Southeastern Idaho. It was then, in the midst of my data collection, that I visited my brother Skyler. My conversations with the participants in my study generated questions I now had for Skyler that begged for answers in order to make sense of what I thought I already understood. So for two days, in a study room in the library, we found ourselves laughing and crying as he answered many of the same questions I'd been asking my student participants.

Later that night we braced ourselves for the wind and snow and walked to the dollar theater across the street from campus to see *The King's Speech* (2010). The not-so-recently released movie detailed the relationship of King George VI and his speech therapist, Lionel, who helped the king overcome an extreme stuttering issue and ultimately ascend the British throne. At one point, as the king detailed some of his childhood traumas and fears that exacerbated his stuttering issue, Lionel said to the king, "You don't have to be afraid of the things you were afraid of when you were five."

Sitting in the movie theater next to my 24 year-old brother, and against the backdrop of two days of discussions, I could feel the sting of those words. Surely I had my own psychological bumps and bruises that remained from childhood, but with some of Skyler's fresh on my mind, I wondered about the import of those words on him. The

next day when we talked, I asked him if any parts from the film resonated with him. He quoted the exact line, “You don’t have to be afraid of the things you were afraid of when you were five.” Then he explained, “I think that’s the first time that it ever really hit me. That I don’t have to be afraid of not knowing how to spell...that I don’t have to be afraid of an interview process...I don’t have to be afraid of that because if I work hard and I focus on what I need to accomplish, then I can.”

If I could choose a single implication of this study to share with the participants of this study, this would be it. This statement, “you don’t have to be afraid of the things you were afraid of when you were five,” invites individuals to challenge their stories, to re-write their narratives, and realize that although they may have struggled with reading in their past, this struggle doesn’t have to determine their future. But in order for my participants and other struggling readers to realize this, teachers and parents and policy makers need to help by recognizing the other implications of this study as well. Doing so individually and collectively will help re-write the narratives we tell in our schools, society and larger Discourses about what it means to be a struggling reader, as well as the role we each play in co-authoring the identities of students who struggle.

Implications

The discussion that follows highlights the theoretical implications of this research and suggestions as to what these implications might mean in concrete terms within the walls of our schools as well as within our communities. I begin by discussing the importance of opening up the dialogue to multiple interpretations, then transition into the significance of viewing students as in the process of becoming. The next section focuses on affective factors to consider and the final section on agency. Ultimately, each of these

discussions should culminate in a presentation that considers how the stories shared here should change what takes place in classrooms and schools and what these changes mean for teachers, and ultimately the students themselves.

Consider Multiple Interpretations

When I consider the stories my student participants shared, I think about a statement attributed to Gadamer: “the possibility that someone else may be right is the soul of hermeneutics” (Grondin, 1994, p. 124). The stories my participants shared represent moments vastly different from those of students traditionally considered academically successful. Although it might be challenging to acknowledge the experiences my participants described as legitimate representations of what occurs in schools, their interpretations of these larger discourses offer unique glimpses of how school is viewed by many students. Listening to these stories from a teacher’s perspective, I often found myself wincing at the descriptions students provided. Often what I realized might actually be a sound pedagogical move was interpreted in detrimental ways with outcomes drastically different than those originally intended. However, in some ways the intent mattered little; what actually mattered most was how these moves were perceived. Because the interpretations of all students matter, as the teacher seeking to teach in dialogue with my students and their experiences, these alternative interpretations need to be considered.

Randy Bomer (2011) alluded to the importance of considering the individual interpretations of each student when he explained, “our teaching can be most powerful if it is undertaken with students experiencing the classroom as including space for the details of their existence, rather than blurring their individual faces into a vague

generalized identity of ‘student’” (p. 21). The past literacy experiences students bring to the classroom influence the way they interpret the teaching and learning that occurs today, whether those past experiences occurred years ago or yesterday. Realizing the students in our classes share some of these experiences in common, but also bring a range of vastly different experiences, is akin to navigating the heteroglossic tensions Bakhtin (1981) described. The similarities between their experiences will bring a unifying tension and allow us to teach to a common community, but the differences also pull at this commonality and remind us how essential it is to consider the unique needs of individuals. Providing students the kind of experience that accounts for these similarities and differences will start with one teacher broadening his or her notions of literacy, questioning a definition of struggling readers, and reaching out to students one at a time.

Before these dialogues begin, teachers and students must work together to create spaces in their classrooms where multiple interpretations are valid. Classrooms such as these include spaces where students can take the risks necessary to enter into “ongoing reflective conversation” that includes more traditional understandings of literature and schooling, but also leaves space to consider “the texts of our lives” (Fecho, 2011, p. 5-6). Doing so not only means positioning students as valuable contributors of ideas and creating spaces where they can freely share different understandings, but also places where every voice is valued and sought out. And, as can be seen from the comments of the students in this study, so much of this is determined by the extent to which teachers internalize dialogic traits.

Once these spaces for dialogue have been created, it will also involve opening up dialogues in the classroom about what literacy means to students, not just teachers

lecturing students about what core standards dictate literacy to be. Bomer (2011) outlined the depths of these dialogues as he stated,

We need to know what students know and how they think about literacy in order to help make connections to new ideas and practices. We need to know how they have been changing lately in order to transform what they can do tomorrow. We need to know what they think they already are...instead of beginning by telling them they ought to make something of themselves. (p. 21)

In terms of this study, think about the way Braydon defined a good reader as someone who reads fast. What practices are we perpetuating in schools to encourage this false notion? How might assessing reading skills in ways other than by speed challenge this idea? Perhaps students in classrooms across the country might benefit from heeding the words of teacher and researcher Tom Newkirk (2012) who restated the goal of reading instruction as not a rushed process, timed by a stopwatch, but to convey to students in both word and in deed, “take your time. Pay attention. Touch the words and tell me how they touch you.” (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/reading-is-not-a-race-the-virtues-of-the-slow-reading-movement/2012/01/25/gIQA4RVCbQ_blog.html#pagebreak). A first step towards these transformative dialogues could start with discussions about topics as seemingly simple as what it means to be a good reader.

Beyond direct dialogues with students, teachers should also consider multiple interpretations of what occurs in the classroom. Teachers make hundreds of pedagogical decisions each day about the classroom that students interpret in a myriad of ways and often don't understand. Research shows teachers who recognize the importance of

sharing rationales with students make an effort to explain the purpose behind activities and tasks, as well as the usefulness of particular skills (Reeve, 2006). Teaching with a certain sense of transparency allows students to understand why the teacher does what he or she does and will reduce the amount of confusion and misinterpretations that often led the students in this study to shut down or withdraw. For example, Anna's literacy teacher's ability to be metacognitive as he dialogued with her class the importance of practicing reading out loud made all the difference for her. In contrast, the lack of dialogue around why Sarah was only allowed to select certain books in the library led her to make assumptions about her worth in relation to the other students in the class the librarian most likely did not intend.

Although Bakhtin (1993) said we can never truly empathize with others, valuing their interpretations—their stories—will change the way we act. Demonstrating the role multiple interpretations should play will require these kinds of changes across whole departments, in whole schools, and even throughout the whole community. It will take parents and communities willing to advocate for quality teachers based on their positive influence on students rather than simply on their standardized test scores. Consider the way Jack and Maurice conceptualized school success as passing end of the year tests but not really learning. Is this what we really intend students to think? Changing these ideas might include exploring the possibility that top-down accountability mandates may be the result of policy makers failing to realize or care “that adolescents enact self-direction” (Moore & Cunningham, 2006, p. 144). This means it will take communities willing to participate in hard conversations about how funds will be allocated and opening up the way we define success in our schools.

Recognize Students in a State of Becoming

Bakhtin (1981) described the ideological becoming of the individual as the process of selecting and “assimilating the words of others” into one’s own discourse (p. 341). Although throughout this dissertation I have previously emphasized the role the words of others played in the stories these adolescents told, here I place the emphasis on the process.

For many of my participants, the teachers and parents who played the most positive pivotal roles in the re-authoring of these students’ identities were the individuals who saw students as works in progress. Rather than defining the students by their abilities, the adult helped the students see themselves as capable of change. For example, Sarah’s professor who helped Sarah view herself as “an above average student,” instead of the “third grade reader” she had always been, positioned Sarah in ways that allowed her to work through those struggles and become what she wanted to become. Examples such as this one demonstrate the significance of educators who believe “that youth are in a state of becoming,” allowing them to challenge the idea that students’ identities are fixed and see them as capable of changing the direction of their future over time (Moore & Cunningham, 2006, p. 142).

Reinforcing the notion that failures are fixed and unchanging characteristics of the student, rather than temporary challenges, contributes to false notions of who the student is as defined by his or her actions. Research demonstrates that crucial moments in the classroom can disrupt and challenge narratives long enough to allow students to challenge certain elements of their identity (Fecho, 2000; Miller, 2000; Tatum, 2008). But without teachers in the classroom who position students as individuals capable of

change and literacy challenges as temporary, these identities detrimental to student success will continue to be reinforced instead of challenged.

However, it's important to remember these changes will not occur after just one interaction. The moments, as well as the ideas that contributed to students' current perceptions, resulted from the culmination of months and years of experiences. As a result, rarely will a single success in the classroom flip a switch and enact instantaneous change in the way a student performs or views his or her abilities. Similarly, although changes may occur in one area of students' abilities or perceptions of themselves, the continual nature of dialogue means change might not occur in a steady upward line of improvement. Students may oscillate back and forth, questioning their identities, pulling and pushing at them—almost allowing them to fold back over on themselves. For example, even though Braydon and Sarah both now succeed in school, they still struggled with the dialogues between their inner voices that represented them as readers in drastically different ways. Learning how to catch themselves in these dialogues and then choosing to assert one perspective over the other is not an automatic process. The nature of this process demands patience and perseverance.

Ultimately, viewing students as in a process of becoming means seeing students for what they can become, rather than what they may seem to be right now. Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie warned of the danger of viewing others from a single perspective when she said, “Show a people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again, and that is what they become” (TED talks, 2009,

http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html).

When teachers position students as a type of learner, students get stuck in a single story

that defines them as a reader and a learner. Caught in this singular story, students often become frustrated as it proves difficult for them to change and they often turn inward, shut down, or leave school altogether.

In contrast, positioning students as dynamic individuals, capable of change, invites students to become more than they currently are, or, in other words, to step beyond the confines of a single narrative identity. In this way, we invite students to author new and alternative stories of their identity as readers and learners. Adichie concluded by stating, “When we reject the single story, when we realize there was never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” I would offer the substitution of the word “person” for “place,” because when we realize there is not a single story about any person, we regain a sense of the wonder and potential of the individual. Expanding the single stories of struggling readers leads to power to change them. Ultimately these dialogues result in the authoring of new stories, new identities, and new visions of the individual. Individuals involved in the infinite process of becoming.

Examine Affective Factors Like Feelings

At one point in my data collection process I felt like I was struggling to ask the students in my study questions that opened up discussion about pertinent issues. I called Skyler and told him about my dilemma, and he advised me to “ask them about how they feel.” It sounded like a good idea, but I pressed him about why he offered this particular recommendation. He explained that so many of his high and low experiences concerned moments that influenced the way he felt about himself as an individual and a learner.

Later, as I went back to my data and looked across the stories my students had shared, I realized how often the words “feeling” and “felt” sprinkled the pages of my transcripts.

This prompting from Skyler represented a significant connection to a discussion of the narrative structure of emotion (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). According to this theory, although individuals often describe emotions as existing inside the body, the narratives that provoke emotions make little or no reference to events that occur physically inside the body. In other words, although emotions are often considered biological responses, the causes of emotions vary from individual to individual and take on meaning only in relation to stories. The stories learners associate with their identities are heavily bound up in their emotions and therefore, the emotional responses of students to reading and learning significantly influence the construction of their identities.

Research focused on motivation points to the significance of affective elements in reading (Davis, 2006; Galbraith & Alexander, 2005), which suggests perhaps we are still not paying enough attention to these issues when we think about struggling readers. Individuals remember best those moments of their lives laden with emotion (Buchanan, 2007). If students cling to both positive and negative moments from the past because of the way these moments influence their feelings about themselves, the power of emotion in learning and the way students construct their narrative identities is worth further examination. If these emotionally charged moments are the ones students remember best and therefore use to construct their identities, it becomes critical to help them interpret these stories in constructive ways.

Consider the central significance of the way students feel in relation to reading experiences. If we extend Rosenblatt’s ideas (1995) about the reader’s aesthetic

experience with the text, then we might consider that what matters is not just how students connect with a text, but also how they feel about their experience with the text itself and how they feel about themselves as a result of the experience. Could the aesthetic experience also involve the emotional response they have as readers and its effects on the reader's sense of identity? As Jensen (1998) suggested, "Good learning does not avoid emotions, it embraces them" (p. 79). Ultimately, tapping into the lasting power of such moments could make way for meaningful and lasting learning in the classroom.

Many of the readers in this study talked about how the majority of the reading they did in school made them feel stupid or dumb. However, the emotional responses students associate with their learning experiences represented a complex combination of instinctive emotions and emotions to which students attached particular meanings (Jensen, 1998). For example, Maurice explained how difficult school had been because he "felt stupid most of the time," but how his favorite part of school was "this really good feeling" he got when he received a good grade that caused him to feel "really feel good about" himself. His emotional responses associated with school resulted from a series of successes or failures rather than instinctive, biological reactions to schooling itself.

It seems so simple, but so often goes overlooked: kids want to feel good about themselves. Not in the way that relies on empty praise of the teacher as an extrinsic motivator, but in a way that allows them to feel genuinely good about themselves because they are learning and succeeding. However, for some students the feelings of failure that have piled up by the time they reach high school can feel insurmountable, causing them

to disengage and disconnect by the time they reach our classrooms. For this reason, it becomes key to address these reading struggles at the earliest stages.

Assess the Significance of Words

Bakhtin (1986) explained we live in “a world of others’ words,” where language exists as the central orienting force for the individual (p. 43). Words are imbued with power. Johnston (2004) described language as both representational as well as *constitutive*, that is, “it actually creates realities and invites identities” (p. 9). Because of the potential power language possesses, its imperative for teachers and parents to pay attention to the way it’s used and the identities it fosters.

For example, helping students re-author their identities involves more than bestowing empty compliments on students that struggle. Doing so only skids across the surface of the issues, rather than effecting lasting change. As one researcher described it, “recognition must be accurate as opposed to cheerleading” (Santa, 2007, p. 87). The students in this study knew when they struggled and when they deserved the praise they received. “Because we tend to internalize the kinds of conversations in which we become involved, we should think seriously about the nature of these school interactions and their implications” (Johnston, 2004, p. 65). In this quote Johnston alluded to the long-term significance of the authenticity of the exchanges in the classroom. Using language that goes beyond cheerleading first means demonstrating a genuine response to individuals through the words used in the classroom.

Words also position identities as fixed or negotiable (Dweck, 2006). By using words that position identities as labels or attributes as inborn, teachers and parents often inadvertently reinforce identities over which students have no control. In contrast,

complimenting an attribute over which the student has some power allows failures to be viewed as acts that can be changed, rather than as a fixed identity. For example, Johnston (2004) proposed questions such as, “How did you figure that out?” or “What problems did you come across today?” implied that a certain amount of struggle was normal and encouraged students to plan for ways to deal with challenges inherent in learning. In Sarah’s case, her professor helped Sarah challenge the idea that she “wasn’t going to make it,” a label Sarah internalized through dialogues with other teachers and her own past failures. By helping Sarah see how her willingness to work hard and persist through her challenges would help her become a student who “was going to make it,” even if it took her longer to do so, Sarah not only learned she could exercise some control over this identity, but was also able to challenge a label that had previously been fixed.

The words teachers use also assign value to students in relation to others in the classroom. In terms of peer relationships, Johnston (2004) described this idea by contrasting two ways teachers often position students: as either competitors with one another or in collaboration with others. When students are positioned as competitors they often internalize this position, even when the teacher is not directly responsible for it. Consider the way Jack thought about each of his encounters with classmates as competitions in the classroom. Although these temporarily appealed to his desire for a challenge, ultimately it reinforced the idea that he lived in a hierarchical world where he rarely made it to the top. In contrast, when students are positioned as collaborators, they work together and support one another in their learning. The way Maurice described learning as occurring among friends alluded to this idea as he talked about working in small groups to learn together.

The language teachers use to position themselves as an authoritarian or dialogic teacher also influences the way students construct their identities. Teachers who use non-controlling language, encourage student responsibility. These teachers also encourage student ownership as they ask student to generate their own solutions or evaluate their own and others' ideas (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004). In these classrooms, it's not central to the teacher's authority to be viewed as the source of knowledge on all subjects. Rather, the students and teacher work together and all voices are valued. As Anna worked through books in her literacy class, the interpretations of the students existed as valuable sources that offered possible meaning in text. Although her perspectives were consistent with the literature, they didn't always represent the most obvious theme. However, the teacher allowed space for multiple perspectives and valued these interpretations, which were technically no less correct than any others.

Finally, the teachers' language use also positions students in particular ways in relation to classroom activities, just as the parents' language offers particular philosophies for students to assimilate. Whether it's the words teachers use to describe an activity—for example, reading time as a punishment or reading time as an opportunity—the way the relationships are described causes students to think differently about different tasks (Johnston, 2004). Consider the way Jack described learning. For him going to school was like “a pill to be swallowed” and something to get through. But these understandings about school did not originate with Jack. Bakhtin (1981) described how our words “taste” of other's words; the understandings Jack conveyed began with the ideas his father taught him and then Jack found reinforcement for these ideas at school.

Teach For and Encourage the Use of Agency

Throughout this discussion I have drawn on Bakhtin's notion of the ideological becoming of the individual as "the process of selectively assimilating the words of others," with emphasis on the nature of the process, as well as the significance of others words (p. 341). However, in this section I would like to emphasize the adverb "selectively," which Bakhtin used to describe the way the words of others influenced the individual's ideological becoming. The very nature of the word "selectively" implies choice and agency. However, as demonstrated in the discussions of the students in this study, exercising this agency is often more difficult than students realize.

Moje and Lewis (2007) defined agency "the strategic making and remaking of selves" (p. 40). Students who position themselves as agents in their learning realize how to direct this power and take responsibility for their own learning. However, students who struggle with reading and learning often feel like much of their ability to understand and succeed in school is out of their control. Therefore, teaching students how to be agents in their own learning becomes central to helping struggling readers develop positive narratives about themselves as learners.

Helping students learn to take agentive roles in their learning centers on the way they perceive their locus of control. Psychologists use the term "locus of control" to explain how much power individuals believe they have to determine the outcome of a situation (Rotter, 1966). In schools, students who perceive academic success as out of their control and consequently who do little to try to effect change as far as their academic performance is concerned are said to have an external locus of control because they believe the power lies outside of themselves. Conversely, students with an internal

locus of control believe their actions change their academic outcomes and as a result these students demonstrate higher motivation and perseverance. As the way students perceive their locus of control changes, the way they view themselves as literacy learners changes also (Vieria & Grantham, 2011). Subsequently, their narratives about themselves as learners change as well. Therefore, it becomes imperative for teachers to take action and do things in the classroom that supports these kinds of changes (Galbraith & Alexander, 2005).

This concept proves central to the way teachers and students make sense of their identity in the classroom, but initiating these kinds of changes begins with the teacher. “When educators share the belief that people are active decision makers in the course of their lives, students have opportunities to evolve a greater sense of personal agency” (Moore & Cunningham, 2006, p. 142). Students are able to see their actions as influential in their own learning and therefore connected to their actions in the classroom rather than to fate. For this reason, teachers need to take an active role in creating classrooms where students experience autonomy in decision making and learning.

Studies also demonstrate that teachers who use non-controlling language emphasized student choice as well as agency and responsibility (Reeve, 2006). Anna and Sarah both alluded to moments when the nature of a teacher’s language engaged them or turned them off to learning because it removed their sense of agency. For Anna, difference between phrases like “you can and you will,” as opposed to invitations to take on a challenge, made all the difference. For Sarah, it included teachers who invited her to assume alternative identities and take control of her learning. In both cases, these teachers didn’t give out answers, but offer hints to enable student progress. These teachers also

listened, acknowledged students' feelings and perspectives, even those that were negative. By so doing, they provide opportunities for students to guide their behavior.

Moje and Lewis (2007) also described how, as "people move across different discourse communities, they enact identities that will be recognized in particular ways by those communities," and these identities are shaped by race, gender, and other factors (p. 20). Consider Jack, who described himself as a boring person at school and a fun person out of school. His identity as a learner conflicted in numerous ways with the person he wanted to be. He didn't see his identity as something capable of changing; rather, it was fixed and did not work within the confines of the discourse of school. Although he might contest it or indeed may not have even realized it, in many ways he used his agency to resist the negotiation of his identity.

In contrast, Anna saw her identity as changing as she became a part of the discourse community and in part because of the new discourse communities she entered. She took advantage of opportunities offered "to make and remake" herself and her identity based on "the new ideas, practices, or discourses learned" through participating in her literacy class (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 20). Her identity as a reader changed as she actively assimilated the words and ideas of others that positioned her as a capable reader and learner.

Teachers who acknowledge the role of agency in the literate lives of students "believe young people ultimately decide the extent to which they see themselves reading and writing and participating in school" (Moore & Onofrey, 2007, p. 288). In the end, the students decide what identities they will assume. However, the most effective teachers also realize the role they play in helping students recognize this agency and

acting on it in transformative ways. This includes offering students a variety of reader and learner identities to choose from, as well as creating a classroom environment that encourages students to act.

Summary: Implications for Teachers, Parents, Researchers and Communities

Educational philosopher and champion of democracy John Dewey (1990) once wrote, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy” (p. 3). Dewey’s words pointed to the necessity of schools where each student would be educated and cared for in ways that met the approval of the communities “best” parents.

However, Nel Noddings (2007) pushed this query further by asking, “What would the best and wisest parents want for their very different children?” (p. 194). To me, the question Noddings posed is the question that really matters because the best and wisest parents realize each of their different children have very different needs. The best and wisest parents would advocate for learning opportunities customized to each child. And, the best and wisest parents would continually work towards change to ensure each student voice mattered and could be heard. As parents, teachers, researchers, and communities, no one individual can enact these changes alone. Rather, they require working together in ways that show we value all children as our own.

Considering how the literacies valued in the classroom contribute to authoring students in particular ways, the teacher’s role proves vital. Instead of prescriptive approaches that only value certain kinds of texts or students, teachers need to allow their classrooms to become places where students and teachers work together to interrogate

texts, identities, and the meaning of literacy itself. Most likely, this will often include bringing in elements of students' home cultures as a part of these dialogues. Parents prove key to keeping these dialogues going at home and helping students continue to see their experiences from multiple perspectives.

Looking at how our institutions author students also becomes essential to bringing about change for struggling readers in the classroom. For example, although it is useful for a teacher to open his or her classroom to multiple kinds of texts, until the testing practices of the school reflect assessments that truly valuing multiple ways of knowing, teachers are limited in their ability to help struggling students. This means not only interrogating school Discourses, but also those perpetuated by policy makers and communities. Similarly, as researchers it also becomes important to continue to draw attention to issues of literacy and identity. Considering new methodological approaches to push our current understandings will be key to bringing issues of identity to the forefront of research that matters to communities, policy makers, teachers, and students.

As Fecho (2011) rightly pointed out, it seems counterintuitive to think that initiating changes in students would begin with changing the teacher or others. But, as he explained, "At the ironic center of locus of control is that by exerting change over our lives, we consequently change the lives of those who come into contact with us" (p. 65). This idea becomes central to understanding the power of our words and actions in the co-authoring of the students in our classrooms.

Returning to the quote by John Steinbeck that inspired the title of this dissertation, I once again reference his words. As he described the teacher who's authoring made such an impression on his life, he explained how she created in him "a new thing, a new

attitude and a new hunger” for learning that changed the way he approached life forever after. It’s this sort of authoring that the best and wisest parents want for their very different children and it’s these sorts of moments that re-author the futures of struggling adolescent readers. Ultimately it’s these sorts of encounters that occur when classrooms become spaces for dialogue that recognize all voices.

Conclusion

It’s been a year since my visit to Idaho and since my dialogues with Skyler occurred. It’s been almost as long since I left CHS and finished my interviews with Anna, Maurice and Jack. I’ve seen both Braydon and Sarah occasionally, but our scattered conversations rarely revolved around interview talk.

In a few days I’ll board a plane for Idaho once again, just like I did last year when Skyler and I had our last big discussion about his reading experiences. But this time, instead of talking about his struggles, I’m going to help celebrate his college graduation. As I prepare to do so, it almost seems incomplete to conclude this research without including some comments directed specifically to the individual students in this study. So, it’s to them that I address this final section.

Dear Sky, Braydon, Sarah, Maurice, Anna, and Jack,

When we first started our conversations, each of you expressed a desire to share your stories with me so that others could learn what life is like for students who struggle with reading. The ideas you’ve shared challenge stereotypes and trouble assumptions that are sometimes easy for others to make, so thank you for talking with me about your experiences and the difficulties you each still sometimes face.

I've learned a lot in the course of this research, but of all the things I've learned some of the greatest haven't been what I've read, but what I've learned from each of you. I think one of the most significant things each of you taught me is that we each hold authoring power as we write our stories. Our stories help us make sense of our lives. But if we cling too tightly to a particular idea or a certain version of our stories, we hold onto ideas about ourselves that aren't true. Although the experiences you each shared are real, they can hold you back if you're not careful. Remember what Lionel said? "You don't have to be afraid of the things you were afraid of when you were 5." Thanks for reminding me that we each have the ability to change—both beyond how we see ourselves and beyond the labels others might project upon us.

You've also reminded me how important it is to keep the stories we tell in perspective. Right now education is full of a lot of what we call culturally constructed ideas that present certain stories as facts, but they're not necessarily true. In other words, there are stories that so many people have been telling that have been reinforced by society and culture for so long, we've forgotten that these are just stories some people perpetuate. Because of that, they are powerful stories that almost seem like facts and they are hard not to believe. But, when we take a step back and realize that those supposed facts are really just stories too, our horizons open up and we can re-write those stories based on our own, not other people's experiences.

For me, it's easy to forget these things and I often need a reminder, so I wanted to take a moment to encourage you not to forget them as well. It doesn't matter if it takes you a little bit longer to graduate, or if you don't go to an Ivy League university. It's okay if you struggled in elementary school or if you got made fun of in high school. Just

don't let those moments become labels or identities you assume. Maybe you did poorly in school at one time, but that doesn't mean you are stupid. Perhaps you struggled learning to read the kind of things you were given in school. Just because you have to work a lot harder than people around you to get good grades doesn't mean that you're not smart. Remember, now is just one moment in your infinite becoming. You too get to play a role in deciding who you want to become and in working towards that goal.

Dawan

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APPENDIX A

Consent Forms

DATE: _____

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers
Minor Assent Form**

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in my research project titled, **“Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers.”** Through this project I am trying to understand the ways students who struggle with reading engage in American schools and what this means for teaching these students. I expect the project to take place between January 1, 2011 and May 31, 2011.

If you decide to be part of this project, you will allow to audio record five interviews with you. You will talk to us about your experiences as a student. You will allow us to watch you and take notes while you are attending some classes. Each week, you will also be invited to write a personal story about some learning experience you’ve had at your school. Finally, I may ask you to talk about how you feel about what I’ve written about you.

You do not have to participate in this project. Your participation or non-participation in this project will not affect your grades in school. I will not use your name on any papers that we write about this project. However, because of your participation you may improve your ability to read and write. I hope to learn something about the educational possibilities and concerns of struggling high school readers that will help other students and their teachers in the future.

If you want to stop participating in this project, you are free to do so at any time. You can also choose not to answer questions that you don't want to answer. Hopefully, there will be no discomfort other than talking about yourself with people you only know briefly.

If you have any questions or concerns you can always call me at 503-779-7388. You can also contact me by email dawan@uga.edu.

Sincerely,

Dawan Coombs
University of Georgia
503-779-7388 or dawan@uga.edu

I understand the project described above. My questions have been answered and I agree to participate in this project. I have received a copy of this form.

Signature of the Participant/Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers
Parental Permission Consent Form**

I give my permission for my child to participate in the research study titled “**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers**” that is being conducted by Dawan Coombs, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 503-779-7388, under the direction of Dr. Bob Fecho, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706 207 5909. This participation is entirely voluntary. My child can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled. I can have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as that of my child, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

The reason for the research is that it will give the researcher and other educators a better understanding of how students who struggle with reading see themselves as learners in American schools and what views and opinions they might have of those schools.

The benefits my child might expect are an improved ability to think about his/her learning, to better understand how American schools operate, and a possible improvement in communication skills. The benefit for society is a better understanding of what happens and what it means when struggling readers attend American high schools.

I understand that the study will take place from January 1, 2011 until May 31, 2011.

If I agree to allow my child to participate in the study, I agree that he/she will, once a week, write one short personal story about some event that occurred as part of his/her experiences as a student in public schools. This writing will take place on my child’s time and should take no more that 30 minutes per week.

I also agree to allow my child to do all of the following: (1) take part in five audio-recorded interviews conducted by Dawan Coombs; (2) if she is my child’s teacher, allow, Ms. Paige Cole, to write weekly descriptions of him/her as a student, and (3) allow Dawan Coombs to observe and take notes on him/her as he/she learns during class. He/she will be expected to do these activities described in Points 4 & 5 from January 1, 2011 until May 31, 2011. Participation in the interviews will not be more than 1 hour a month and will occur at a place that my child and I are comfortable with. The observations will occur in school.

I agree to allow my child to share the products of school assignments and personal writing with Dawan Coombs.

I agree to allow my child to meet with Dawan Coombs no more than three times from May 31, 2011 until August 31, 2011 to help Dawan make clear meaning of her understandings of the research data. These meetings should be no longer than 45 minutes each.

The only discomfort or stress my child might experience during this research would be the normal range of discomfort or stress usually associated with writing or talking about him/herself to adults he/she doesn’t know well.

No risks to the participants are foreseen, except the minimal risk sometimes associated with revealing personal information through writing and speaking.

The results of my child’s participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior written consent, unless otherwise required by law. All participants will be assigned aliases and all specific identifiers will be removed from reports. Only Dawan Coombs

will have access to the audio recordings and only excerpts from the written transcripts will be shared in reports. All data, paper or electronic, will be stored no less than four years (September 2015) but not more than eight years (September 2018), at which point they will be destroyed by shredding.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project and can be reached by telephone (779-7388) or e-mail (dawan@uga.edu).

In no way will these activities affect, either positively or negatively, grading in my child's courses. If I choose for my child not to be part of this study, that choice will also not affect his/her grade either positively or negatively. Participation in this study will not release my child from any course or school requirements.

FINAL AGREEMENT:

Student's Name (Please Print)

Please check:

_____ I WILL ALLOW MY CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.

_____ I WILL NOT ALLOW MY CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I give my consent to allow my child to participate in this study. In addition, I have been given a copy of this form

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Parent

Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one and return the other to the researcher, who can be reached by telephone (503-779-7388) or e-mail (dawan@uga.edu).

Additional questions or problems regarding your child's rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers
Student Consent Form
(For participants 18 or over)**

I give my consent to participate in the research study titled titled “Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers” that is being conducted by Dawan Coombs, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 503-779-7388, under the direction of Dr. Bob Fecho, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706 207 5909. This participation is entirely voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

The reason for the research is that it will give the researcher and other educators a better understanding of adolescent readers’ perceptions and perspectives of the classroom, their abilities, and themselves. It will also help give the researchers and other educators better understandings about the way readers’ experiences influence their sense of self and how these things influence literacy classrooms.

The benefits I might expect are an improved ability to think about his/her learning, to better understand how American schools operate, and a possible improvement in communication skills. The benefit for society is a better understanding of what happens and what it means to be a reader attending an American high schools.

I understand that the study will take place from January 1, 2011 until August 31, 2011.

If I agree to participate in the study, I agree that I will do all of the following: (1) take part in five audio-recorded interviews conducted by Dawan Coombs; (2) allow Dawan Coombs to observe and take notes on me as I learn during class; and (3) make a memory box to share with Dawan Coombs, which she will return to me. I will be expected to do these activities described in Point 4 from January 1, 2011 until May 31, 2011. My participation in the interviews will not be more than 1 hour a month. The observations will occur in school during the course of the regular school day. The interviews will take place during student advisement sessions when I do not have work to make up or after school in the library or other designated space.

I agree to share the products of school assignments with Dawan Coombs. I understand she will return this work to me.

I agree to meet with Dawan Coombs more than three times from May 31, 2011 until August 31, 2011 for members checks at the high school to help Dawan make clear meaning of her understandings of the research data. These meetings should be no longer than 45 minutes each and will be audio recorded.

The only discomfort or stress I might experience during this research would be the normal range of discomfort or stress usually associated with talking about myself to adults I don’t know well.

No risks to the participants are foreseen, except the minimal risk sometimes associated with revealing personal information through writing and speaking.

The results of my participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior written consent, unless otherwise required by law. I will be assigned an alias and all specific identifiers of me will be removed from reports. Only Dawan Coombs and Dr. Fecho will have access to the audio recordings and only excerpts from the written transcripts will be shared in reports. No information about me with specific identifiers will be shared with my teacher without my permission. However, information about student participants, including me, will be shared with her generally. All data, paper or electronic, will be stored no less than four years (September

2015) but not more than eight years (September 2018), at which point they will be destroyed by shredding.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project and can be reached by telephone (779-7388) or e-mail (dawan@uga.edu).

In no way will these activities affect, either positively or negatively, grading in my courses. If I choose not to be part of this study, that choice will also not affect my grade either positively or negatively. Participation in this study will not release me from any course or school requirements.

FINAL AGREEMENT:

Student's Name (Please Print)

Please check:

_____ I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.

_____ I DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I give my consent to participate in this study. In addition, I have been given a copy of this form

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one and return the other to the researcher, who can be reached by telephone (503-779-7388) or e-mail (dawan@uga.edu).

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers
Teacher Participant Consent Form**

I give my consent to participate in the research study titled “Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers” that is being conducted by Dawan Coombs, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 503-779-7388 and Dr. Bob Fecho, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706 207 5909. **This participation is entirely voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed.**

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The reason for the research is that it will give the researcher and other educators a better understanding of how the beliefs and actions of a teacher influence perceptions of struggling adolescent readers in the classroom.
- 2) The benefits I might expect are an improved ability to think about my teaching, to better understand how I work and interact with my students, and how these interactions affect and are affected by my teaching and teaching philosophies. The benefit to society will be an understanding of how these interactions took place within my teaching.
- 3) I understand that the study will take place from January 1, 2011 until May 31, 2011.
- 4) If I agree to participate in the study, I agree to do all of the following: (1) take part in up to five 60 minute audio-recorded interviews conducted by Dawan Coombs; (2) allow Dawan Coombs to observe and take notes on me as I teach during class. I will be expected to do these activities from January 1, 2011 until May 31, 2011. Participation in the interviews will not be more than 1 hour each week and will occur at a place that I am comfortable with. The observations will occur in school.
- 5) I agree to meet with Dawan Coombs no more than five times from January 1, 2011 until May 31, 2011 to help her make clear meaning of her understanding of the research data. These meetings should be no longer than 45 minutes each.
- 6) The only discomfort or stress I might experience during this research would be the normal range of discomfort or stress usually associated with writing or talking about myself to others.
- 7) No risks to the participants are foreseen, except the minimal risk sometimes associated with revealing personal information through writing and speaking.
- 8) The results of my participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior written consent, unless otherwise required by law. I will be assigned an alias and all specific identifies will be removed from reports. Only the investigators will have access to the audio recordings and only excerpts from the written transcripts will be shared in their reports. All data, paper or electronic, will be stored no less than four years (May 2015) and no more than eight years (May 2019), at which point they will be destroyed by shredding.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project and can be reached by telephone (503-779-7388) or e-mail (dawan@uga.edu).

FINAL AGREEMENT:

Participant's Name (Please Print)

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I give my consent to participate in this study. In addition, I have been given a copy of this form.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one and return the other to the researcher, who can be reached by telephone (503-779-7388) or e-mail (dawan@uga.edu).

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX B
Recruitment Scripts

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers
Recruitment Script for High School Students**

My name is Dawan Coombs from the Department of Language & Literacy at the University of Georgia. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to examine how students who struggle with reading view themselves and their experiences with teachers and in school. You may participate if you are enrolled in this course.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in no more than five interviews about your past educational and reading experiences, and about your current reading experiences, including those in this class. Your time commitment would extend until the end of the semester.

The only discomfort you may feel from this study would be the stress normally associated with normal range of discomfort or stress usually associated with writing or talking about yourself to someone else. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you are free to withdraw your participation. You may benefit from this study through the extra reflection you take part in, but there will not be any compensation, financial or grade related, for taking part in this study. The data will be kept confidential and if you wish to withdraw your participation at any time, you are free to do so and your data will not be used.

If you would like to participate in this research study, please come talk to me.

Do you have any questions now? If you have questions later, please contact me at dawan@uga.edu or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Fecho, at bfecho@uga.edu.

Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers Parent Recruitment Script

My name is Dawan Coombs from the Department of Language & Literacy at the University of Georgia. I am calling to invite you to allow your child _____ to participate in my research study to examine how students view themselves and their experiences with teachers and in school. He/she was initially contacted because he/she was enrolled in this course. After I shared a little about this study in class, he/she indicated he/she would be interested in participating and gave me your phone number.

As a participant, he/she will be asked to participate in no more than five interviews about his/her past educational and reading experiences, and about his/her current reading experiences, including those in this class. These might take about an hour each and take place during his/her advisement time or after school. His/her time commitment would extend until the end of the semester.

The only discomfort he/she may feel from this study would be the stress normally associated with normal range of discomfort or stress usually associated with talking about himself/herself to someone else. If he/she feels uncomfortable at any time, he/she will be free to withdraw his/her participation. He/she may benefit from this study through the extra reflection he/she takes part in, but there will not be any compensation, financial or grade related, for taking part in this study. The data will be kept confidential and if you or your child wishes to withdraw his/her participation at any time, you are free to do so and the data will not be used.

If you are willing to allow your student to participate, I will send you the necessary consent documents for you to sign. I can either mail them to your home, email them to you, or send them home with your child. Which would you prefer?

Do you have any questions now? If you have questions later, please contact me at dawan@uga.edu or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Fecho, at bfecho@uga.edu.

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers
Teacher Recruitment Script**

My name is Dawan Coombs from the Department of Language & Literacy at the University of Georgia. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to examine how students view themselves and their experiences with teachers and in school.

As a teacher participant, you will be asked to participate in no more than three interviews about your philosophies of teaching and learning, your current experiences with readers, and our perceptions of students and transactions in your classroom. These will take about an hour each and will be conducted after school at a time and place of your choosing. Your time commitment would extend until the end of the semester.

The only discomfort you may feel from this study would be the stress normally associated with normal range of discomfort or stress usually associated with talking about yourself to someone else. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you are free to withdraw your participation. You may benefit from this study through the extra reflection you take part in, but there will not be any compensation for taking part in this study. The data will be kept confidential and if you wish to withdraw your participation at any time, you are free to do so and your data will not be used.

Do you have any questions now? If you would like to participate, please let me know now or by contacting me at dawan@uga.edu. You may contact my advisor, Dr. Fecho, at bfecho@uga.edu.

APPENDIX C

Interview Guides for Participants

Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers Interview Guides

Meeting One: General Background and History

The Student

1. Tell me about yourself. What words would you use to describe yourself? Why?
2. Tell me about things you like to do. Why?
3. Tell me about things you don't like to do. Why?
4. Do you have a job?
5. Tell me a story about yourself that will help me to understand you better.

The Students' Family

6. Please describe the members of your family. Who do you live with?
7. What are your parents'/guardian's attitudes about school? Tell me a story about your family that will help me understand their attitudes towards school.
8. How do you see yourself fitting in/not fitting in with your family? Tell me a story about your family that will help me understand your relationship with them.
9. Do members of your family read? What kinds of things do they read?

Educational History

10. What have been your favorite subjects in school? Why?
11. What are the subjects you disliked in school? Why?
12. What subjects were your strongest? Why?
13. In what subjects did you struggle? Why?
14. Tell me a story about your elementary school experience that shows me how you felt supported by the school and /or teachers.
15. In what subjects did you put forth the most effort? Why?
16. Tell me a story about your elementary school experience that shows me how you didn't feel supported by the school and/or teachers.

Reading History

17. What comes to mind when I say “reading”?
18. Can you remember learning how to read? Tell me a story about learning to read.
19. How did you feel about reading as you were growing up?
20. Can you remember someone reading aloud to you? Tell me a story about this.
21. Is there anything else you’d like to share?

Meeting Two: Current Experiences

1. Begin with clarifying question from previous meeting.

Experiences in School

2. Tell me about a typical day for you now in high school.
3. Describe one time when you felt a teacher reaching out to include you.
4. Tell me about a time when you misunderstood a teacher. What did you do?
5. Tell me about a time when a teacher misunderstood you. What happened?
6. Have you ever challenged something a teacher has said? Tell me about it.
7. Describe a class you enjoy.
8. Tell me about one of your least favorite classes.
9. What school related extra-curricular activities do you take part in? Why?
10. What is one of your proudest school/academic experiences in high school?
11. What was one of the times you remember struggling most in high school? What made it so difficult?
12. Think of a teacher who seems to have connected with you? What makes that teacher different from other teachers?
13. When you and your friends talk about teachers, who are the ones that get bad reviews? Why (no names). What is that they do that you don’t like?
14. How important is school and education to you now? Has it always been that way? Why or why not?

Experiences Reading

15. When do you do reading during your school day? Tell me about these times.
16. What do you usually do during silent reading time?
17. Do you ever read aloud?
18. What is your favorite kind of reading?
19. What is your least favorite kind of reading?
20. What do you think about when you first hear about a reading assignment?
21. Tell me about how you usually go about reading or writing assignments. How do you start? Finish?
22. What kind of help do you get for reading assignments, if any?
23. What kind of help do you wish you could get?
24. Do you read for fun?
25. Do your friends read? Do you read with your friends?
26. How have your ideas about reading changed from elementary school?

Meeting Three: Perceptions of Education, Self & Teachers

1. Begin with clarifying question from previous meeting.

General Perceptions of School/Education

2. Do you feel your experiences in school are beneficial to you? What is your evidence?
3. What do you expect from school and is the school meeting those expectations?
4. Do you think you have to do much reading in school?
5. What supports do you have that help you?
6. How much pressure do you feel to succeed in school? Where does that come from?
7. How do you think your teachers perceive you as a learner?

8. What do you want from school? How is that the same/different as what your parents want? As what the school wants? Why do you think this?

Perceptions of Self

9. How would you describe yourself in general? How would you describe yourself as a learner?
10. Do you have a system of beliefs that guide your choices? Describe it.
11. Who are some of the most influential people in your life?
12. How does your reading ability influence the way you see yourself? Tell me a story that demonstrates this idea.
13. How important is reading to your perception of yourself as a learner? To your perception of yourself in general?
14. Do you see yourself doing much reading after you graduate? Why or why not?
15. Do you want your future kids to read? Why or why not?
16. What do you think are the stereotypes about struggling readers and how much do you replicate or differ from that stereotype?

Perceptions of Teachers

17. Do you like a lot of attention from a teacher or do you prefer to stay in the background?
18. What do teachers do that helps students to become good readers?
19. What do teachers do that helps students with reading assignments?
20. What can teachers do to help students who struggle with reading?
21. What do teachers do that makes it difficult for students who struggle with reading?
22. How can schools and teachers make reading better for students?
23. If you could change school to make it better for struggling readers, how would you change it?
24. What advice would you give to other struggling readers?
25. What do you find difficult/makes you uncomfortable about answering these questions?

26. Do you have any questions for me?

27. Is there anything else you would like to say about reading that I didn't ask?

Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Readers

Interview Guide for Teachers

Meeting One: General Background and History

General Teaching/Learning Ideas & Philosophies

1. Tell me about your teacher preparation (educational background, years teaching, past and present professional development activities, etc).
2. Describe your current teaching assignment (school makeup, classes taught, students).
3. What does a typical class look like?
4. Tell me about your philosophy towards teaching.
5. What are your goals as a teacher (what are you trying to accomplish)?
6. Tell me a story about a student you've taught who made you think about your teaching.
7. What do you feel are your strengths as a teacher?
8. Where do you struggle as a teacher?
9. What are your understandings about struggling readers?
10. How do these work against your other teaching philosophies?
11. How do these ideas influence your approach to planning, teaching, and the classroom environment?
12. Tell me about your past experiences working with struggling adolescent readers.
13. Do you find these ideas influencing your interactions with students? If so, describe an example.
14. Do you find these ideas influencing the structure of your classroom or classroom environment? If so, describe an example.
15. Do you think your students noticed a difference? Why or why not?
16. What do you find particularly challenging about your job?

Meeting Two: Current Experiences

Current Experiences with Struggling Readers

1. Begin with clarifying questions from the previous meeting

2. How do you perceive the reading abilities of students in your classroom now?
3. Tell me about your current experiences working with struggling adolescent readers.
4. Do you find these experiences influencing your interactions with students? If so, describe an example.
5. Do you find these ideas influencing the structure of your classroom or classroom environment? If so, describe an example.
6. How do these ideas influence your approach to planning, teaching, and the classroom environment?
7. Tell me a story that illustrates this idea.

*Other questions will be based on observations of transactions between the students and teacher

Meeting Three: Ideas about Education, Students, and Transactions

Teacher Perceptions of Education, Students, and Transactions in this Classroom

1. Begin with clarifying questions from the previous meeting.
2. Do you think your struggling readers like a lot of attention from you as the teacher or do you think they prefer to stay in the background?
3. What do you think teachers do that helps students become good readers?
4. What do you think teachers do that helps students with reading assignments?
5. What do you think teachers can do to help students who struggle with reading?
6. What do you think teachers do that makes it difficult for students who struggle with reading?
7. How do you think schools and teachers can make reading better for students?
8. If you could change this school to make it better for struggling readers, how would you change it?
9. What advice would you give to other teachers of struggling readers?
10. What do you wish you could get your struggling readers to understand?

11. What do you find difficult/makes you uncomfortable about answering these questions?

12. Do you have any questions for me?

*Other questions will be based on observations of transactions between the students and teacher

APPENDIX D

Principal Letter

11/13/2010

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, “Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers”, presented by Dawan Coombs, graduate student at UGA, under the direction of Dr. Bob Fecho, UGA professor. I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at Crenshaw High School.

The purpose of this study is to explore how a struggling readers’ identity development is influenced by their experience in schools, particularly focusing on the role their interactions with their teacher shape these perceptions. This study will provide valuable insight into the ways teachers can work with struggling readers and help them acquire the skills necessary to be successful in schools.

I understand that the interviews and observations with Alice Longworth will take place at school at a time that is mutually convenient and does not interfere with regular classroom activities. The interviews will be conducted over a time period of no more than 6 months. I expect that this project will end not later than June 2011. Ms. Coombs will also *contact* or *recruit* student participants according to district regulations and in accordance with the IRB approved procedures of the University of Georgia. Student participation will be entirely voluntary. The interviews and observations of students will take place at a time that is mutually convenient and does not interfere with regular classroom activities. These interviews will also be conducted over a time period of not more than 6 months and end no later than June 2011. Ms. Coombs will *collect data* at Crenshaw High School as she observes Ms. Longworth’s teaching approaches, interviews her, and works with students.

I understand that Ms. Coombs will receive consent from her participants. Ms. Coombs has agreed to provide me any documents that I request in relation to the study. Any data collected will be kept confidential and will be stored *in a secure location accessible only by the researcher*.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed above.

Sincerely,

David B. McGee, Principal